

Fatherhood:

A Model for Christian Leadership

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Salt and Light Ministries

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Contents

Foreword	5
Preface: Many Guardians, but Not Many Fathers	7
<i>1</i> God's own Nature	9
<i>2</i> No Family without Fathers	16
<i>3</i> What is a Father?	21
<i>4</i> Learning to be a Father	31
<i>5</i> Sons becoming Fathers	39
<i>6</i> Fatherhood: Some Final Thoughts	51

Foreword

“What is hidden in the roots will be revealed in the shoots.”

This has been one of the lifelong principles by which I have sought to live and build. Experience tells us that what the roots of the plant are like, and what they feed on, determines what sort of fruit grows; where the foundations of a building are shaky, time and disaster will reveal it; where the most simple flaws are not spotted, dreadful disasters can follow – as when a basic defect in the fuel system of the Challenger space craft cost the lives of seven brave astronauts.

So it is with people. What we believe in our hearts will eventually determine how we live, how we build and what we end up with.

This “Roots and Shoots” series is not so much an attempt to define the distinctives of our family of churches, but rather to ensure that all our beliefs and practices are firmly rooted in the Scriptures.

Many people have asked us over the years: “Who are you and what do you believe?” While our structure may appear to be somewhat nebulous, nevertheless the understanding of our common beliefs needs to be clear and unambiguous.

We are a family of churches that believe we are to be “sons of the kingdom” sown into God’s earth. The key that transforms “the word of the kingdom” into “sons of the kingdom” is *understanding* (Matthew 13:23). In the Lord’s first parable of the kingdom (the Sower), the ‘word’ of the kingdom – the seed – when properly received and understood produces fruit. In the second parable of the kingdom (the Weeds), we discover that the fruit has become the seed, and that the seed is “the sons of the kingdom”. The word, bearing fruit, producing seed as sons of the kingdom, planted in the world! That is our prayer for this series of books.

Barney Coombs

Fatherhood

Preface

Many Guardians, but Not Many Fathers

I am deeply indebted to two men who have been like ‘fathers in the Lord’ to me. I am what I am as a leader and pastor because of the input of many: my mother who prayed earnestly for me, youth leaders who provoked and put up with me, many friends at the church in which I grew up who challenged me, beach mission leaders who trained me in practical evangelism, college tutors who expanded my understanding and love of God’s Word, brothers and colleagues in ministry who have encouraged, stimulated, adjusted, corrected and followed me.

But two men have done more than that. One of them is quite unknown to likely readers of this booklet, and one very well known to many in the Salt and Light family of churches. The Rev William Oare Park, better known simply as ‘Pastor Park’ in the Toxteth area of Liverpool where I grew up, spent forty years as pastor of a Baptist Church in that area. He was a local figure, full of care and compassion, a great visitor of people in their homes, and the one to whom everyone turned for wisdom and spiritual strength in a crisis. More importantly for me, he was a man with not a great ambition for himself, but with very great ambition for the young men and women under his pastoral care. He was ‘a father in the Lord’ not just to me, but to many others. I can count many of the friends with whom I grew up who are today serving the Lord. He encouraged us, gave us opportunities, took us out with him when ministering elsewhere, and most essentially communicated to us that God would use us significantly if we walked humbly with him. From a very early age I knew I wanted to be like that man.

Once I ended up in the Baptist ministry, for which I most naturally trained because of my roots, I met Barney Coombs through a developing friendship with Dave and Chris Richards and Geoff and Mary Norridge who led an exuberant and fast-growing church in Witney, Oxfordshire. It did not take me long to recognise a man with the same spirit as ‘Pastor Park’. Here again, as many in the Salt and Light family recognise, was a father in the Lord, full of encouragement and grace, but not afraid to challenge and train those around him according to Biblical principles. It has been a privilege to be associated with him over the years and to find not only fatherhood and sonship, but also a very real and deep friendship.

But this booklet is not a eulogy of these men. It is born out of a conviction that the ‘spirit of fatherhood’ which they modelled is essential for leaders today who want to see the family of God grow, sons and daughters trained and released into ministry, and many more sons prepared for glory!

Chapter 1

God's own Nature

It is one of the most incredible revelations of God's own nature and being that he is a father. That God should be seen as Creator of the universe, King of infinite majesty, Lord of armies of angels, and mighty in power is not so strange! You would expect God – any God – to be all these things. It is perhaps more remarkable that people would worship gods who are less than this. The Old Testament asks the question on a number of occasions as to why people would make an idol out of wood or stone or precious metals, stick it on a shelf in the corner of their sitting room and then begin to worship it. It is ridiculous! No, God must be powerful, big, creative, able to *do* things – otherwise, why call him 'God' at all?

But *what sort* of powerful God can we conceive of? The truth is, we can perceive of *power* as good or bad, directed in many different ways. Indeed, in the ancient world, many gods were seen as being vindictive, malicious and capricious. You would never quite know what evil they might direct their power towards, and you would need to keep on the right side of them.

God Makes Himself Known

Against this backcloth, a quite different God was revealing himself amongst the Jewish people. Yes, he is the Lord of Creation; yes, he is the Lord Most High and Lord of Hosts. But his character is seen very differently to that of other gods. One of the decisive 'theophanies' (a manifestation of God in some tangible form) of this God was to Moses: "Then the LORD

came down in the cloud and stood there with (Moses) and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.’ ” (Exodus 34:5-7a)

The psalmist takes up this theme and presses the conclusion: this God is like a *father*: “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger for ever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.” (Psalm 103:8-13)

The prophets also focus around this theme in one form or another. Isaiah prophesies, in what are now familiar words but which then had quite startling impact, the birth of the coming Messiah: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.” (Isaiah 9:6-7)

Later in his prophetic ministry, Isaiah appeals to God to take action, not on the basis of a desperate hope or wishful thinking, nor because of previous promises, but on the grounds of God’s own nature as a father. Surely a father would take action! “Look down from heaven and see from your lofty throne, holy and glorious. Where are your zeal and your might? Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us. But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name.” (Isaiah 63:15-16)

He *Does* Want to be a Father

Jeremiah turns this theme around another way. While Isaiah pleads with God to act because of his own nature as a father, in the prophecy of

Jeremiah, God pleads with the people of Israel *as a father* whose children have gone their own way. “I myself said, ‘How gladly would I treat you like sons and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation. I thought you would call me ‘Father’ and not turn away from following me.’ ” (Jeremiah 3:19)

There is no doubt, then, that in the developing history of the Middle Eastern world this God of Israel stands out as a God of great tenderness and fatherly care. He is a constant surprise. On the one hand, he is a holy God, concerned to maintain the holiness of the people who trust him. For this reason, he seeks to train them, sometimes through circumstances of great adversity, to live in holiness. He is an incredibly *moral* God, who is not just looking for lip-service of loyalty to himself, but for a lifestyle that manifests his own nature and personality. On the other hand, he remains faithful to his people when they are incredibly fickle and disloyal. He comes to them over and over again to help them, rescue them and redeem them.

Nonetheless, incredible though it may seem, God's people lose sight of his fatherhood. We talk today about people ‘losing the plot’. For one reason or another, maybe an over-attention to detail, maybe through allowing ourselves to become distracted by peripherals, we lose a general sense of overall vision and perspective. God's people, Israel, without doubt, towards the end of the first millennium BC totally ‘lost the plot’ of God's fatherhood. For them he became quite distant, a holy God who seemed to be unmoved by their plight, indeed one whom you could hardly know, and most probably one who would not come down to be involved in everyday life.

Having lost this amazing sense of God's fatherhood, the Jewish religion quickly became a ‘worn-out wineskin’. Its religion was full of tired worship with wearisome demands. The period between the Old Testament and New Testament phases was especially barren and spiritually like a desert; until, of course, Jesus came, surprising this weary world with a new refreshing touch. Much of his message was very akin to all that had gone before: God was a holy God looking for people with holy lives. But the most amazing transformation was that God was suddenly accessible like he had not been for years; and, quite incredibly to his followers, Jesus lived constantly as though God was accessible.

Jesus has a Father!

I wish it were possible for us to understand just how much Jesus opened up the wonderful new world of God's availability and accessibility to ordinary people. The teachers of the Jewish Law had made religion inaccessible, a matter of nit-picking rules and regulations, only really understood by the inner circle or elite. They had bolstered their own position as 'authorities'. But in order to keep their special status they had also kept ordinary people both ignorant of God's love and at a distance from it. What a terrible tragedy and travesty that the very possessors of the keys to eternal life can become possessive about them, and therefore deprive others of them!

Into this world, Jesus comes with a refreshingly different approach. Ordinary people in their poverty and simplicity can know and touch God! Simple disciples are "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world". And the key to it all? You have a father in heaven, says Jesus, and it's all about a relationship with him. He's good, he's generous, he's caring and forgiving. And, most of all, he wants us to know him and live like him.

Once you understand this, it changes the way we see *prayer*, Jesus said. "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your *Father*, who is unseen. Then your *Father*, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your *Father* knows what you need before you ask him. This then is how you should pray: 'Our *Father* in heaven ...' " (Matthew 6:6-9)

Likewise, understanding this changes the way we see *forgiveness*. "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly *Father* will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your *Father* will not forgive your sins." (Matthew 6:14)

Again, if only we could understand *our propensity to worry and anxiety* in this context: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and

yet your heavenly *Father* feeds them ... So do not worry saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly *Father* knows that you need them." (Matthew 6:25-26, 31-32)

It is so simple when you see these things in the context of God's *fatherhood*, isn't it? But I find myself responding in my own heart: yes, and I wish *I* could do that!

Jesus and the Father are One

Well, the amazing thing is that Jesus really *did* do that. This is how he lived – in the light of God's own fatherhood in his life. So, life was just a matter of watching what the Father was doing and then doing it himself! "Jesus said to them, 'My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.' " (John 5:17)

The implication is clear – my Father is working, so I'm working too! He puts an even sharper edge to it elsewhere: "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be, and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him." (John 8:28-29)

In fact, Jesus is very clear that the only reason he can do the miracles that he does is because the Father is 'in him'. "Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." (John 10:37-38)

Knowing the Father was therefore a key to the whole of Jesus' life and ministry. He pursued that as a goal when just a boy enquiring about his Father's business in the temple (Luke 2:42-49), and it was a life's mission for him: knowing the Father and making him known to the people around him, especially his disciples. In his very intimate but High Priestly prayer to the Father in John 17, he makes this abundantly clear: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (John 17:3) "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I

have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.” (John 17:25-26)

The continuous testimony of scripture, and of Jesus, is that God has revealed himself as Father, wants to be known as Father, indeed that knowing him as Father is “life eternal”. What is more, Jesus makes clear that the fatherhood of God is what lives through his own life. If we catch a glimpse of glory through Jesus, it is the glory of the Father. This is very much a case of ‘like Father, like Son’.

Introducing the Father to Others

Unsurprisingly, this was very much an aspect of the faith of New Testament believers. The writer to the Hebrews emphasises that Jesus, God’s Son, came to do the most significant work of salvation; that is, as God’s unique Son and “the exact representation of his being” and nature, he came to bring many more sons to the knowledge of the Father. “In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.” (Hebrews 2:10-11)

The apostle John makes fellowship with the Father and love for the Father not only the privilege of the Christian life, but a litmus test of whether we are really walking in the life opened up to us by Jesus. “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” (1 John 1:3) “Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist – he denies the Father and the Son. No-one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.” (1 John 2:22-23)

This cumulative testimony of scripture, therefore, demonstrates convincingly the following simple points. First, God has revealed himself dramatically as a Father, full of compassion and mercy, but faithful to his word and holiness. He is a father who loves and cares for his children and

wants them to know his fatherhood. Second, Jesus came to demonstrate the joy of living in a relationship with God as Father – and its effect and fruitfulness – and to offer and open up such a relationship to all who would come to him. Third, the New Testament believers were filled with a sense of wonder and amazement that they could know God as Father – indeed, they had become his children. This is now their new status, and the work of the Holy Spirit within them!

“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” (1 John 3:1-2)

“... those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father’. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” (Romans 8:14-16)

It is an incredible gospel! That God should adopt us as his sons and daughters; us, the worst of street kids, filthy, rotten, scheming and rebellious. Moreover, he wants us to live in his house, to feel his joy over us, to know his pleasure in us. I want to maintain that this is the life that he calls us to enjoy in his family, the church. Here in the church we are to know his pleasure, his encouragement, his acceptance, his hopes and dreams for us, and his training of us. Here in the church, we are to experience his fatherhood, just like Andrew from Oxford. A former heavyweight boxer with loads of trophies on his mantelpiece and bookshelves, he first cried out to God for help when his wife had their baby very prematurely. Would God have mercy on this 28 week 1½lb. scrap of life? God heard Andrew’s cry, preserved the child’s life, and Andrew realised he had a Father in heaven. He once prayed out in one of our meetings, “Father, you’re better than all my trophies.” The Father of the Bible still wants to be known today.

Chapter 2

No Family without Fathers

We are living in a day when the world around us, at least in the West, is at pains to insist that no value judgements can be made about such things as lifestyle and relationships. So, ‘gay’ relationships are seen as valid as heterosexual marriages, single parenthood is as normal a state as a two-parent family – and woe betide anyone who tries to claim that one situation is preferable or more desirable than another.

But actually, the Bible teaches that same-sex relationships or same-sex ‘marriages’ are *not acceptable to God*; indeed that such relationships are, in the words of Paul, an abomination or a perversion (e.g. Romans 1:24-27). Likewise, while the Bible never condemns the single parent (but rather, has lots of compassion for the widow, the abandoned and the orphan), it does show that God’s ideal for family life is one man and one woman living together faithfully throughout their lives, caring for their children *together*. While our hearts go out to single parents, as to those struggling with homosexual temptations, neither of these states is what God has intended, and the Bible will not let us pretend otherwise.

Children need *both* fathers and mothers – not two ‘fathers’; not two ‘mothers’; not a single parent (father or mother) who is desperately trying their very best. This is a Biblical assumption: families need fathers and mothers.

Fathers and Family Go Together

The Bible makes absolutely clear God's design plan: *family*. Family means two loving parents living in covenant love with as many children as God chooses to give them. But it means more than this. Families in the Old Testament setting were part of clans, who were themselves part of tribes. In other words, families are not 'accidental units', but *fundamental building blocks* of the whole fabric of society. They are the context into which orphans, or single people can (and should) relate, and through which the elderly are cared for. "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families ..." (Psalm 68:5-6)

That last line in the NIV translation is slightly misleading. A better translation is, "God sets the solitary in families." It is not that people who are lonely and (by implication) needy may somehow enjoy the benefits of family too; it means that the natural setting for all of us is *community* or *family*. We are not supposed to be self-existent individuals, self-sufficient, self-fulfilled, self-realised etc. God designed us to be *individuals-within-community*; individuals-enjoying-relationship, for whom family is a natural expression of that.

We say of some people: he's a real 'family man'. That means, he loves being at home with his family. He can think of no better way of spending his leisure time than playing with his children, out walking with them, or whatever. He is not rushing off to the golf course, about his business or pleasure. He is at home, loves being at home; his children are his pleasure, not a burden.

God, the Great Family Man

Well, God is a 'family man', if I can dare to put it that way. In his being and nature, that is who he is. As we know, there are three persons in the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit – a Holy Family! The Father loves the Son (as John's gospel tells us) and rejoices to send the Holy Spirit to do his work. The Son honours the Father. The binding force of the persons of the Trinity is the love they have for one another; and they are united in one goal: bringing many sons to glory. God is a real family man, looking for family, in heaven and earth:

“For this reason I kneel before the *Father*, from whom *his whole family* in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” (Ephesians 3:14-21)

There is a play on words at the beginning of this passage. It comes out well and very obviously in Greek, but does not work at all in English. In Greek, the word for father is *pater*, and the word for family is *patria*. (You can see how similar they are.) A ‘*patria*’ or family derives its being from a ‘*pater*’ or father; and you cannot have family without fatherhood. In Biblical thought, fatherhood comes before family, and family comes out of fatherhood. In a most general sense, the whole family of heaven and earth comes from God’s fatherhood; and in every specific expression of family, it flows out of a father’s being and name. This is the significance of all the lists of genealogies of the Old Testament. We might find them just about the most boring part of our reading of scripture (if we are honest!): but the Israelites saw that the name of your father gave you significance, and the family line was more than a historical narrative: it stood for your identity, belonging, and your unity with brothers and sisters in a common heritage.

Keep it in the Family!

The Jewish sense of family is much stronger than our own. In Liverpool, where I grew up, there was a very strong Jewish community, and I had a number of friends within it. It was well known, at that time at least, (though I don’t know whether it still applies) that if a Jewish teenager got into some trouble, the police would take the teenager back to their family and effectively give the family a choice: will you deal with this offender, or shall we? Inevitably the family chose to deal with their erring

son or daughter, and no more would be heard. Family at its best and most effective!

A few years ago, Lorraine, my wife, and I read, over a period of a few months, a number of novels of Jewish family sagas. Not only were they a thoroughly ‘good read’, tracing the family’s roots from Israel and the branches out across Europe and the USA over generations, but you felt that you touched ‘the fibre’ of family. This sense of family is surely God’s deposit. If we recognise that God prepared his people in advance to reveal himself and his own nature, there are no accidents about the strength of family demonstrated by the Jews, or God’s heart for family that comes out so clearly through the pages of Scripture. God is a family man in his own nature and being, works through natural families and wants to bless them, and is now demonstrating his own plan to have a huge spiritual family from every tribe and nation, filled with his own love, the Father’s love, and the love of Christ which is so vast. This family is to be amazingly manifest in *the church*, as God works in us by his power.

This is the big picture, without doubt – a family filled with the love of the Father. Old Testament families with their fathers (patriarchs) are a shadow of the real thing that is to come in Christ; but they do point the way. And when God means to do a new work in Christ by establishing the church, his own family, he does it by giving them apostolic leaders who behave like *fathers*.

“As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

“You are witnesses and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.” (1 Thessalonians 2:6-12)

Apostolic Mother and Father!

What a wonderful balance there is here between the pictures of mothering and fathering. We have already said that families need fathers and mothers. Here we have Paul saying that he had to be both for these new Thessalonian Christians! The tender care of the mother over her little children, for whom she would give anything, and the encouraging and urging onwards of a father are combined to establish this fledgling church in Thessalonica.

The truth is that fathers cannot help but be fathers. Paul fathered churches, he fathered individuals (such as Timothy and Titus) and took pride in the special quality of that relationship. “You do not have many fathers,” he wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:15. I confess to a special sense of satisfaction when the family gathers at home (a not-so-frequent occurrence these days) and we sit around the table. The patriarchal genes are excited! And now that there are grandchildren expanding the generations, it is even more wonderful. But this satisfaction is akin to that which comes when looking across the congregation and congregations that God has called me to care for. I feel deeply blessed by these lovely and faithful people, enriched by their variety of callings and talents, thrilled over the life of God in them. Fatherhood and family go together!

Chapter 3

What is a Father?

A few years ago I came across a small spiral-bound book in a bookshop where I was browsing. The title, “A Father’s Book of Wisdom”, caught my interest, and I bought it. The author, Jackson Brown, about whom I know nothing more, had found eight shoe boxes in his father’s wardrobe a few weeks after his father’s death. These shoe boxes were filled with scraps of paper, old envelopes, napkins, matchbox covers, little notebooks etc., all covered with disjointed ideas about life. Some were other people’s observations, some his own. These scraps of paper were fascinating to the author because they contained the distilled wisdom he had heard over the years. Amongst the pithy statements was this one: “Life doesn’t come with an instruction book – that’s why we have fathers.”

I suppose the book of Proverbs underlines this idea. Proverbs is loaded with wisdom and counsel from a father to a son: how to live in the fear of the Lord, how to avoid immorality, temptation and foolishness, how to shun laziness and sloth, and a multitude of observations concerning life in general.

Certainly, a very major responsibility of fatherhood was seen in the Bible to be the impartation to one’s children of godly values and an understanding of why those standards and values are important.

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit

at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

The heart of this is training for life. Why gain all this experience of life if your children have to make all the same mistakes you made – that does not make a lot of sense of the learning process! Even more important, however, than simply teaching *principles* of life, fathers were to give their children *understanding* of why they live a certain way before God and to tell the story of their faith, because if their children *understand*, they will also *adhere* to the same principles for themselves.

“In the future, when your son asks you, ‘What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?’ tell him: ‘We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the LORD sent miraculous signs and wonders – great and terrible – upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers. The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness.’” (Deut 6:20-25)

This passage has always fascinated me. Even the most liberal of Bible commentators see this passage as one of the most ancient and authentic traditions of Israel. In it, the Israelites are instructed to pass on from one generation to another, father to son, father to son, the story of their salvation and deliverance from Egypt, which is what makes them the people of God. That is why they live like the people of God. But the story needs telling and re-telling, father to son, so that, with understanding, children embrace God’s ways. This is fatherhood! But, of course, fatherhood has many aspects, and I want to outline a number of them.

1. A Father Takes Responsibility

It is a fact, biblically, that in the marriage relationship, the husband and father takes a place of headship in the home and family. This headship makes the father no more important than anyone else in the home, it simply

defines his role as one of care, authority and responsibility. In the Trinity, the Father is ‘head’ over Christ and the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 11:3). They respond to his leadership within the Trinity, but are one in love and unity. In a world where many fathers are abdicating their responsibilities – producing children, but leaving it to mothers to bring them up – or simply fulfilling their own life and pleasures but being fairly ‘absentee’ in reality, we desperately need fathers to lead the way in taking proper responsibility.

For me, this means a number of things. First of all, *fathers are prepared to be decisive*, for this is an inevitable part of leadership. One axiom of leadership is simple: any decision is better than no decision! I am obviously not commending the resurgence of petty dictators in the home again, after the Victorian model, but clear decision-making is essential!

Second, *fathers must face difficult situations without flinching*. I well remember my own father, who was a small businessman, coming home from his work very dejected one day. He had discovered that four of the people who were working for him had been fiddling business expenses. They were four of his pivotal people as well, and a significant part of his staff. He had been forced to dismiss them all. I was impressed with a number of things: most importantly, the pain that he felt in *having* to sack these people, but also the fact that he faced up to it. No matter what difficulties it would cause him personally and business-wise, he had to be able to trust his staff. A father does not flinch from facing difficult situations!

Thirdly, *fathers do not blame others*. We live in a world of ‘mutual irresponsibility’. We accept responsibility for nothing, and blame others for everything. What happens is down to our genes, society, the environment or circumstances. We cannot help it, and someone else ought to do something about it! But a father says: in my house, I am responsible, and I can change things! I may not be able to change the world outside as I would want to; but in my own house, I set the atmosphere. The moral climate of the world may depress me; but I do not need to let it invade my home through television or discourteous behaviour under my own roof. This is my world and I am the only person to blame if it gets out of hand.

2. A Father Loves all the Children God gives Him

As a father of five children, I think I have at least a little experience in this area! Someone once remarked to me that parenting was the most bewildering of processes. You have no real training for it, and there are no re-runs! Your experience with one child gives you not a lot of help with the next one, who, being another individual, behaves and reacts quite differently to the first. You start from scratch with each one! Each one is a fascinating individual, ‘wired’ quite differently, with unique responses and a unique destiny. Helping them into that (and not laying on them your own expectations for their future) is both a challenge and a privilege. But the truth is: I love *all* my kids! I feel protective to them, I want the best for them, I pray constantly for them, I feel endearment for the quirks of each one. That is not to say I find them all easy. (But the feeling is probably mutual! They will tell you that I am the sort of father – I say it to my own shame – who, when they came home with a 95% mark in a test, will ask them what happened to the other 5%!). But I love them all! They all have a place in my heart, and I want the best for them. I pray about their present situations and circumstances; I pray about their futures. I have prayed about those who have left home more than when they were at home. That is fatherhood!

But this is how it is in the church as well. The true father loves all those God gives him – not just the easy and conformist ones, but those who are challenging and divergent as well. Even when people behave badly, as we all do from time to time, a father never withdraws his love. He sticks with all of his kids. He loves the older brother who never left home and the younger brother who was an absolute rascal. Of course, like anyone else, I have got cross with people in the church from time to time. But I think the genuine reason has always been because I feel people have been making a mess of their lives or other people’s. That grieves a father! And nothing thrills him more than his kids walking with God and fulfilling his will.

3. A Father Sets a Tone of Stability

I have always felt that fatherhood means dependability. Jesus taught that our heavenly Father is completely dependable.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:25-33)

The clear thrust of this teaching is simple: you don’t need to *worry* about these things, because your Father is *dependable*. He is *there* for you. He is reliable, steady, not up and down. I remember a young couple whose baby was born prematurely and died after a couple of days. I was actually away on a ministry trip, returning just after the death of the baby. I was due to go away on holiday immediately afterwards. They asked me tentatively whether I would take the funeral of their baby, even though I was due to be on holiday. There was no question, either for me or Lorraine. Fatherhood means you are there! But I well remember the wife of the couple adding, as part of the request, “We just feel the need to have a father around, not just someone to do the job.” If there had been even a ghost of a doubt about whether I needed to be there for them (and I do not really think there was), the issue was definitely decided when I heard that!

4. A Father is Compassionate

“As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone and its place

remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him ... ” (Psalm 103:13-17).

The essential feature of this passage is the Father's understanding of our weakness and mortality. A father balances adherence to *principle* (the desire for righteousness, right behaviour, and so on) with an *understanding* of the frailty of human nature. It is difficult to get this balance right, for sure. Either we can be so unbendingly committed to principle that our children can feel we are harsh, unyielding and unsympathetic; or we can be so indulgent that we do not call them up to the right standard. In the church context, people know instinctively whether they are touching someone who genuinely understands weakness and has compassion for that.

5. A Father Feels for the Fatherless

God is prepared to be “a father to the fatherless” (Psalm 68:5) and he is looking for the same heart in us.

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:27)

At various times I have become an ‘adoptive’ father for kids who, for different reasons, have not had access to a father. At one time I was named as a potential guardian to about twenty children in the wills of friends. Fortunately these friends did not die prematurely, and I never needed to fulfil these responsibilities; but we were prepared!

Instinctively we feel for those who have been orphaned. We sense their loss, pain and the ongoing absence of the dependable figures of affection that we ourselves have been privileged to enjoy. But in the church there are far too many orphans! Individuals who are lost, without people to love them, pray for them, guide them and challenge them. I am persuaded that God wants to turn this around, and raise up fathers in the body of Christ who will get hold of these orphans and father them for the Lord.

6. A Father will Carry his Children when Necessary

There is a fascinating passage of scripture in Deuteronomy 1:30-31: “The LORD your God, who is going before you, will fight for you, as he did for you in Egypt, before your very eyes, and in the desert. There you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place.”

Before your children are mature, there is a lot of ‘carrying’ to do. Having had five children, I seem to have spent a good bit of time over the last few years carrying my children. Mums carry kids in their arms, but dads often carry them on their shoulders. That way they can see where they are going, but be spared tiring effort! The number of walks that the children have begun enthusiastically but then grown tired on are countless. Fatherhood at such times means encouragement, incentive and, finally, carrying them. So it is in the church, especially with young and immature Christians. They often cannot keep up the wearying walk, and do need encouragement and carrying. When they are mature, they will carry others. Jesus made very clear in John 10 that the difference between the shepherd and the hireling is that the shepherd cares at his own cost and to his own detriment, while the hireling flees at the first sign of pain and trouble (v12-13). What the church needs is not those who will seek the glory of successful ministry, but those prepared to live with the commitment of fathering others.

7. A Father is Not Afraid to Confront

God said to King David about his son Solomon, “I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by man. But my love will never be taken away from him.” (2 Samuel 7:14-15)

It is taken for granted in the Scriptures that fatherhood means training and discipline. The Book of Hebrews makes it very clear that just as human fathers discipline their children, so God disciplines those who are his true sons and daughters (Hebrews 12:10). I have never really known many people change deep down unless in one way or another they are *challenged* about the need for change. This challenge may, of course, be a gracious challenge

by God's Spirit, or may be a frightening face to face encounter with the truth; but challenge and confrontation are in there somewhere. Fathers have to confront their children – with their bad behaviour, bad attitudes, bad grace, selfish and self-centred thinking and so on. Confrontation is never pleasant, but the fruit is good.

I can still remember clearly a time when we had my sister's family to stay. We were having one of those boisterous tea-times when drinks were spilt, the food did not please everyone, and after several attempts to bring order, one of my daughters once again overstepped the mark. I took her down from the table and administered appropriate training on the seat of learning. We talked and hugged afterwards and came back to the table. What peace descended! My only regret was that I had not acted sooner!

Fathers will confront, and must confront. Such confrontation must be done personally, and carefully. Pastors should never berate the whole congregation or vent his frustrations for the sin of one on the many! Fathers take erring family members aside and challenge them individually. This leads to a further related point:

8. A Father Looks for Respect more than Popularity

Some fathers want to win the affection of their kids too much! So they spoil them, giving them constant treats, currying favour with them. In fact, some fathers are so afraid of their kids that they will not confront them and stand up to their bad reactions, moods or whatever. A true father has a long-term goal: that his son or daughter should be trained to be a mature, unselfish person, given to living for the glory of God. Training to be unselfish means the father cannot pander to every whim or desire of the child. To do so only teaches self-centredness!

In this area, I am very grateful to the pastor under whose care I grew up. He was a man of principle, who wanted to please God more than anything else. I can well remember being part of a quite large youth group who wanted certain 'freedoms' within the context of church life. On a whole number of fronts, our pastor was prepared to be very flexible and accommodating but over certain things he was quite unyielding. He wanted us to respect elderly people in the congregation (a biblical injunction!);

he insisted that we knew and honoured the Word of God, and that our words, relationships and behaviour showed that.

9. A Father Feeds his Children the Wisdom and Word of God

The book of Proverbs is not just a collection of pithy sayings and wise words. It is a training manual prepared by a father for his son: “My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity. Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favour and a good name in the sight of God and man. Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” (Proverbs 3:1-6)

Wise words from a father to a son! And just about all the teaching – on the fear of the Lord, on acquiring wisdom, on avoiding laziness, on fleeing immorality – all of this is prefaced regularly with the words, “my son”.

I can still remember wise words my own father spoke to me: “If you’ve decided to get married, son, do it. Don’t wait until you can afford it – you’ll wait all your life. Likewise, if you wait until you can afford children, you’ll wait all your life.” Very encouraging and liberating counsel – and I have said similar things to my son!

10. A Father Unites the Troops and Leads Them out to Battle

This may not sound a very normal aspect of fatherhood, but it really is a fundamental of leadership which has fatherhood in it. After Joshua had led the Israelite people in the allotment of land for their future possession, he encouraged them to serve the Lord. He was well aware, however, that they had a free choice in the matter, and that he could not impose his will on them, but he did say: “But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” (Joshua 24:15) That’s fatherhood! He could speak for his family, and he would align them with the Lord. Later on in Israel’s history, when David became king and needed men to stand with him, people from

various tribes gathered around him – in their family units! In the list of people David could rely on, who came to be part of his army, we read:

“ ... men of Levi, 4,600, including Jehoiada, leader of the family of Aaron with 3,700 men, and Zadok, a brave young warrior, with 22 officers from his family ... ” (1 Chronicles 12:26).

“ ... men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do – 200 chiefs, with all their relatives under their command ... ” (12:32).

This is family! This is fatherhood! It is a very powerful force for cohesive strength and activity. We need more of this in the church: leaders who can envision the troops and call them to concerted action because they have already built family. This is surely a key: these fighting forces already *were* family. We need to know how to build *family* so that we can move forward into action as an *army*.

Fatherhood is a critical factor in today’s world and today’s church. In a world where people are searching for identity and a sense of belonging, fatherhood will build a sense of family. In a church where, frankly, there are too many orphans, unloved, untrained and undisciplined sons, we need fathers to get hold of all the potential in the family of God and develop it. So how is this going to happen?

Chapter 4

Learning to be a Father

One day a few years ago, along with Christian leaders from other churches in the city of Oxford, I was invited to an open evening put on by Oxford Youth Works, a non-denominational group who release youth workers into schools and youth clubs to care for young people who otherwise might have no-one to care for them. The goal of the evening was to help us understand their vision and how they operate, especially as their focus is very largely unchurched youth. After half an hour of mingling with others, the presentation began.

The main speaker was a man in his late fifties/early sixties who had first had the vision for Oxford Youth Works. I was very impressed with him indeed. He was not an obviously impressive figure with charismatic personality and creative ideas flowing from him about how to touch young people – far from it! He was so unassuming (indeed, I had long forgotten his name, although I have recently ascertained it) and offered us only one key for working with young people: love them! Young people know instinctively who is genuinely for them, and who is in it for themselves. He had simply loved them, had always been there for them, and had always been surrounded by them. He commended this approach to us! If young people feel anything, he said, they feel quite alone and ‘at sixes and sevens’ in this world, and lots needed fathers and mothers who would be there for them.

Fathers – Sign Up!

Across the board, fathers are needed. We are actually in a generation where fathers are abdicating responsibility in huge ways. Even as I write, the Queen’s Speech at the opening of the current session of the British parliament has just announced fresh initiatives from the government to deal with the problem of fathers who are ducking out of their responsibilities for the financial support of their own children. But what about the emotional support, the moral support, the character support, to say nothing about the spiritual support? It is one thing to father children *as an act of reproduction*; it is quite another to father them *as an ongoing process* in all the ways outlined in the previous chapter. Even where fathers are still resident at home, they need to rise up and take proper responsibility.

I can see that my old Pastor, Bill Park, was this sort of a man. Perhaps this is why I was so impressed with that founder of Oxford Youth Works too. He was a man of the same calibre, commending what I knew instinctively, and what I now know Biblically, to be a key: *being there*. Bill Park was ‘there’ for many people over a forty year period. He fathered so many young people, who otherwise would have had no-one to encourage them forwards, no-one to really champion their cause. But he was ‘there’ not only for a handful of people, but for a whole community as well. He was constantly visiting people in that area of Toxteth, in and out of people’s homes, welcome anywhere. If ever our church engaged in door-to-door work, when we introduced ourselves a frequent response would be, “Oh yes, Pastor Park’s church. We know Pastor Park – he’s been here, helped us ... ” etc., etc. A father to the fatherless – and to the whole community.

Fathers Give Identity

As I reflect on Bill Park, I can see that he brought the church that I grew up in a sense of cohesion. This was *not organisation*, but *family*. One of the frightening truths of leadership is that the people become what the leader is! He not only sets the tone, but actually imparts and reproduces what he is. A leader produces followers; a manager develops an organisation; but a father produces family.

I well remember the startling thought that went through my mind when my father died. My mother had died a few years previously, and my father, disabled by illness and old age, had been inactive for a number of years. But this thought, all the more startling because I was in my late thirties, struck me: “You’re on your own now!” This seemed silly: I had been ‘on my own’ for years; married for many of them; had children of my own. So what was this reaction about? Somehow Dad gave my brother and sister and me some sense of relational identity: he was now gone. Undoubtedly this was ‘growing up’ in a way, but it was still significant.

This underlines for me the critical role of fathers. Whole communities need them; whether the towns and cities of ancient Israel (elders in the gate) or our own modern day cities (city aldermen – the root of this word is the same as that of elders); whether in churches or smaller family units; fathers are essential for identity and security for all of us. The big question is: how can I be a father to the children God has given me, and how can I lead like a father in the church which is God’s own family?

Jesus Shows Us the Father

Since it is true, as we said earlier, that Jesus came to show us the Father, dealing with us in exactly the same way as the Father deals with us, then we would expect to find some pattern of fatherhood in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. And we do! Some fairly tender and robust interaction between Jesus and Peter in Matthew 16 illustrates this well:

“When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’

They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’

‘But what about you?’ he asked, ‘Who do you say I am?’

Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’

Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you

loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day raised to life.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you.’

Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.’

Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.’ ” (Matthew 16:13-28)

This fairly lengthy and energetic encounter between Jesus and Peter highlights how Jesus dealt with his disciples, and therefore how the Father deals with us. For me, they convey essential features of fatherhood, which I must imitate if I am to father others.

Four Essential Features of Fatherhood

1. Encouragement

In the first part of this meeting between Jesus and Peter, Jesus is asking questions to find out how much the disciples have really understood about who he is. Eventually, Peter blurts out the right answer, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” Jesus is excited that Peter has seen it, and immediately encourages him. This is not only the right answer; this is a revelation from heaven! One can almost see Peter swelling with pride –

Jesus complimenting him in front of all the other disciples! And his answer was not just somewhere on the target; it had been a ‘bull’s eye’!

All children need encouragement – and thrive on it! Encourage a child over their artwork, and a production line begins. Encourage them over their piano practice, and they hammer out the same piece over and over at seven o’clock in the morning! But are adults any different? No, far from it! We still thrive on appreciation of a job well done. A comment to one’s hostess that “the dessert was excellent – one of my favourites!” guarantees its reproduction on a future occasion! On one of my visits to India, I ate several meals with members of Bombay Baptist Church. Maybe four or five times I was served crème caramel. When I expressed appreciation, I always received the same answer, “Oh yes, it’s Vic’s favourite, too!” What you encourage, you get more of, and Vic has obviously encouraged them lots!

I simply want to emphasise here that this is the starting-point for other aspects of this discipleship relationship. Encouragement and investment in the positives becomes the bridge for the launch of truth and adjustment still to come. But the relationship does not start with training or adjustment; it begins with encouragement! (For that matter, true discipleship cannot really be found through discipleship *courses*, even though they have their place.) Discipleship is a relationship which is rooted in encouragement. I listen occasionally to Roger Cole teaching our daughter Esther to play the flute. I have never heard a greater encourager! The lesson starts with prayer for God’s help and is prompted every couple of minutes with: “Yes, well done! ...Very good, Esther! ... Lovely!” This is surely the heart of fatherhood!

2. *Promise*

Immediately after the encouragement to Peter over his revelation, Jesus moves on to indicate the vision that he has for Peter. “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” Whatever the strict exegesis of this passage, which has tested commentators sorely, one thing is quite clear. Jesus is saying, “Peter, I’ve got vision for you! You are going to be a significant player on my team – the church! What’s more, I’m going to give you a spiritual authority that will accomplish my purpose!”

I wonder if Peter could believe his ears? Him, the great fisherman and ‘blurter extraordinaire’ – a key player in God’s kingdom? But Jesus believed in him! And fathers believe in their children, too. For if they don’t, who will? Sometimes, they might believe too much; but it is a clear aspect of fatherhood. I see promises in those around me; I want the best for them; I have vision for them. And people so need to hear this from fathers in the church. Not an unreachable, over-the-top (even lying!) encouragement of people that has no relation to the facts or any possibilities; but a realistic statement of what we can see those around us actually accomplishing in Christ.

When I was fourteen, my pastor said to me, “Son (he called many of us young people that – an indication of his own heart towards us), it’s time for you to preach in the church. Not the morning service, but the evening one.” That surprised me – the morning service was the quieter, ‘teaching’ service; the evening service was the livelier and definitely much better-attended service. He was giving me the best! “And so that you’re not nervous when you get to preach, you can lead the service as well as preach.” He was obviously very trusting! After I had preached that evening, I made for the door, as pastors and preachers do, to shake hands with people. The first one to the door immediately after me was my pastor. “Son, that was great, just great!” (*Encouragement!*) “You keep walking humbly with God, and God will use you powerfully.” (*Vision!*) What a spiritual father he was!

3. *Challenge*

We are not really sure when the incident next recounted by Matthew happened, but it was probably soon afterwards. Peter has seen that Jesus is the Christ (or, Messiah). Good! But now he needs to understand *what* sort of Messiah – one who will suffer and die! Peter remonstrates with Jesus that his expectancy of suffering and death just cannot be right – not for Messiah! Jesus responds with the sharpest, most stinging of rebukes: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” Wow! This is the point at which our modern-day teenager decides to leave home or, to put it in spiritual terms, a church member decides to look for a more loving church, charging the leadership of his current one with spiritual abuse and insensitivity!

So why did Peter stick with Jesus? And what did he really feel? I have no doubt that inside he was mortified, absolutely gutted to have been so stupid – again! But he knew by now – if he knew anything at all! – that Jesus was *for him*. Jesus had praised his insight; and pledged him a great future. This was an embarrassing rebuke (though note that it was delivered one-to-one: Peter had “taken Jesus aside”); but isn’t that being fathered? Does it not actually increase your security to be crossed or challenged from time to time?

A few days after I had preached my first sermon and had been so encouraged by my pastor, I bumped into him again. “Son,” he said, “I really do think you did very well on Sunday evening. The whole service was good, full of content, very helpful and upbuilding. And I do mean what I said about God using you in the future – keep walking humbly with him. *But*, (that great word introducing the sting in the tail!) while you were preaching you had your hands in your pockets. Son, it’s like this: when you’re preaching, you are handling the Word of God itself. It’s a holy privilege, and you need to show respect to it. Never, ever let me see you preaching again with your hands in your pockets!” I was a bit taken aback, but, maybe like Peter, not for long. I needed warning against being casual with the Word of God (and though we may not be over-worried today by the details of this, the attitude he was trying to inculcate in me we certainly need today in the church!). The warning did me good – because I knew he was *for me*; and what’s more, it sounded like I would be preaching again! I have to say that even now, over thirty years later, when occasionally I find my hands have found their way into my pockets thoughtlessly while preaching, I slide them out again. The congregation knows nothing; but I know. And maybe my old pastor is smiling in heaven!

4. *Explanation*

Jesus’ challenge to Peter is followed by an explanation of why Peter had been so manifestly wrong, with an unfolding of the *principle* behind Jesus’ response. Self-preservation is an unfruitful, self-serving instinct; the kingdom, and eternal life, belongs to those who deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Jesus. Peter is wrong not just because he flies in the face of Jesus’ chosen path or plan, but because he transgresses an

important principle of the Father's heart. Challenge and rebuke need to lead to *explanation* and *understanding*, so that Peter understands the Father's heart. The *point of rebuke* becomes a *gateway to understanding* – as it always must, if the father's heart is to be touched. What value is there in any challenge or discipline if we do not 'see' why we are being confronted? The point of training is not to produce outer conformity, but “a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11). This is what a father seeks: not a slavish devotion to the minutiae of religious or legal observance, but a glad embracing of the Father's will out of clear understanding of the principles in his own heart, so that eventually we can say: “I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.” (Psalm 40:8)

Discipleship and Fatherhood Hand in Hand

I feel immensely privileged to have been fathered spiritually in the way that I was. I believe in personal pastoring because I am the product of it. I sense that *discipleship without fathering produces gifted orphans*; children who are well-trained but are still suffering from some emotional deprivation, insecure and having to prove themselves. The Body of Christ has enough un-rooted ministries, uncertain of where they belong, how they fit, and striving to find a place of acceptance and inner peace. Fatherhood sows security, acceptance, belonging and produces sons who are teachable and strong but malleable.

This is my desire – to train up sons who I do not need to watch at every turn but who know the Father's heart, and will seek the Father's kingdom. If I want to produce such sons the process is clear: lots of encouragement, plenty of vision, some challenge, and lots of understanding. May God help all who lead to lead in this spirit!

Chapter 5

Sons becoming Fathers

Only yesterday I was sitting in a ‘thought pooling’ session on mission and church planting in Europe (such sessions used to be called ‘brainstorming’ until that word was deemed politically incorrect and insensitive by the Epileptic Society!), when the cry was heard and repeated: “What Europe needs is fathers.” There are too many leaders on their own, leaders who are doing their own thing, leaders who have lost their way, leaders who are orphaned and all at sea. Europe needs fathers!

Many Guides, not many Fathers

This seems to take us back to Paul’s heart cry as well: there are many guardians, but not many fathers (1 Cor 4:15). It must surely be a goal of leadership in the church today to raise up sons who can become fathers, and daughters who can become ‘mothers in Zion’ – those mature women who can teach younger women, spoken of by Paul in Titus 2:4.

I have already indicated that I believe that a lot of the initiative for this process is in Christian leaders fathering properly those God gives them. Principled fatherhood, rather than management or event-orientated excitement, is still a great necessity. A lot of leadership these days focuses around exciting ‘events’. One wonders whether much of this is not a serious distraction from the relational building of the body of Christ. Events, outings, holidays may all be part of a child’s memories; but the relational day-to-day interaction is the real character-forming and destiny-making stuff of life. In the church setting, we need to make sure that we are as attentive, if

not more attentive, to the relational, ongoing building process of vision and discipleship into people's lives than sponsoring 'exciting' events – and this is especially true of young people's leadership.

And, I repeat, fathers do need to be fathers. Sons need their fathers to be fathers. Jackson Brown's father wrote (on one of those scraps of paper found in the shoe boxes in the wardrobe): "Fathers are pals nowadays because they don't have the guts to be fathers." Over-indulgent love towards children can spoil them! An interesting document was issued by the Police Department of Houston, Texas, which illustrates this:

Twelve rules for spoiling a child:

1. Begin at infancy to give the child everything he wants. In this way he will grow up to believe the world owes him a living.
2. When he picks up bad words, laugh at him. This will make him think he's cute.
3. Never give him any spiritual training. Wait until he is 21 and then let him decide for himself.
4. Avoid the use of the word 'wrong'. The child may develop a guilt complex. This will condition him to believe later, when arrested for stealing a car, that society is against him and that he's being persecuted.
5. Pick up everything he leaves lying around – books, shoes, clothes. Do everything for him so that he will be experienced in throwing all responsibility on other people.
6. Let him read any printed material he can get his hands on. Be careful that his silverware and drinking glasses are sterilised, but let his mind feed on garbage.
7. Quarrel frequently in the presence of your children. In this way they will not be too 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 every craving for food, drinks and comfort. See that every sensual desire is satisfied. Denial may lead to harmful frustration.

10. Take his part against neighbours, teachers, policemen. They are prejudicial against your child.
11. When he gets into real trouble apologise for him yourself by saying, “I never could do anything with him.”
12. Prepare for a life of grief. You will be likely to have it.

This is a somewhat lengthy way of saying that even the world is recognising the importance of good parenting, which is not over-indulgent or simply allows a process of self-development to take place in the lives of children.

But the same is true in the Kingdom. If we allow people simply to ‘develop themselves’ we will have some of the same fruit; people who ultimately please themselves, do only as much as they want to do, avoiding responsibility, commitment, pain and challenge. Regrettably, we can see evidence of such people in the church. Whose fault is it? In the pithy words of Mr Miagi, the trainer of “The Karate Kid”: “No such thing as bad student, only bad teacher”; which can be extended to “no such thing as bad children, only bad father and mother”. While it is always true that our children need Jesus, and are in every bit of need of salvation as we are, our effective abandonment of parenthood does not serve them well!

There is an awesome example of this in the Scriptures in the story of Eli, the priest who had a considerable commission from God, but who could not be bothered to train his own sons properly. Consequently, they became renegades – in the ministry for their own ends, selfish and godless (1 Samuel 2:12-17,22). Eli *favoured* them, but wouldn’t *father* them. As a result they were eventually discarded in favour of Samuel, a man of God.

Leaders – Train up your Sons and Daughters!

It is no good bewailing or bemoaning the dearth of leadership in the church, or of people actively willing to play their part responsibly and with commitment, if we do not give ourselves to active fatherhood of our people. In this respect, we surely need to have a strategy, like the apostle Paul, of gathering ‘sons in the Lord’ and entrusting work to them and training them also to become fathers in their own right. This process of seeing others grow up to take responsibility in their own right is a very satisfying one –

even naturally. Our son, Mark, who married in September 1999, rang home recently and in the course of the conversation informed us that he had painted their sitting-room. “Yes,” he said, “it’s quite exciting doing the husbandly thing of making a home for your wife!” Ah, I thought; he is enjoying the satisfaction of taking responsibility. My son is growing up, and it is good to see.

How rewarding to see spiritual sons and daughters grow up and take responsibility too! Paul speaks with great satisfaction about his spiritual son Timothy (not his only son – he clearly regards Titus as a spiritual son too, and maybe more!). Perhaps it would be good to look at the overall context in which those words “many guides, not many fathers” come, as Paul writes to the Corinthians:

“Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.” (1 Cor 4:15-17)

This is a fascinating passage, and it is worth highlighting the following points:

1. Paul is not afraid, as a father, to encourage people to imitate him. Fathers are a role model for their spiritual sons. Paul clearly accepts this responsibility.
2. Paul cannot himself go to Corinth at this time, although it is in his heart to do so soon; but he can do the next best thing – send a son! Timothy, as a son, will embody many of the same characteristics, the same approach to life and to the Lord. Indeed his ‘faithfulness in the Lord’ is what qualifies him as a son.
3. The spiritual son’s responsibility is clear: “to remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus”. For Paul, everything focuses around Christ, and life in Christ. Life is not about rules and regulations, human striving to be good, but about knowing Christ, responding to Christ, Christ living in us. Timothy, Paul’s son, has one main spiritual charge: to

live the same life, and therefore to remind people of Paul's example and lifestyle.

Send a Son

'Send a son' ought to be our motto in all sorts of situations. In planting several churches in the Oxfordshire area, this has been a key: plant sons! In seeking to bring adjustment, change and growth into a variety of situations, this has also been a by-word: do we have a son we can inject into this situation? In a very moving passage, which also relates to his relationship with Timothy, Paul effectively answers this question:

"I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no-one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon." (Philippians 2:19-24)

Timothy is obviously a special son! Paul appears to be in a quandary here. He wants to help the Philippians, and therefore has to think of sending Timothy, as he himself is unable to go, being under house arrest in Rome; but he really wants Timothy with him too! But why is Timothy so important? Paul says there is "no-one else like him". This phrase is rendered in the NASB: I have no-one else "of kindred spirit". Neither of these translations capture the sense of the Greek adequately here, which runs strictly like this: I have no-one else 'so equal-souled', meaning "I have no-one else who can match him in mind and soul" or "I have no-one else so like me in mind and soul", having a genuine interest in your welfare. Timothy was outstandingly like Paul and one with Paul in his concern for the Philippians. He was a genuine son!

Marks of a Son

One of the challenges for the leader, however, is not just the *training* of sons, but *finding* sons to train. The truth is often that, as Paul laments in

this passage, “everyone looks out for his own interests”. A true Timothy is a special find! At the end of the day, fatherhood is released by sons. I can want to father all the good people in the world, but they may not want to be fathered by me. Indeed, it is also the case that we only really want to *try* to father those whom God is truly giving us: fathering someone else’s kids is a tremendous challenge, if not an impossibility! So what are the marks of a son?

1. *A son proves himself through faithfulness*

In 1 Corinthians 4, Paul commends Timothy because he is “faithful in the Lord”. I am sure that we will end up training our sons in faithfulness, as fathers naturally have to do; but we will be looking for evidence of that faithfulness emerging. Roger and Di Cole have been a spiritual son and daughter to me. Arriving at Cote when I was pastoring that congregation, their youthful enthusiasm and zeal was an exciting injection of life for us. I watched them give themselves faithfully to working with us in a housegroup in the nearby village of Standlake, which was not the most dynamic setting; but they gave themselves to it. Then deciding to take on the wardenship of Kingsgate Flats for elderly people, which at that time was more closely associated with the church and built right behind our building. Little did we realise the important training that was for a future ministry with our “Jubilees” group (for the over-50’s). I have watched with delight as Roger and Di (and their family) have grown in stature, wisdom and gifting; but the foundation of it all was *faithfulness*.

I think we cannot do much better than keep our eyes fixed on the ‘classic’ teaching on faithfulness from Luke 16:10-12:

“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?”

The three laws of faithfulness are clear here:

- a) If we are faithful in small things, we will be faithful in larger things. Sons must be trained to be faithful in the small things!

- b) If we are faithful in handling finances, we can be trusted with spiritual riches and responsibilities.
- c) If we are faithful as a servant or steward in someone else's sphere of responsibility, we can ultimately be entrusted with our own.

Sons must prove themselves faithful. An emergent son will want to show himself faithful in all these ways; a training father will give him opportunities to do so.

2. *A son delights to 'be around' the father and what the father is up to*

In natural life, this happens easily. When I have a practical job to do, I will go and get my tools from the garage; two minutes later my son Benjamin arrives with his toolbox (and this is no toy toolbox – the tools are very real!). He wants to work with me.

In Luke 2 we have the delightful story of Jesus being 'lost' by Mary and Joseph, when all the time he was around the temple. When Mary challenges him he says (literally), "Didn't you know it is necessary for me to be *in my Father's things*?" Jesus was bound to be in his Father's house, taking an interest in his Father's business. This is what a son does! If a son wants to gain all the wisdom of a father, he needs to be around him a fair bit. This is what Paul says of Timothy in Philippians 2. Timothy does not have his own agenda, or his own interests; his focus is God's heart and Paul's heart for the churches.

Closely linked to this point is our next one:

3. *A son is prepared to serve*

Our highest example of this is obviously Jesus Christ himself who, Paul tells us in Phil 2:7, took on himself "the very nature of a servant". It is vital for us to recognise that he did not take on himself the form of *a man* and end up as a servant; he deliberately and intentionally took on himself the nature of *a servant*. This is God's own chosen nature!

Isaiah saw this over seven hundred years earlier. "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight. I will put my Spirit on him ... " (Isa 42:1). This passage is surely echoed at the baptism of Jesus, when the heavens open and the Spirit descends on Jesus, and a voice from heaven is heard: "This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

(Matthew 3:17) *The Son* becomes *the servant*, manifesting the nature God delights in best of all. Any son worth his salt will manifest the same desire and nature! This is why Paul delights in Timothy: “But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has *served* with me in the work of the gospel.” (Phil 2:22)

I count myself well blessed to have around me in the work I am involved in many, many people willing to serve; blessed not only because it helps to get the job done; but mainly because the servant heart or spirit is what God most delights in, and because it sets a wonderful prevailing atmosphere for all our Kingdom work.

4. *A son is eager to learn*

Again, Jesus sets the example for us as, at the age of twelve, he is “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46). He wants to know about the Father’s business.

One of my delights has been to develop within Oxfordshire Community Churches a discipleship group of some whom I see to be up-and-coming sons and daughters of the Kingdom. Likewise, one of the things that Barney Coombs had developed was a discipleship group across Salt and Light UK, which he passed on to me when I took on the baton of leadership of the European Team, and which I now delight to draw together. These times are a highlight for me. While sometimes I may share some things I sense God putting on my agenda, at other times it is they who set the agenda completely. They ask all their awkward questions – theological, pastoral, ecclesiological, Biblical and conceptual – and pump me for the answers. How satisfying it is though (even if also draining at times!) to feel you have fed the hungry, equipped people for the ministry better, and encouraged them to continue in their calling!

5. *A son highlights his father’s life and teaching*

A son does not want to take people off on his own track; rather he highlights his father’s teaching. Paul sends Timothy to the Corinthians “to remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.” Likewise he sends him to Ephesus with the charge: “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of

many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” (2 Timothy 2:2) This obviously goes along with what we said in the first point, that a son needs to learn to be faithful in someone else’s sphere of responsibility before being given their own. But the true son will not depart from the principle he has learned. He may extend and develop them; he may even grow beyond his father’s sphere; but the building or working principles will be clear. This does not ‘box in’ a son, but provides the platform for his future growth, development and ministry which may well go beyond that of the father.

We recently had in our home Pastor Francois van Niekerk, a man who leads a church of 7,000 in Pretoria, South Africa. He was actually doing a weekend’s ministry for the churches in Oxfordshire, which was an enormous blessing. A man in his late thirties, obviously having a great deal of grace on his life, we were very impressed that he just came alongside us and helped in the building process. He said to me over the meal table one day: “Steve, if anything makes me what I am, it is the fact that I had a spiritual father (*a godly leader by the name of Ed Roebert, now with the Lord*)”. He went on to say, “In South Africa there is a dearth of spiritual fathers, and consequent insecurity in leaders and constant competitiveness. Someone who has been fathered has resolved issues of *identity* (who they are and what they should be doing) and *security* (who they are really trying to please and respond to).” Why did I feel so at home with this man? I recognised a kindred spirit!

I feel the same deep appreciation not only for the pastor under whose care I grew up, but also for the fatherhood I came to recognise and receive from Barney Coombs. After a number of years leading the church at Cote, coming into spiritual renewal, and seeing some growth and much change, and then finding good fellowship with brothers like Dave Richards and Geoff Norridge (then leading the church at Merryfield House, Witney), it was a delight to meet Barney. Here was a ‘pastor of pastors’, a father who both encouraged and challenged – and who has done so for the last twenty years or so that we have been associated. I have set myself to learn from him, have enjoyed accompanying him in ministry, have questioned him profoundly, have been on the receiving end of both encouragement and

adjustment from him. (In fact, Dave Richards and I both believe he has been tougher with us than anyone else; well, maybe we needed it!)

But my major testimony is this: the law of sowing and reaping applies here as in any other area of life. As I have *sowed* to receiving Barney's fatherhood into my life, as a son to him, so I have *reaped* an increase of spiritual fatherhood in my own life. *Paradoxically, I have become more of a father by becoming a son.*

This has nothing to do with dependence, cloning or other such accusations of weakness that might be inferred by some. (Indeed, most who know me well might accuse me more of strength of will, not weakness; self-sufficiency, not need of others.) It is to do with reproducing spiritual sons and daughters who are strong in the principles of the Kingdom, who are encouraged in their work with God, and who are challenged deeply in many aspects of their life with him.

What Input does a Son Need?

This is where I want to conclude this chapter: simply by asking, on what levels might a son expect to receive from a father's input; or how a son should posture himself to receive from a father? The following list may also act as a guide for those who would father others to consider whether they are facing the challenge sufficiently well. I want to list off as straightforwardly as I can the ways in which Paul impacted Timothy's life, drawn entirely from his letters to Timothy, as a model for this father-son relationship.

1. Paul addresses Timothy *affectionately*. "My son ... my son" is the constantly repeated refrain. (1 Tim 1:2; 1:18; 2 Tim 1:2; 2:1)
2. Paul teaches Timothy *theologically*. He draws him back time and time again to first principles, so that practice arises out of principle and not vice-versa. (1 Tim 2:3-5; 3:14-16; 4:1-5; 2 Tim 2:8-13)
3. Paul instructs Timothy *relationally*. He is clear with Timothy how he should handle relationships, with older men, younger men, older women, younger women, etc. (1 Tim 5:1-21)

4. Paul is direct with Timothy *morally*. Appeals for purity and integrity are a constant feature of his letters. (1 Tim 6:11-16; 2 Tim 2:14-26)
5. Paul trains Timothy *ecclesiologically*. Within the church, there is right order for worship, ministries, the appointment of leaders, etc., and Paul trains Timothy in how to implement these. (1 Tim 2:1-2,8-15; 3:1-13)
6. Paul watches for Timothy *financially*. Attitudes to money cannot be ignored, and are a stumbling-block for many. (1 Tim 6:3-19)
7. Paul handles Timothy *encouragingly* and *provocatively*. He urges him on to continued progress, to “fight the good fight” of faith. (1 Tim 1:18-19; 4:11-16; 6:20-21; 2 Tim 1:6-14; 2:14-26)
8. Paul spurs Timothy forward *spiritually*. He encourages Timothy to keep in training in his spiritual life with godliness, and not to neglect this out of his busyness in caring for others. (1 Tim 4:7-8)
9. Paul urges Timothy to work *diligently*, leading by example to be a provocation to others. (1 Tim 4:15-16; 2 Tim 2:1-10)
10. Paul commends Timothy to devoted effort *ministerially*. He needs to keep at preaching and teaching, and not neglect gifts he has been given to work for God. (1 Tim 4:11-16; 2 Tim 1:6-7; 4:1-5)
11. Paul encourages Timothy to labour *perseveringly*. The man of God does not give up! (1 Tim 4:16; 2 Tim 3:10-4:5)
12. Paul challenges Timothy to be ardent *faithfully*. He must not be intimidated, but operate out of the spirit of “power, love and a sound mind” that God has given us all. (2 Tim 1:6-7)
13. Paul warns Timothy *eschatologically*. There are ways to behave and not to behave in the terrible times of the last days. Life is to be lived in the light of the return of Jesus! (2 Tim 3:1-9)
14. Paul admonishes Timothy to act *pastorally* and *evangelistically*. He definitely must maintain an outward-looking perspective. (2 Tim 4:1-5)
15. Paul encourages Timothy to stick to the word of God *avidly*. He is both to keep on preaching and teaching it, and live by it himself so

that, as a man of God, he may be equipped for every good work.
(1 Tim 4:13-14; 2 Tim 1:13-14; 3:14-4:5)

Even a superficial reading of Paul's two letters to Timothy show how direct Paul was with Timothy and how comprehensive was his teaching. The training is all-embracing! This is fatherhood at its best, training a son so that he in turn may become a father.

Chapter 6

Fatherhood: Some Final Thoughts

In this final brief chapter I want to draw together a number of disconnected thoughts. I hope I have said enough to convey that fatherhood is an art not a science; it is an atmosphere set by someone who is ‘there’ which allows spiritual sons and daughters to develop as God wants them to, rather than a dominating or controlling imposition of personality. But certain questions may have arisen in your thinking by what I have already said.

Fathers *and* Mothers – an Essential Partnership

Some may feel I have taken a rather patriarchal approach to spiritual leadership. Is this not all that is worst of Pauline practice, where women appear not to be allowed to speak in churches (1 Corinthians 14:34), and definitely not allowed to teach or have authority over a man (1 Timothy 2:12)? Well, as we surely understand, those two verses quoted are only part of the picture, definitely not the whole of it, and need to be understood in context. Elsewhere, Paul clearly encourages women to pray and prophesy within the context of church worship; and prophetic ministry is for the edification, encouragement and comfort of the saints (1 Cor 14:3) – presumably through much of what we would now describe as ‘sharing the Word’. Government over men, and governmental teaching of men, seem to be the only limits put on the ministry of women in the early church. Jesus himself had a large band of women around him and his twelve disciples (Luke 8:1-3) and by including them he gave them a prominent place.

As usual the issue is not either/or, but both/and. It is not a case of ‘*either* we have strong male leadership’ *or* ‘we allow women to lead as well’. Rather, we want *both* men to function fully as fathers in their families and in the church *and* women to function fully alongside them as ‘mothers in Zion’ (like Deborah who, in Judges 5:7, arose “a mother in Israel”, though her heart was for the “princes of Israel”). I am impressed with the ‘noble’ woman praised right at the end of the book of Proverbs (31:10-31). She is some woman! Her husband trusts her as she gets up early to work, runs businesses, manages her family and the estate, and is capable of skilled hard work herself; she cares for the poor and needy, is prepared for winter, and generally is a commendation to her husband and children. They appreciate her worth and value. Meanwhile, her husband is one of the city elders, and respected amongst them not only because of his own wisdom and work, but because of her – she is also praised “at the city gate” where the elders sit (Prov 31:31).

In fact, this is some partnership! The family is blessed because of this father and mother, as indeed is the whole city. I have a feeling that this reflects the intention of God for family at home; and since the church is also God’s family, for the church too. We need fathers who will take their place in all the ways outlined earlier; but we need mothers who will also give themselves diligently and devotedly alongside them to the ministry of Christ, setting an example of godliness, and teaching younger Christian women how to live good and godly lives (Titus 2:3-5). The issue here is not a particular ‘model’ of ministry for women (i.e. up-front versus behind the scenes), but *partnership in ministry*.

What about Singles?

Perhaps some of you might be thinking: “Well, this is all very well for those who are married or those who have children. But what about me? I’m single. Am I excluded from all this then?”

“By no means!” (to borrow a phrase from Paul!) There is ample room for leadership for single men and women. The picture of the human family helps us here. My older children have often had responsibility for the family when Lorraine and I were not around. They have driven them

places, fed them, looked after them – and had fun with them in a way we would not or could not. Single men and women can lead in all sorts of ways – very effectively and with great fruitfulness. They are just not fathers and mothers in the way that mum and dad are. In the church, almost every area can be led by anyone ; but ‘dad’ and ‘mum’ are needed to create the sense of family. This picture of the family is reflected everywhere in the New Testament: for example, Ephesians 3:14-15, Hebrews 2:10-13; 1 John 2:12-14.

Having said this, as individuals begin to mature in Christ, there is no reason at all why single men and women cannot begin to operate as fathers and mothers in the Lord. After all, Jesus was single, yet Isaiah prophesied of him that he would be “Everlasting Father” (Isaiah 9:6). Within my own lifetime there have been significant leaders who have been single; think for example of a man like John Stott who has been a father to many in the evangelical world. Here in Oxfordshire we recently took the step of putting in a single young man, aged just twenty-three, as the Community Head of one of our churches. He had already shown his value in the family; he is now growing in being a father to his people.

So, then, no single should read this book and feel disqualified! If it is in our heart to be a father or mother among God’s people, then simply get busy doing whatever God gives you to do in the family, and see what grows!

Fatherhood and Brotherhood

“But acknowledging we need fathers in the church, what is the balance between fatherhood and raising up strong leadership teams?”, someone might ask. “Teams who will lead corporately, challenge one another and grow together?”

It is sometimes the case that where a ‘father’ has founded a fellowship, his influence is so strong that a strong team cannot develop around him. But this is not necessarily the case. A father’s goal should be to raise mature sons who can develop and expand the family business, each taking responsibility for his own area. These mature sons become fathers in their own rights. Jesus himself seems to have had the same progression in view:

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are *my friends* if you do what I command. I no longer call you *servants*, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” (John 15:12-15)

Jesus has a progression – servants to friends. Paul’s progression for Timothy seems to be from being a son to becoming a father. But there is a shift – a growth up alongside one’s father, that the true father enjoys and wants. Indeed, he wants his sons to surpass him. I have watched Barney Coombs invest himself into others, constantly encouraging, equipping and releasing them to be mature sons in Christ. He has encouraged those of us around him to be honest with him, not to be ‘yes’ men, and to provoke him as much as he challenges us. He gladly recognises other giftings stronger than his own and, in wisdom, releases such gifting. I am blessed to have many young men to train and work with in Oxford. We try to set the atmosphere of strong interaction, iron sharpening iron. They definitely have the edge over me in terms of energy; I think I might have a slight edge in wisdom. I need their energy; they need my wisdom. I think it can be a very effective team, even if I am doing most of the coaching, and they are doing most of the playing. Fathers must allow sons to grow to become co-workers, and ultimately fathers in their own right!

Postscript 1: A Plea for Stable Fatherhood

Needless to say, fatherhood has to be flexible and responsive, not reactive. Many leaders are not good fathers precisely because they are explosive or reactive. People say all sorts of things which can be deliberately or accidentally hurtful; they can be self-willed and difficult to lead; or passive and difficult to motivate. The consistently self-willed and passive are equally as infuriating as those who are inconsistent and subject to mood swings! Good fathers are stable and steady, whatever is going on, and consistently measured in handling people; otherwise those people are the victims of their emotional whims and ups-and-downs. I remember to my shame exploding at one of my team about a particular matter, mainly because I was under pressure. I think he had been mistaken about something, but it

definitely was not as major as the mess I had to clear up because of my own outburst!

“And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” (1 Thess 5:14) When emotions rule the day, we end up encouraging the idle, and warning the timid and weak, which does no-one any good!

Postscript 2: A plea for Principled Fatherhood

I see three types (at least) of leadership, and we need to understand the difference between them.

1. Principled leadership

This kind of leadership is obviously governed by adherence to principles. You know where you stand with those who are leading. Contravene the principles, and you know what’s coming. An example of this is someone like Churchill – never give up, never turn back!

2. Pragmatic leadership

This kind of leadership assesses what is best to do in each situation. It can look wise for that reason, but the lack of principle eventually shows. All leadership must be pragmatic to a degree; but the true pragmatist is quite prepared to compromise *principle* to achieve a *solution*. Neville Chamberlain, in contrast to Churchill, was such a leader. You could never be sure where he stood.

3. Populist leadership

This third kind of leadership is ‘the growing friend’. It no longer has any particular principles, but leads according to what the people really want, in order to win popularity and to be deemed a good leader. Any unpopular measures will be tackled by the ‘spin doctors’, who will seek to put a good face on things, so that popularity is maintained. I know some fathers like this: they are afraid their children will not like them, so they pander to their every whim. In order to avoid taking an unpopular stand, these fathers never train their kids in right and wrong or confront bad behaviour and say “No”! I see this trend advancing in the church: there are

‘populist’ teachings – the promise of prosperity, healing, self-fulfilment. People like this stuff! And surely, while we’re at it, sin can’t be so bad, can it? Why be so mean as to say ‘no’ – show some understanding: be nice to people.

This trend is more subtle than I portray it. The trouble is, we all like to be liked; and we all want people to be attracted to Christ. But if we are not careful, we are seduced into offering more than Christ. Of course, he offers forgiveness, freedom from bondage to evil, and eternal life; he also insists people turn away from sin, make him absolute Lord of the lives, and take up their cross and follow him. Ouch!

This book is a simple appeal for leaders to lead like fathers. The church is crying out for them. Europe needs fathers! The world needs fathers! Principled, stable, responsible and loving fathers, setting the same tone in the family of God as God the Father himself does. May God raise up many such fathers, and may all of us aspire to become fathers by being sons!