

Train Up a Child

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Salt and Light Ministries

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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

Chapter 1

If God is For Us ...

One of the greatest privileges in life is to be called by God to be a parent. It is also one of the greatest challenges! It is a tremendous responsibility to have care for the life of any person, and it is a great calling to raise up our children on God's behalf. Our goal is that they should know him and choose to follow him. Our own greatest encouragement over the last twenty years has been to know that God is for us, 'rooting for us' in our roles as parents. In writing this booklet our purpose is to encourage and envision you for this task by sharing some of what God has taught us through our experience. We have read and been greatly helped by much material and many people; but God's Word and his Holy Spirit have been our chief supporters and guides. Not surprisingly, then, we have included quite a lot of Scripture in this book. Although most of this has not been printed out, please take time to study the references; in them you will discover the real wisdom! Biblical foundation and understanding always needs to come before practical outworking.

Train a Child

As we begin to consider different aspects of parenting, one clear mandate from God should grab our attention. Proverbs 22:6 spells it out: "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it."

For some, these words can produce sadness and confusion when, having done their best, they reflect on children not walking with God, or

with whom they have lost relationship for whatever reason. All we can do is line ourselves up with God's Word, do the best we can, and trust him for the outcome. Where the choice of individuals is concerned, there can be no guarantees; but, with God's help, we can invest such an important deposit in our children when they are young that they will have roots deep in his will and ways. These will not only give them an ever-open way back to him, but will also encourage security, strength of character and godly values in them as people.

Following the Fundamentals

We can't say it all

Given the nature of this 'Roots and Shoots' series we are not aiming for a comprehensive guide to parenting. There is, anyway, a wealth of wise, practical and godly material available. What we are trying to do is explore certain core issues for Christian parents. Although much of what we have written will be helpful to those with teenage children, we have focused on the younger years. A planned 'sequel' will deal specifically with issues and experiences through the teenage years to the moment of finally releasing our precious children into their adulthood.

Lasting results

When we adopt techniques without a clear grasp of why we are doing what we're doing, we end up with problems. We would be engaging in behavioural adaptation rather than the genuine, healthy and productive training which leads to lasting fruit in the lives of our children. Ultimately, people of any age are much more likely to embrace any visible 'practices' if they are made aware of the root principles. If good parenting is to be passed down the generations, then we need to have the longer view. As Charles Simpson once said: "The true test of success is producing successors." To achieve this we must examine underlying issues, and not simply settle for the giving and receiving of prescriptive advice. So, when a child causes embarrassment through bad behaviour, the question is not so much "How can I control this?" as "What might be the root causes of this behaviour?"

Beware of everyone else!

We need to be constantly aware of the pressure to conform to unspoken codes of conduct which can cause us to become so focused, and sometimes so caught up, on the ‘presenting problems’, that we miss the fundamentals. Sadly Christian communities can sometimes add to this difficulty as people feel the need to ‘perform’ to be acceptable, or that it somehow reflects badly on God if we’re not doing well. We can find ourselves looking at how everybody else’s children behave, or how serene all the other mothers appear, or how everyone else seems to manage to sing a whole praise song without interruption. Our deduction is usually somehow connected to the content of our personal walk with God, so our struggles must mean that we are falling short in that area. Apparently, no one else has the same problem! Or do they??? Judging by appearances and making comparisons are deadly! Let’s all be aware of the pressures we can put on both ourselves and each other, and be released from all expectations that undermine the joy God wants for us as parents.

Beware of the teaching!

This needs saying in two respects. Firstly, to compare ourselves and our parenting to the teaching we receive is usually deadly. Teaching can reveal our shortfall and shortcomings to the effect that we feel discouraged, disappointed or even despondent. It’s important to receive teaching primarily as *target-setting* or *envisioning* for the future, rather than a measuring stick of the present. Secondly, there can be a very real danger of thinking that, having read the book, listened to the talk or whatever, we are doing what we’ve heard. James 1:22-25 spells out that seeing the issues and putting them into practise are two different things; and we parents will be missing the best of God’s desires for our families if we confuse or equate them.

Doing it on your own

We are conscious that our readers will come from widely varied backgrounds and be at different stages of life. Many of you may be single parents and we trust you will not be offended by any emphasis placed on the importance of marriage. A close friend of ours has helped by writing a

chapter on her experiences over many years as a single mum. We trust you will find this to be an encouragement! It is an important chapter for everyone to read, in fact, as we all have a part to play as members of the body of Christ. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ ... its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it ...” (1 Corinthians 12:21-26). Sometimes, just being there is enough, but sometimes we can support a single parent’s parenting in ways that will feel like ‘life-savers’ to them.

Chapter 2

Vision – Setting our Sights

Much More than Survival

One of the things we have often found disturbing is to hear parents talk about ‘surviving’ the childhood years. As any parent knows, there are certainly times when this seems the highest we can aim for, especially in the days of so little sleep! We strongly believe, however, that this is a time more to be enjoyed than just ‘got through’. The thought that parents are missing out on the best of such a precious, unrepeatable time of life fills us with sadness. God wants us to experience so much of what he feels for us as his children, and to be able to look back with pleasure on the years of child-rearing. Yes, it is hard work, and yes, it can be heartbreaking at times; but our mind-set as we go into the parenting years can be one of excitement and anticipation rather than dread! Dread will always threaten to rob us of what’s good about being a parent. It can even rob us of our relationships with our children, as they sense from us a resentment and negativity and realise that they’re the source of the problem.

We’re going to focus on the positives because that’s the perspective on parenting that we find in the Bible.

The Set of the Sail

We are sure you don’t need us to tell you of the difficulties of raising children in today’s world. Many people would say that this is a time of unparalleled opportunity, with endless scope to achieve wealth, status and

self-fulfilment. This may be so; but all this opportunity is matched by an unprecedented decline in the social fabric of our society. The pressures and influences on our children are both many and demanding. They come into our homes in abundance, through sources such as the media, entering by new and insidious routes on a daily basis. And which parent of a teenager hasn't suffered the tyranny of peer pressure in all its many guises, seeming to change their child's personality overnight?

Perhaps most tragic and damaging of all is the accelerating decline of the family in the West. This is of double concern as the secure family is both the source of strength and safety for the growing child, but also the primary model for future relationships. A few years ago we read a heartbreaking story in the local press about a father on trial for the murder of his own daughter. He had no defence; but through his tears he spoke of his great love for his child. He had acted out of the weight of unbearable fears for her growing up in such a deprived and wicked world. His desperation to protect her from what the future might do to her had pushed him beyond reason. How easy for us to look on from a distance and condemn his actions in taking her life. Ever since, we have reflected on the sadness of those lives and the tragedy that nobody was alongside to speak God's love and hope into their situation.

We do need honestly to face up to the world we live in, but not allow ourselves to be crushed by the circumstances. Hear the inspiration behind this old poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox:

One ship drives east and another drives west
With the self same winds that blow;
'Tis the set of the sails and not the gales
Which tell us the way to go.

The reality is that we are in this world and are vulnerable to the prevailing winds in society. But that does not mean that those winds will automatically determine our course. An experienced sailor knows you do not simply have to be dragged along with the wind; indeed it is often dangerous to allow that to happen! Rather by wise and determined use of the sails and rudder he is able to navigate a course.

For us it is God's course through life that we choose to follow. When the underlying guiding principles are set right then, rather than being blown

off course, we can use the gales of life to make progress. Difficulty and opposition can be turned to advantage. For example, any form of opposition to our value system forces us to consider what's important to us and to think through what we really do believe.

We need to have a God-inspired vision for our children to give us a sense of direction and purpose. If we have a sense of where we are heading and what we are trying to build in to our children, then every time we need to deal with something in their behaviour we can hold on to a bigger picture and see that it's not just a matter of a life full of isolated incidents. Also, if we are functioning from an underlying vision, then what we need to do in practice is easier to decide. We don't then just react or respond to any given situation, but we can see how every little piece can have its key place in the overall jigsaw.

Being a Dad

Clear and confident fatherhood is one of the aspects of parenting most seriously undermined by today's society. However nothing can or ever should take its place. (Please do read Steve Thomas' booklet on Fatherhood in this series.) Ephesians 3:14 tells us God is not just *like* a father; he *is* a father. Whilst many others are considered in later chapters, here is a list of a few key qualities which are clearly visible in Father God. We have found them to be helpful goals to aspire to and principles to work on! They are not in any particular order of importance and we have found they cannot be a substitute for one another:

- *Availability* – Children need our time – both quantity and quality. This needs to be more than simply being there. As dads we must be approachable for our children, no matter what the issue.
- *Authority* – We believe the father has God-given authority in the family. Verses in Proverbs about discipline speak directly to fathers. The father's key role in this area comes out in Ephesians 5:22-24; 6:4; and 1 Timothy 3:4-5. One aspect of this for us has been our children understanding that Dad has established boundaries, and that Mum operates under his authority. Whenever possible, Dad deals with the discipline.

- *Compassion* – Fathers need an ability to feel for our children, and identify with their struggles and pain. Being tough and firm does not mean being hard.
- *Integrity* – As a father, it really matters that we are men of our word and faithful to our promises. Our lives need to be an accurate reflection of our words.
- *Patience* – Love is patient (1 Cor 13:4); so allow space to understand your child, and for them to repent, develop, and mature.

Getting our Direction from God

We believe it is hard to over-emphasise the importance of clear vision. Psalm 121:1 says, “I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD.” Like the psalmist we need to raise our eyes from the daily grind to see where we are going and who will help us. It is vital that we get, and maintain, vision both for our children and ourselves, and it is in God’s Word that we find the substance for the vision we need.

Here are 3 different parental responsibilities from Scripture:

- Parents have the God given task of *caring for* and *protecting* their children (Luke 11:11-13; 2 Corinthians 12:14b).
- Parents are entrusted with *training* and *disciplining* their children (Proverbs 22:6,15; Ephesians 6:4; Hebrews 12:9).
- Parents are responsible for the *spiritual upbringing* of their children (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 2 Timothy 3:14-17).

As we reflect on these words we can catch God’s heart not to *own* our children but to *steward* them on his behalf.

Chapter 3

Values – Things that Really Matter

Learning from Trees

A tree's root system underground is so important because it draws its life through the roots, feeding the tree even when there has been no rain for weeks. The roots are what holds a tree firm through wind, rain, and storm. If the roots have not developed fully or grown deep enough into the ground then the tree will always be vulnerable and may not even grow to its full potential. Interestingly, a tree's root system below is mirrored in the tree above. The shape, strength, and depth of what is invisible is revealed in the shape, strength and height of what we can see. The stronger and healthier the roots, the more secure and safe the tree; but without roots, a tree will not live.

The values we hold to in life are rather like a root system.

The human tree

The Bible sets out very clearly that what goes on inside a man is what draws God's attention. Samuel learned that "The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Jesus told the Pharisees that it was "out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). Many other scriptures give the same message: God is bothered about what happens inside us, and whatever we allow to happen on the inside, whatever

governs and fills our heart, will make its way to the surface and be revealed through our words and actions.

The state of our ‘root system’, the contents and values of our hearts, will be evident in the ‘branches’ of our outward lives. But the daunting fact is that, not only will God have a clear picture of the values we hold in our hearts, but our children will know what those values are too! They probably learn more from the way we live than what we say. And they won’t just learn what we want them to! They will inherit things from us that we would never want for them. Abraham never got to grips with his tendency to lie (Genesis 20:10-20; 20:1-1-18), and not only did Isaac utter exactly the same lie as his father (Gen 26:7), but his failure to value honesty was passed on to his own son (Gen 27:1-27) and grandsons (Gen 37:12-36)!

Values, good or bad, will be one of the few really lasting possessions that our children will take with them when they leave home. Our job as parents, then, is obviously to make sure that their ‘roots’ are deep and godly, that what we pass on is what God would choose for them.

The Source of our Values

Our characters are shaped by the values we hold in our hearts. A person who values honesty highly will be known as an honest and trustworthy person. His children will see him give money back at the supermarket checkout when given too much change. They will know that when they ask parents for advice or information they will hear the truth. They will trust the things they have taught them throughout their lives because they have watched honesty flow from their hearts day after day. They will learn to esteem honesty themselves, and although there are no guarantees that they will always be honest, their parents’ example will be a constant challenge when they’re tempted to compromise.

A personal health check

Let’s stop and think for a minute about our values. What are they? Where do they come from? What have we inherited from our parents? Is there anything of the Abraham-style sequence in our background? Are

some of our values out of line with God? Are some self-oriented and others godly? Are they unchanging or variable? How do we live out our values?

It would be very helpful to spend some time with God at this point, checking through with him where we stand on his values, inviting him to change things we've hung on to from the past and to cut off unhelpful inheritances. We need him to renew our hearts and minds so we can be more God-focused in our parenting.

Roots in God's Word

When God gave the Law through Moses his instruction was that we were to love him with all our heart, soul and strength, and that his commands were to be upon our hearts (Deuteronomy 6:5-6). Moses said of these laws, "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. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates"(v7-9). I hope we get the message that God intends his Word to be important to us! This is where our roots need to be.

Shoots in our lives

Those instructions talk about the Word of God as a natural outflow of our hearts, imprinting themselves on every aspect of our daily lives, in such a way that our children can't help but breathe them in. Out of such hearts, soaked in God's values, the people were to impress his will and ways on their children. If all our heart, soul and strength is focused on God, and we are living out the values we learn from the Bible, then we can be confident that our children's 'roots' are growing strong, deep and healthy. What we impart to them will come from what God is imparting to us.

Knowing God's Values

The books of Psalms and Proverbs are teeming with verses teaching God's values, and it is well worth spending time studying them. We can discover more by studying the ways God deals with his people, particularly through the person of Jesus – the righteousness, the integrity, the mercy,

and so on. Also, there are many people in the Bible who model God's values in their lives – humility, obedience, patience etc. Some of these values have to do with our inward, or personal character, and others have to do with our outward, or relational character. However, the two are obviously linked! It may be useful to make a written list of values revealed in the Bible as you come across them.

On the inside

There are thousands of little incidents and opportunities every day through which we can mould our children's attitudes and build in godly values; but the temptation to compromise can be huge! Isn't it so much quicker, and less stressful, to tidy all the toys ourselves rather than seeing it through to the very last toy with a kicking and screaming two-year old? And doesn't it seem cruel to insist that our five-year old own up to trampling down the flowers in the neighbour's garden hunting for his best marble? If we go and do the job ourselves, we model to them that our instructions don't really matter; so, not only do they feel insecure about our dependability, they learn that they can get out of obeying if they delay long enough or make enough fuss. Regrettably, bad values are just as character-forming as good ones!

As tired and over-stretched parents it can be a real struggle to see things through every single time; but values can be taught through insisting the child does as they are told. They will see that finishing a job, doing it well and thoroughly, brings its rewards as they feel satisfied and we praise them. They will learn diligence, the benefits of doing their best, perseverance, self-respect, self-discipline and so on. If we always expect obedience children will grasp its importance. It will become a more natural response, and they are more likely, when the time comes, to respond with obedient hearts to God himself.

Honesty, integrity, humility, righteousness, high standards, and hopefully forgiveness can all be learnt in following through with the 'owning up' example above. But it does need to be said that, in any situation where we are seeking to train our children in God's values, they will learn from what we *do* more than what we *say*. Our attitudes and inner character will show through our actions. What we model will, to a large extent,

determine the depth and strength of what grows in our children. We sometimes get discouraged when we see inside our real selves; but Jesus always looks at what someone can become, and we need to do the same with both ourselves and our children.

Using everything!

A few years ago I was teaching part-time in two different schools about five miles apart. On Fridays I had to leave one school and be ready in front of a class at the other school within half an hour. One Friday I had left the first school in plenty of time; I had no need to rush. But to my horror, as I was driving through a nearby village, I saw two bright flashes in my driving mirror. I had been caught by the speed trap camera hidden in the trees! I have been the butt of many a family joke since; but actually we have taught and learnt much through the experience. Being caught can be a blessing in disguise (though I wouldn't have said so at the time!).

God's values can be taught very powerfully through those situations where we, consciously or unconsciously, allow our children to experience the consequences of theirs, or others', actions. Some time ago, friends of one of our boys were getting on the school bus and then handing their passes to others who did not have their own pass. They weren't demanding money for the favour, but apparently harmlessly helping each other out ... day after day. It almost seemed churlish to disapprove! However, in talking it through with our children we tried to raise their eyes above the peer pressure and the 'acceptability' of the world, to the nature of God's hopes and desires for them, and his reasons for wanting them to have higher standards. Almost any situation can be an effective teaching tool!

On the outside

God is a God of relationship, and we are relational beings. God entrusts us to teach our children values that impact their relationships, and there are many scriptures instructing us in this model. Our prime example is Jesus relating to people with such grace, respect, compassion, understanding, love, generosity, and so much more. Just reading the gospel stories at bedtime with our children can give us countless opportunities to

shape their hearts and minds, and help them to see that it matters to God how we relate to other people.

Imagine (or possibly remember!) the feelings when your toddler picks up a toy and hurls it at the child who has been agitating him all morning. Or when you arrive to fetch your four-year old daughter from school only to be summoned by her teacher and told of her spiteful taunting of another child. Imagine the embarrassment, the anger, the frustration, the sense of failure. Evidence of outward, relational values of any description, let alone godly ones, seem totally non-existent at that point! These are just the situations where we can home in on the stories of Jesus' values and valuing of others. Asking a child to put themselves 'in the other person's shoes' always helps for understanding what they did wrong, and looking at what Jesus would have done and why, is the best way to show what would have been the right thing to do. Again, it might be a useful exercise to make a list together of how Jesus behaved towards other people, which can then be referred to in any situation.

Practising the Principles

You'll be able to think of many of your own examples of tasks to give to your children through which they can learn godly values from a very early age. But here are some thoughts and suggestions aimed at giving foundations to your practical out-workings!

Shaping the inside world

- **Honesty:** (Prov 12:22) *Always* require honesty; stress the importance of trustworthiness; give examples of the consequences of lies; deal more severely with a lie about a misdemeanour than the offence itself.
- **Integrity:** (1 Chron 29:17) *Consistency* is the key! Be open about your own and your child's strengths and weaknesses; have the same standards wherever we are – in action, words and attitude; 'walk the talk'.
- **Righteousness:** (Prov 12:28) Teach and demonstrate the importance of righteousness at all times. Do what is right when no one is looking

and no one will ‘find you out’, because there will be nothing to ‘be found out’!

- Diligence, Excellence, Perseverance: (Prov 14:23; 2 Tim 2:15) The importance of thoroughness; doing a job again if it’s not good enough the first time; the goal is pleasing God; encouragement builds courage.
- Faithfulness: (1 Sam 26:23) Keep your word; hold children to their word; follow through commitments made; maintain loyalty through tough times; keep your integrity.
- Obedience: (Prov 19:16) *Always* require it; train in the little things; don’t compromise.
- Self-value: (Ps 139) Dwell on God’s love for us with children; express our esteem of them; don’t criticise their opinions or creativity; talk, have fun, listen, ask for their views.

Other values to build in – hopefulness, positive outlook, joy, patience, humility, self-discipline, responsibility, holiness, reliability, etc.

Shaping the outside world

- Compassion: (Matt 25:34-40, Colossians 3:12) Commitment or convenience? Action not just feeling; caring for pets; exercises in denying self and making sacrifices (adapted to age); counteract self-oriented society; Jesus’ example; our own example.
- Generosity: (2 Cor 9:6-7) God’s example; take every little opportunity to practise; money, talents, time, possessions (sharing toys or giving them to charity appeals); attitudes towards others; encouragement and praise of others. Model it.
- Honouring parents: (Exodus 20:12) Check out our own attitude(!); honour not humour; always esteem your partner; not variable with age of child.
- Respect: (1 Peter 2:17) Everyone deserves respect as God’s creation; don’t allow demeaning words (e.g. idiot, stupid); encourage using names when answering; habits.
- Repentance and Forgiveness: (Matt 6:14-15) Make sure it’s real, from us and them; grace in giving and receiving; decision not feeling; not

optional in the Christian home; talk about why; vital importance of reconciliation; hugs.

- Relationships: (John 13:34-35) Time, attention, working through difficulties and breakdown (Jesus and Peter, God and us); commitment; others' feelings; enjoying differences; fun; generosity not possessiveness; applicable whatever age of children!

Other values to build in – gratitude, politeness, helpfulness, service, encouragement, tolerance, etc.

The Character of Christ

Our example is our children's model and standard. Especially in the early years, our influence is profound and lasting. They will have natural strengths and weaknesses, which will differ from ours. Some of God's values may be secure in them as part of the nature he created in them, and others will need continuous shaping and moulding, as is the case with us parents! It takes effort and dedication from us to imitate Christ on a daily basis, and it will take even more to help our children to do the same. What a blessing that God's help and inspiration is consistently available, because we consistently need it!

Chapter 4

Communication – the Lifeblood of our Relationships

Communication is a thread which runs through everything we are to our children, and is therefore implicit in virtually everything else we can say in this booklet, whatever the focus. It's more than possible that we will be repeating ourselves as a result, so please forgive us and try to capture the heart of what we're wanting to say.

When Silence is not Golden

We have met many children, and many adults, who experience huge difficulty in saying what they think even in small groups or one to one situations. What they think is not necessarily controversial or at all shocking, but they feel that, even if they had something to say, it wouldn't be interesting or valuable, and no one would want to know what they thought anyway. They're afraid that, if they open their mouths, the words will just not come, or that they will get so muddled in trying to explain themselves that people will just think they're stupid. They feel worthless when it comes to talking.

The painful truth behind these people's personal stories is too often that they have been discouraged from even the most basic forms of self-expression in their childhood. Some were allowed a certain freedom, but their views were then ridiculed or discounted as irrelevant. Some have been told that they're stupid, or brainless, or that they talk nonsense. Their innocent, childish spirits have believed the adult's 'wisdom', and so long-term damage is done. There are others who, in childhood, were hardly

ever spoken to as people; they were just told what to do and what not to do, but were never asked what they thought about anything. Others have experienced little significant interaction as they grew up, so cannot sustain any meaningful conversation now. Many feel worthless themselves and grow to believe that they don't have the right even to feel. If their words are not treated as valuable, then the same must be true of their thoughts and feelings.

The First Relationship

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the security and mutual acceptance that come so easily between a newborn baby and its parents could be the constant flavour of our spoken and unspoken communication with our children? We are the ones God has placed to establish the patterns for communication with our children, and it can be so valuable to examine what's already going on inside ourselves first.

Take some time to think over the communication in your family. Ask God to show you the difficulties you have personally, and if there's a particular source to them which needs dealing with. What were your own growing up experiences? Have you carried any debilitating hurts through to your adulthood which may hinder the vision you have for your family? What positive steps can you make in developing your own communication skills? What are you hoping for in your family?

Opening the door to God

As parents we want to know our children as people. We don't want just to know what they do, but what they think, what they feel, and who they are. We want them to know us too, through open, dynamic channels of communication. What our children experience and learn in this first and most moulding of relationships will determine the pattern of their communication skills throughout their lives. Most significantly, our relationship with them will be a powerful forerunner of the relationship they can experience with God himself. If we listen to them, they'll find it easier to believe that God listens. If we care what they think, they will have more confidence that God cares. If we talk honestly and lovingly to them, they will trust God's words to them more readily. If, through the

depth of our communication, we can enjoy our relationship with each other, they will have the potential to know a deep appreciation of security between themselves and God.

A Two-Way Street

Communication keeps a relationship alive. We need to allow our children to talk to us with frankness and individuality, and we need to talk to them with honesty and integrity. We must help them to learn to listen sensitively, and we need to listen both to what they say and to what is going on underneath the words they say. It takes time to think about the messages they are sending and the needs they are revealing; but the more we can connect with the person behind the words, the more they will sense their value to us. They will feel loved and important, and want to share more of themselves because they know we are worthy of their trust.

This all sounds as if it's intended for children approaching adulthood; but it's not. It's for even the youngest. We begin the experience of two-way communication from the moment of birth, and we're learning all the time.

Counteracting the world

Our self-image develops around the signals we receive as we interact. As Christian parents we want to be a model for God in the way we communicate with our family, giving and receiving unqualified love and acceptance through our spoken and unspoken interaction. Our model needs to be strong. The alternative that our children will experience (the world's model) is one of self-centredness, distrust of others and a very measured level of vulnerability. People find real honesty hard to handle, from both the giver's and the receiver's point of view. The easiest route, therefore, is to avoid it. Often the object of communication is personal gain of some kind, and manipulation is quite normal.

Actually, the world does not have one model; rather, everything is variable and adaptable according to the context, to such an extent that trust and trustworthiness are not only optional, but also disposable. Betrayal is common. The world's values ignore God's love and esteem of every

human being, and yet people are crying out to be heard and understood and loved.

Making a choice

Valuing everyone as God does, knowing how he feels about us, leads us towards the kind of communication that will build and not destroy, that will inspire and not demean. We need to make a definite decision about our own family's standards, so that we don't drift in and out between the world and God. There are different areas to consider:

- How are we going to talk to our children?
- How are we going to respond to them?
- What are we going to do when we don't like what we hear?
- What standards will we insist on between the children themselves?
- Are we prepared to aim really high in what we want in our family?
- How do we deal with the unhelpful stuff that comes in from 'the outside'?
- What are we going to say about our feelings?
- How are we going to encourage openness and freedom whilst maintaining sound boundaries of what's acceptable?
- How can we develop a flow of communication that keeps us close and trusting of each other?

Whatever decisions we make need to be within the context of God's Word, and what we understand as God's desires for our children now and in the future. It's crucial that couples agree on the standards and are consistent in maintaining them; mixed messages will undo all the good we're trying to do!

The Power of our Response

Locked up feelings can be really uncomfortable and unhealthy to live with. Several years ago, one of our children experienced exactly that. Four or five times over the space of several months something relatively small would trigger a huge reaction which usually resulted in

pronouncements of self-hatred and worthlessness. He was convinced that he was no good for anything and that we would all prefer him not to be in our family at all.

As you can imagine, we were horrified and devastated and so confused. We had no idea where it had all come from. We were not aware of having handled him with any less love and care than our other children, but clearly things had slipped through the net and we had been too busy or too casual to notice. We had failed to pick up signals, so he had felt uncared for. Apparently ignoring his pain we had given him messages that we weren't interested, and his self-esteem was battered. We hadn't been helping him to learn how to handle the things going on inside him and, unable to identify why he felt so bad himself, he had buried his feelings.

We spent many hours (not all at once!) asking questions about his days, letting him talk about things that happened, listening 'between the lines'. We encouraged his opinions, asking how he felt about things, suggesting words and phrases to help him express himself. We said sorry for letting things get so out of hand, talked about feelings and how to show them, and, not least, prayed constantly for him and with him, awake and asleep. We gave him our time and love in a way that reassured him deeply of how utterly precious he was to us, and we learnt an unbelievably valuable lesson.

We also thank God for his grace in exposing the problem so 'safely'. A teenager who has his feelings unacknowledged is at great risk. Why should he submit to his parents' authority if they show no interest in who he is? Why would he want friendship with parents who have shown no respect of the person inside? Denial of the reality of a person's feelings is crushing. Serious rebellion is a strong likelihood for the teenager whose parents have not established healthy two-way communication in their family, and unmet emotional needs are a time-bomb threatening their ability to make stable relationships in the future.

Meeting needs

We know from the inside of ourselves that feelings are very real. No one can say that we shouldn't feel whatever it is we're feeling. It's just the same for our children. It can be tempting to brush aside a display of emotion

with a “You’re just overtired,” or “You’ll feel better when you’ve eaten something,” or, in later years, (red rag to a bull!), “It’s just your hormones.” If we do that, we’re missing something vital. Their feelings are real and we need to allow them the right to feel them. Accepting the reality of our children’s feelings, whether or not we like what we encounter in them, is a necessary part of our relationships with them. When we allow them honestly to say what’s on their inside we release the security and trust needed for their emotional needs to be met and their individuality to develop. They feel respected. Acknowledging their feelings inspires growth.

Significantly, knowing themselves to be accepted and valued increases their potential for making and maintaining healthy relationships throughout the rest of their lives. It is both daunting and thrilling to realise that the way we respond to our children’s feelings, even in their earliest years, can have a direct impact on the success of their marriages, their working relationships, and their parenting of our grandchildren!

Putting in the goalposts

In our family we enjoy a full range of types of communication, from hysterical banter to debating real issues. We would never claim to have got it all right all the time, but we can see the fruits of having set our sights high and having tried to give attention and care to all our communication, no matter how unimportant it seems. The heart of what we want to communicate all the time is unconditional love, and for that we need God’s grace and help. We’re on his agenda here in relationship-building within our family, so we can expect his abundance when we ask for it.

One of the most valuable benefits of having a godly standard which we implement in our family life, is that, as we live out the principles as parents, we are also taking our children through a training programme for their whole lives. As we value and respect them through our response to them, they will learn that people are to be valued and respected. We will have to reinforce some aspects of the training with some specific focus, such as listening, honesty, and gratitude, particularly when they’re very young, but the messages will go deep: this is how God wants us to communicate with each other; this is how to esteem others; this is how we

should treat other people; this is how God feels about us and wants us to feel about ourselves.

So here are some suggestions for how to put into practise the underlying vision we have tried to convey. They are more to do with encouraging the intimate and personal, or handling the challenging or confrontational, rather than the daily chit-chat we enjoy. However, all types of communication will support and enhance the others, so you may find there are tips here that you can use in surprising ways. You'll also have many ideas of your own!

- *Be decisive*: (Prov 31:26) Stick to what you've said, in the short and long term. Children feel very insecure if they can't be certain that their parents mean what they say. Let your word be true and faithful, not misleading or confusing.
- *Be consistent*: (Haggai 1:7) "Give careful thought to your ways." What we speak must come from the heart and be evident in our lives. We tell them they are important to us – are they experiencing us live that way? Children learn by example – are they hearing a different standard in us from the one we're asking of them? If we're not consistent, they won't trust us with their inmost thoughts and feelings.
- *Be united*: (Gen 2:24) Beware the children playing one of you off against the other: "But Mum said...!" Confer over decision-making. Have one mutually agreed standard of what is and what isn't acceptable, and both model it. Don't ever dishonour each other to the children; rather, affirm and honour each other.
- *Be affirming and affectionate*: (1 Thessalonians 5:11) Show trust by giving jobs even to very small children, then giving lots of praise for a job well done. Always thank them for even the smallest effort. Encourage strengths, build up self-image through admiration and interest. Verbal and physical attention and affection increase as their self-awareness grows. Be sensitive about hugs around conflict or distress (some children want hugging, but others recoil from a hug before they're ready for one.) Lack of expressed affection can lead to low self-esteem and rebellion; anti-authority attitude will lead to anti-God attitude.

- *Be honest:* (Prov 12:22) Being truthful earns respect, allows trust and creates safety. Tell children how you feel (e.g. “I’m feeling rather cross at the moment.”), rather than letting them just experience the effects! Be wise about what’s appropriate to express of your own emotions; honesty about personal difficulties, specific and general, gives freedom for children to admit to, and talk about, their struggles. Be accepting on the inside as well as outwardly towards them – they’ll know the difference. Don’t mislead them about their strengths and weaknesses; help them be honest with themselves, and so avoid disillusionment later. Always speak truth, and always expect them to do the same.
- *Be repentant:* (Ps 51:17) Always say sorry when you get it wrong; it models humility, honesty, and allows reality. We can’t be 100% all the time and neither can they. They need to know that we are not perfect, are ready to admit that we’re not, and don’t expect them to be either! All this gives a precedent for repentance to God.
- *Be ready to learn:* (Prov 19:20) Constantly! We change, they change, and they’re all unique. Learn from your mistakes: what works for one child may not with another. Build on what does work, and communicate with your spouse about your discoveries. Learn to recognise their signals (e.g. Are they usually chatty, but not today? Are they hanging around you when they’re usually busy elsewhere?)
- *Be equipped:* There are practical tools for making communication easier:
 - Eye contact – helps honesty, ascertains relationship and attention. (Maybe hold both hands too.) Particularly necessary in confrontation, to see a child’s spirit; is it rebellious or submissive? It’s harder for children to be resistant if looking in your eyes.
 - No eye contact! – If the subject matter could be embarrassing, very sensitive, or difficult, do something together to ease the opening up process, to enable being together without having to be eye to eye.
 - Give undivided attention as far as possible. This communicates value, especially if the child is disclosing something very personal.

- Use open-ended questions to facilitate conversation rather than just responses. ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ answers can shut down your channels!
- Don’t rush disclosures – allow thinking and feeling time for both you and child. Agree to take a break if it would help to keep negative emotion from taking control (e.g. “I can see this is a bit hard for you. Shall we talk about it later?”)
- Pick the time carefully if you want any depth of communication – make appointments if necessary! But be prepared to be flexible if that’s what your child needs. Usually it all tumbles out just before bedtime; so decide what you’ll do if you’re supposed to be going out, and consider whether your child is actually too tired to handle the emotion.
- Don’t let emotion take control (either from you or from your child)! Stick with the *issue*; don’t get angry; don’t be manipulated.
- Help with vocabulary. Children rarely know how to express their feelings safely without help. Don’t take away their need to say it for themselves, but suggest words that might help (e.g. You look a bit sad/worried/frightened etc.)
- *Be aware of children as people*: There is no substitute for taking time to know them.
 - Respect their privacy – don’t share what they’ve said without their permission.
 - Respect their space – we sometimes don’t want to talk, and they’re the same! Don’t force them into talking (Eph 6:4!)
 - Recognise that self-disclosure is draining, risky and can be embarrassing; so don’t reject their frankness, or respond over-emotionally. Allow time to ‘re-stabilise’ afterwards. (You might need it too!)
- *Be aware of yourself*: Our self-esteem affects the way we react and interact. The greatest difficulty is dealing with emotions displayed by our children, which we repressed, had unacknowledged or rejected in our childhood. Our children’s experience may trigger past hurt in

us. How we treat ourselves is a role model in self-evaluation – what is our self-talk like?!

- *Be Spirit-led:* (Galatians 5:22-25) Turn to God with our children. This helps them develop communication with God, grows trust with us. We need God, so do they. If we imply that Mum and Dad can fix everything without help, what happens when we can't? Pray things through with them, and talk about God's response. They'll know where to turn when we're not there, and that God always has an answer.

Knowing the Truth

As with every area of life, the Bible has much to say about how God wants us to speak to each other, in relationships that recognise the uniqueness and value of every individual. In Proverbs we find a wealth of information about both the short and long term effect of words. The letter of James, too, has some very salutary warnings about the power of the tongue. Too often we read these instructive passages without our family relationships in mind. Family is the place where we know that we're loved and accepted, faults and all; so we can slip easily into making less effort to get things right. Yet it is the very place where both parents and children could be practising getting things right with even more effort than elsewhere. It's the place where we can experience how good it is to follow God's ways, where we can teach our children that they don't need the world's alternatives. Scripture is detailed and practical, and gives plenty to work on!

Be radical

We strongly believe that God intends us to be radical in our parenting, not just for the sake of it, but because his ways are radical. They seem increasingly so as standards in society deteriorate. We could be deceived into thinking that we're being quite radical in comparison to the world out there, when actually we're being fairly average from God's viewpoint.

Communication is an ideal aspect of family life and training of children in which being radical can be effective. If we want to go for high

standards, for really living God's way, then we should work through the nature of our family's communication, deciding on areas for change and areas for sharpening up. Very small children will be easier to shape, but older children can respond favourably too. You may like to consider these suggestions:

- Require that your children use the name of the person they're talking to or answering ("Yes Dad" instead of just "Yes" or maybe even just a grunt!)
- Ban any form of name-calling when being used as an insult.
- Ban words like 'stupid', 'useless', 'hate you', 'idiot' that can actually leave permanent damage.
- Ask the children to come when you call them, rather than carry on a shouting match through the house.
- Require that they have the same high standards when talking to their siblings as they would for anyone else.
- Politeness and courtesy, always!
- No whispering when others are in the room.
- If you can't say something nice, don't say anything!

These might all seem a bit heavy. Our experience is that they work and that it's worth the effort of feeling and seeming pedantic. Attention to the finer details takes grace and commitment, but the point is that we want high and radical standards to be a part of who our children are, not just something they do to please us or get us to stop nagging at them. *Fixing the boundaries and sticking to them helps immeasurably towards the strength of the 'finished article'*. Proverbs 18:21 says that "The tongue has the power of life and death ...". The more our children can see that God's ways are best for them, the more 'life' they will enjoy.

Chapter 5

Discipline – the Principles and the Practice

Getting a Positive Attitude

So, we reach the area of parenting which prompts the most reaction! Stop for a moment and examine what first springs to mind when you hear the word ‘discipline’. Probably not much positive response, even from those who look back on their childhood years with pleasure and gratitude to their parents. All that is conjured up by just the word itself does not sound like fun. It suggests restriction, rules, a series of ‘don’ts’, loud voices and punishment. If this describes our experience, it takes a conscious decision to let go of that in order to let God teach us what he means by it.

Knowing where we are going

In our experience, one of the most powerful motivating forces towards getting a vision for disciplining our children that we could ever come across was an encounter with a seriously undisciplined teenager! He caused havoc wherever he went, and had total control over parents, siblings, and household alike. He was offensive, self-centred and utterly disrespectful. We knew instantly that that was not what we wanted!! The experience shocked us into action, and we began to explore the alternatives.

In this, probably more than any other area of our life as parents, we need vision. We need a sense of direction which gives purpose to what so often seems like relentless repetition of instruction and reprimand, ultimatum and sanction. If we know where we’re going, we have a direction

to face and a mission to accomplish. A clear vision makes sense of the day's battles and power struggles. It helps us through the weariness and heartache by giving us a long-term perspective. It can give direction and meaning to every episode, from the most painful to the most apparently ridiculous. We do need to be clear that our goal is not a quiet life, and that may not even be a fringe benefit! *Our goal is to raise children who recognise the authority of the Father and who delight to obey as their instinctive response to his command (Hebrews 12:10-11)*. The book of Proverbs is full of verses to teach us the nature and intent of discipline from our heavenly and human fathers, and is well worth the time taken to study in this context.

The spiritual context – a battleground

The real situation dawned on us one day. Janie was ungraciously enduring PMT; but even so, the child who had entered into battle with her was being extraordinarily resistant. All that was required was a “sorry” to the person he had offended. It wasn't just that the words wouldn't come; there was no evidence of anything remotely like repentance! She got angrier and angrier, more and more embarrassed, and increasingly desperate about how she was ever going to ‘win’ the confrontation. She wishes she could say that she prayed for God's help, but she didn't. They were locked in serious battle.

Eventually, she realised she had nowhere to go but God, and the revelation came. Our child would not meet her eye. She saw the nature of the battle, and prayed. Our son hadn't needed any help in learning how to sin, but he needed help in overcoming it. She held him towards her, and his eyes came back to her. They were able to hug, and the “sorry” was out in moments. She had been battling against sin, not our son, experiencing the challenge of evil against good. She hadn't won, but God had.

Scripture says so much about discipline as God's perfect way for us that we really should not be surprised to encounter sin in our children as we put it into practice. Satan would like us to believe that discipline is repression and potentially harmful to a child, and there is much in modern-day thought which has conceded with this deception. God disciplines us in order to deal with the sin in us and redirect our whole being towards

him, to produce the best in us. He entrusts to us the discipline of our children for the same purpose. If Satan can prevent us from experiencing the fruits in our families then he will. His strategy is to bring division and death. Janie found such release to know that, though she was surely not perfect in her handling of the situation, there was a powerful dynamic in operation with which she did not have to comply. The ultimate battle was already won on the cross.

Responding to God

It's not hard to find verses that talk of God disciplining us. The fact is that he does, but how do we respond? Do we see him as harsh, impetuous, even abusive? Or is it the compassionate, forgiving, loving, just and gracious God that we know at all other times? Do we respond with anger or rebellion? Or are we grateful, trusting and accepting? Who we are as disciples forms the ground on which we walk when we discipline our children. If we are resistant, resentful and bitter, or perhaps disobedient to a God who is always perfect in what he's doing with us, then we don't really stand a chance when we come to disciplining our children. We cannot expect our children to obey when *we* won't! Our responsibility is to love and to train our children in God's ways, through all our dealings with them. Our task as his disciples is to raise them as his disciples (Deut 6:4-9). It's surely no coincidence that 'discipline' and 'disciple' are from the same root word!

In Scripture we are instructed not to despise or ignore God's discipline (Job 5:17; Prov 3:11; Heb 12:5), but rather to consider ourselves blessed and beloved sons when we're on the receiving end of it (Ps 94:12; Prov 3:12; Revelation 3:19). We would usually think of being disciplined with some degree of antagonism, and maybe even with a sense of humiliation; and yet many verses speak of God's unconditional love being the motivation for his discipline of us. We know the nature of that love. When we respond to him, we need to see these two aspects of God's relating to us, his love and his discipline, as *co-operating* not *conflicting*. If we can understand that, then we can begin to understand more clearly the role of love and discipline he has given us.

Take some time to reflect on occasions when you've known God was disciplining you. How did you respond in the immediate, and then in the long term? Let God show you and deal with you as he would like, so that you can be more effective in this area of your parenting.

Responding to our parents

If you're anything like us you can probably only remember one or two incidents to remind you of how you responded to your parents' disciplining of you, but you may have an overall memory of whether you were basically compliant or defiant. Intriguingly, I remember being no trouble at all, but my parents don't seem to remember that part of my childhood!

There is no reason to expect that our children will be bound to respond like we did. We, as couples, may have been totally opposite to each other anyway. It's a valuable exercise to think and talk over; not just how we responded, but how our parents handled this whole area of discipline. Our memories and experiences will undoubtedly affect the way we now feel as a parent, and it's important to be honest about that and invite God to give us a fresh vision, unique to our own family.

What Discipline Isn't

Discipline isn't a lot of things. It's almost as important to have a clear grasp of what it isn't as it is to understand what it is. Let's take a few wrong concepts out, and put the right ones in their proper place.

Discipline isn't behavioural adaptation. If the whole purpose was to get our children to conform to a set of socially acceptable codes that were compatible with our particular culture and time in history, then we would find ourselves guided primarily by the world in which we live. If we wanted to condition our children to 'fit' into a pre-prepared mould, then our attempts at discipline would probably be reduced to punishments, imposing guilt, emotional blackmail, threats and the like, in order to get the desired result. Not only that, but our children would at best be performing monkeys, going through the motions with no sense of choice or understanding. God doesn't love us and say that we belong to him only when our behaviour is

good enough, and we need to be careful that our children do not feel that our love and acceptance of them is conditional on their performance.

Secondly, discipline isn't forcing my parental will on to theirs, by imposing sets of guidelines designed to produce 'good' behaviour. It's not something done to the child in a controlling, authoritarian way. If discipline was control then there would be no heart or godly framework to the relationship between parent and child. The child would act in cold obedience, but not in respect nor with a sound understanding of the nature of authority. He would not mature into a self-controlled person in the sense referred to in Scripture, but rather his emotional life would resemble a time bomb.

Thirdly, and crucially, discipline is not punishment. If that were all there was to it there'd be no parent-child relationship left at all within a very short time. A child would grow physically; but mental, emotional and spiritual growth would be stunted. The parent would not only be exhausted with the effort of maintaining such control, but would be seriously at risk of taking uncontrolled physical action when the child showed any signs of resistance. Again, the child would not learn to understand why his behaviour was deemed unacceptable, and would not learn to respect his parents. They would be acting as dictators in his life, rather than modelling godly authority to him. They would be responsible for breaking his spirit as well as his will.

Are any of these what the Bible is referring to when it talks of God disciplining us? Is God that kind of a father to his children? We know well that the answers are a resounding 'no'. So what is discipline?

What Discipline Is

Discipline is positive. Proverbs 29:17 says: "Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul." It must be relationship-building and enriching to the child if he is going to bring delight to us. It must produce the kind of person who is secure, with sound goals in life and good values, someone we won't have to be anxious about, and someone whose spirit is open to God. Zig Ziglar has written that discipline is an "expression of your love for your children ... It is the key

to his potential greatness, to his being a happy, healthy, creative, well-adjusted and morally sound adult human being.”

Discipline is loving, decisive and active. Again the book of Proverbs gets right to the point: “Better is open rebuke than hidden love” (27:5). Charles Swindoll echoes the point by saying that “Rather than causing your child to question your love, discipline confirms your love.”

Discipline is a God-given command. We are modelling God’s relationship with his children and God requires a response of obedience from us. But God’s way is to inspire the desire to obey, never to demand a response given out of fear which degrades and demoralises. God’s unconditional love for us does not mean that he puts up with everything we do, saying “But they’re just children!” Sometimes, the way he faces us with our sin is painful and difficult to accept. We squirm and sulk and answer back, until we have seen that he is right and have submitted our rebellious wills to his wisdom and forgiveness so that we can have our relationship with him back again. When we discipline our children in a godly way we see the same dynamics.

So, discipline is not a reaction to bad behaviour, but a carefully considered and sensitively administered process of training, guidance, loving, motivating, correcting, forgiving and envisioning.

Discipline is not only a *God-given* task for parents, but it’s also *God-orientated*. As we model God’s ways we are leading our children into the potential for their own relationships with him, showing them his justice and mercy, his righteousness and forgiveness, and his unfailing love. Our goal is that they know how to obey God, through having practised on us! We’re aiming to help them to understand why God wants our obedience. We’re also aiming to set the course of their lives towards holiness through the boundaries we give them, and our expectation that they will live with integrity within them. The pattern of our lives as a family should be a forerunner of their life as a disciple.

Discipline is a rescue package. The book of Proverbs tells us that “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,” (22:15) and that “a child left to himself disgraces his mother” (29:15). The same book gives us another powerful insight into the stark reality of our task: “Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death.” Parents

need to set boundaries in order that their children can be free! A child who has no idea where the limits are will be constantly pushing and testing and experimenting to see if there's any restraint. The restraint would make them feel safe, and give them a sense of where they are. Imagine being a small child in a playground that went on and on as far as the eye could see and beyond. It seems fun at first, but very soon becomes scary, as insecurity, feeling lost, and fear creep in. Charles Swindoll puts it very clearly: "When you care enough to set healthy limits, take the time to enforce the rules, and model the things you expect, children grow up much happier and more secure than those who are given virtually free reign." Freedom is not about lack of restraint, but about safety to grow and develop without being subject to the damaging and destructive powers of insecurity, fear and doubt. A child can be free to have fun when he knows that his parents care for him and value him enough to establish and maintain the boundaries that keep him safe.

The Nitty-Gritty!

As you begin to read these next few suggestions please realise that we are sharing from our experience of what has 'worked' for us, but that we do not know your children! Although underlying goals and principles can be the same whoever the parent and child, there is no substitute for us getting to know our children as individuals. We need to consider the age, the stage of development, the situation we are in, and the character of the individual child as we are thinking through our strategies for each of our children. Is the child compliant or defiant, submissive or resistant, a follower or a leader? All of these observations will help us to know how best to discipline them. Whatever strategies we decide upon, our discipline should always take place within an atmosphere of honesty and trust. We can build a secure bridge, to take the strain when our relationship is tested, with plenty of praise, encouragement, and affirmation of good behaviour, and a framework which focuses on positives rather than negatives.

We've put the suggestions below as a list to make them more easily accessible; but, once again, our list is not to be read as prescriptive or comprehensive!

- Take time to observe and know each child.
- Establish clear boundaries – state them clearly so that the children know what they are and the reasons for them. *They are for the child, not for the situation!* You decide when they can change, not the child.
- Differentiate between what is a child’s carelessness or irresponsibility, and what is wilful disobedience. The former should not be disciplined, but the latter should.
- Remove the child from any public situation whenever possible – the issue is between the two of you, and neither of you needs the distraction of others’ eyes or opinions. A child can experience humiliation if dealt with publicly, particularly an older child.
- Enforce the boundaries consistently, and persistently. Compromise can sabotage their security and your authority. Be consistent with each other and with each child.
- Enforce boundaries immediately – ‘crime’ and ‘punishment’ must be clearly linked, especially for the very young. Older children can cope with “We’ll deal with this when we get home” and it may even help speed the repentance along!
- Ensure the child understands the issue being dealt with – they can’t learn and develop if they don’t understand what the problem has been. Establish the justice of your demands.
- Always see through your requests – don’t let an instruction be ignored or disobeyed, and don’t forget that you’ve made it!
- Expect obedience and wait until you’ve got it – don’t let the child wear you down to a compromise – push through to a result. This means a need to be careful not to make demands that are unreasonable, or unimportant, or to make idle threats.
- Don’t let a situation develop beyond manageability – step in early and enforce boundaries quickly. The longer we leave it the greater the disobedience can become, and the more likely that emotion (anger) will take control.

- Don't excuse bad behaviour because "that's what kids do" – Prov 22:15! Raise your expectations and don't apologise to anyone for having high standards. However, extenuating circumstances are not the same as excuses.
- Keep eye contact throughout confrontation – Matt 6:22 is key. Inability to make eye contact could mean continuing defiance, unwillingness to admit fault, uncertainty about the issue, or the presence of an issue deeper than the one being dealt with.
- Interact respectfully – use each other's names; talk quietly, gently and firmly, at the child's level of understanding as well as his eye level; shouting is usually unhelpful and inflames anger, but a loud voice can indicate the seriousness of an issue; don't allow interrupting (either of you!) or answering back in anger; don't allow emotion to take over; take 'time out' if necessary.
- Know what sanctions you have decided to use – withdrawal of privileges (e.g. TV, pocket-money, sweets?), sending to safe place (e.g. bottom of the stairs?), no star on their star chart? no friend over to play? extra chore in the house? Be appropriate to the child's age. Sanction needs to 'hurt' but not demean or crush. Don't make careless threats.
- What about spanking? – This should *never* be done in anger or retaliation, as that is abuse of the child and cannot be called discipline. A firm tap on a fleshy part of the body, with calm warning and clear explanation, can achieve lots. As with all discipline, it should only be for wilful defiance, not for accidents, forgetting or not thinking ahead to consequences. Have alternatives to use if your emotions are high.
- Always reconcile with your child when the issue is dealt with. The motivation for discipline is love (Prov.13:24), so love should be deliberately reaffirmed and experienced between you after a confrontation. The older the child, the more crucial this is! The child saying sorry is an essential part of reconciliation. Communicate forgiveness really clearly.

Train Up a Child

- Talk over what the issue was, why it concerned or upset you, and how a repeat can be avoided. Aim high.
- Encourage healthy awareness of guilt – this sharpens the conscience; but never manipulate a child through guilt or tears. Don't let them do it to you either!
- Don't just restrict activity, but give alternatives – “Why don't you ... instead of ... ?” This may help avoid an incident, and avoids too many rules. Encourage their ideas and participation in ways to avoid a problem situation arising again.
- Conflict between siblings – establish ground rules for them to observe e.g. nothing physical, no name-calling etc. Listen carefully to what's going on, and don't always get involved. Let them learn to work things out together. Our involvement can make it more serious than it ever was to them!
- Remember, having said all of this, that there will be occasions when ‘grace’ needs to be exercised! All grace and no discipline will produce ‘tearaways’; but all discipline and no grace will produce ‘exasperated’ children, which scripture warns us to avoid (Ephesians 6:4).

“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11).

Chapter 6

Faith in our Home

Certainly no area of our family life can claim higher priority for our attention than the establishing of a living faith in every individual. Personal faith is the ‘taproot’ issue. Developing a strong and healthy relationship with God will give us the resources we need, and enable both us and our children to withstand the storms of life. Just as with trees, roots of faith will begin small and vulnerable and grow slowly. To see ourselves as sowing and nurturing belief is a helpful analogy. This is the most important, but often most neglected, aspect of parenting: most important because it provides our children with a direct line to the source of life; most neglected because of the battle it can be. Where the greatest gain is to be had we can expect the greatest opposition. This will come from the world, the flesh, and the devil. Being honest about the battle is the first step to winning! Our responsibility as with other areas of parenting is not for the outcome but for our input. We trust you find this truth releasing!

It is our firm conviction that establishing faith is first and foremost *our* responsibility, not that of the local church or Christian school. We cannot and must not abdicate this role to others. However excellent is the teaching and support of the church, it is not a substitute for faith in the home.

We really do have to trust our children to God. If we see our parenting as a process then we should be progressively giving our children responsibility for themselves. This attitude is essential for their maturing and to develop ‘wings of faith’ so that on leaving home they can fly

themselves. Let us now consider this further by examining our role as parents and how we relate to our children.

Being Infectious

I am quite sure you are aware of the ‘law of impartation’. The greatest influence on our children will be who we are ourselves. Some key principles flow from this observable truth. In general children will:

- imitate who we are, *not* who we say we are
- follow what we do, *not* what we talk about doing
- become disillusioned and rebel against sham and hypocrisy
- be actively seeking role models.

I wonder if you have heard the story of the teacher who travelled round giving a lecture on the disease of chicken pox. Later his students discovered he had been suffering from the disease of measles. Unfortunately, while being well informed about the discomforts of chicken pox, they had become infected not by his words but by what he was carrying! I’m sure you get the message.

What are they catching?

Here are some ‘plumbline’ questions we need to keep under constant review. Are we:

- regularly feeding on God’s Word?
- communicating with God in prayer?
- consistent in meeting with other Christians?
- open to the person and work of the Holy Spirit?
- using the gifts and talents God has given us?
- responding well to authority ourselves?
- learning to make ourselves accountable?

Clearly the list can go on and on. Our children will be observing us, often unconsciously, to take note of how we answer these questions. We have a unique opportunity while our children are still young to establish

roots of faith and shoots of lifestyle which, if we are honest, many of us are struggling with even now.

Because this is so challenging we need to be sure of God's enormous reservoirs of love and grace and forgiveness when we feel daunted by the task. We have noticed in our own children an interesting and powerful dynamic. The things that we enjoy, treasure, and invest in can take on even more value in their eyes. Keeping our own faith vital is a huge influence for good in their formative years.

Being Priests

A priest has a two-fold role when he stands before the altar. Firstly, he is to represent God to man, and secondly, he is to represent man to God. This can provide us with a rich insight into our role in the family. We do have a priestly function within our families. It is our job to bring the person and ways of God to our child, to reveal God to them and give them instruction in following him. Equally, the cross of Christ has given us access to a loving heavenly Father to whom we can bring our children and all their needs.

Presenting God to our Child

It has been said that in the early stages of a life a parent can, almost literally, be God to a child. Being virtually exclusively the source of love, warmth, care and food, the parent dominates all of the known world. If this is so, it is quite apparent why children who are mistreated or abused at this stage of their lives can later experience a real struggle to grasp hold of God as a father.

Deut 6:1-9 is our great commission from God to bring him close to our child. Perhaps we should have these verses pinned on our kitchen notice board or stuck on the dashboard of the car! The emphasis here is that we are to soak our children with God and his ways. He is relevant to all of our lives all of the time. There are to be no 'no go' areas for our faith. Allowing these to develop may well explain why older children, and some adults, have unhealthy compartmentalising of their life and faith, a sort of 'church is for Sunday only' syndrome. This passage speaks

of a continual and, yes, repetitive communication of faith with our children. The people of God's family are instructed not just to chat to their children, but really impress on them who God is and how he wants them to live their lives. This suggests to me that while it's great to use casual opportunities to talk about faith we need also to build in specific times with our children. Of course both are important and offer different learning possibilities.

Seize the moment

We are constantly on the lookout for moments, often seemingly negative, which can be unpacked with a child to spiritual advantage. For example, a playground incident of bad language or bullying can be explored with a simple question like, "What do you think God would feel about that?" The author Josh McDowell tells of one occasion when he was out with his children and they came across a wall covered with obscene graffiti. Rather than follow his initial inclination to distract his children frantically until they had passed by, he sat the children down and used it as a chance to teach them truth. This is a good principle all round. What may well have been intended for evil we can, in partnership with God, turn for good.

Invest in family time

One specific idea we have found to be very beneficial, particularly when our children were very young, has been what we call 'family time'. This means setting apart a block of time to spend with the children, with God. By doing this we are imparting the message that this matters. It may vary in time and frequency, because of our work commitments, or because of the age and stage of the children. We found that early evenings and weekends to be the most practical – everyone needs to find what suits them the best.

Fight for this time, and guard it jealously. It should be a place of acceptance, reality and encouragement. Its purpose is to show how natural it can be to talk about God and to God. Here are some suggestions for key ingredients:

- Word of God – Bible stories are okay, but the Bible itself is best (in the version best suited to the age of your children). Read it, discuss it and apply it. Don't bite off more than they can chew!
- Simple praise and worship – spoken or sung. There's a wonderful range of tapes and CDs available to help with this.
- Sharing/testimony – what's going on for them, so that you know where they are. We can teach them through sharing where we are too. It can become increasingly encouraging for older siblings to hear each other share.
- Shared prayer (more later).
- Resolving issues – ensuring a clean slate with God and each other.

Keep under review

- Beware ritual – the pattern doesn't matter but the content does.
- Don't try and do it all every time.
- Be sure that everyone is participating.
- Encourage creativity and leadership by the children.
- Make sure that God is always at the centre – the children need to know that he *cares, listens and speaks*.

Presenting our Child to God

This is about prayer. It's in prayer that we connect with the real owner of our children and do whatever business is required in the process of training them up as his disciples.

Past, present and future

- Rather than getting stuck in our spiritual progress as a family, we can come to God with our debris of failure, mistakes, hurts, disappointments and whatever from the past, on our own behalf, but also concerning our children themselves. God heals and restores.
- There are dozens of daily issues that we can bring to God, and issues of immediate need for God's intervention or inspiration. Both we

and our children need God when it comes to decision-making, for example, and we can ask him for help together.

- The very heart of our parenting is directed at our children's future in every respect. Through prayer we can invest in that future significantly, for employment, marriage, ministry, and so on.

Practicalities

1 Thessalonians 5:17 tells us to "Pray continually," and it should be easier to pray for these most precious people than for anyone else! A lot of that praying can be done with them, particularly as they will then gain such an understanding of the three-fold relationship, and know clearly the central place of God in the family.

- Establish a pattern that expresses your concerns for their lives.
- Avoid jargon that would need unpacking.
- Pray *first* at moments of need, hassle, hurt etc. Our confidence is in God, not in other things!
- Show the significance of agreeing in prayer.
- Pray for important things in character, family life, the world, the Church etc.
- Pray for prophetic words for the family, individual children – it brings real excitement!
- Pray at mealtimes, establishing a sense of God's provision.
- Pray at bedtimes, establishing a sense of God's care; thankfulness, routinely, from both parent and child, not just if there's a problem.
- Pray at partings – establishing sense of God's faithfulness and protection.
- Fast and pray for the long-term – their faith, their relationships, their calling.

In prayer we are signifying both our reliance on God and our partnership with him.

Chapter 7

As a Single Parent

As we said at the beginning, we have asked a friend of ours who is a single parent to write this chapter. As a single mother of over 25 years standing, left with a mortgage, a five-year old daughter just starting school, and a three month old son, we believe she has something to share with both those in this situation themselves, both mums and dads, and also with those who have no experience of this complex, lonely, devastating, wearying, but sometimes amazingly rewarding, situation. What follows are her words.

Not Wife, but Mother

When my role as a wife was suddenly severed, I shut down on my own emotions and needs, and threw myself completely into being a mother and nurturing my children. ‘They will be protected as much as possible from what is happening. After all, none of this was their fault so why should they suffer?’ was the way I reasoned. With hindsight, I can see that this was the only way for me to keep the lid on my own shattered life. Now, I am able to allow my own emotional needs to be unravelled and met by a loving and all-providing Father God.

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Single Parent

Loneliness and isolation are probably the greatest areas to tackle when you are a single parent. There is nobody there to bounce ideas off. “How shall we do this?” “When shall we do that?” As you lie awake listening to

a wheezing or coughing child in the night: “Should I send for the doctor, or will they think I am a neurotic mother?” “Is my daughter being bullied at school? – How shall I tackle it.” “Should I let him go to that party?” “How much pocket money should I allow – can I afford it anyway?” “All I need is a hug!” How do I know what is the right thing to do without someone else to agree or disagree with me? I need another hug!

If, like me, you are fortunate enough to be in a caring and loving church community, that is where your help should be found. But, even then, sometimes it takes great effort to ask if someone hasn't recognised your need. I had such a good relationship with one particular family. The phone would ring – “You came to mind just now so thought I'd ring” – just when I would be at my wits end or in crisis. I phoned this particular couple at three in the morning on one occasion when I was so low and so near breaking point. Within ten minutes they were at my door with listening ears, love and practical help. Please don't ignore those promptings you may experience – responding may be crucial to someone in crisis, especially in the early days.

Changing Roles

I was very able to show my daughter how to be a good homemaker, how to be loving and caring. Nevertheless my model was unbalanced without her dad to give that completeness. As a family we had to compensate, rather like when part of our body stops working and other parts are forced to develop in such a way as to compensate for that loss. One evening when Nicola was about nine, she suddenly started talking about weddings and said, “Who is going to give me away when I get married?” Without hesitation and with quite amazing authority for a five year old, James piped up, “Well me, of course!” Eleven years later he did just that; but that conversation alerted me to the fact that I needed to be aware not to let him be robbed of his childhood, or to take on the ‘head of house’ role too much.

The role of the wider church family

Bridges need to be built up between ‘singles’ and ‘couples’ so that there can be opportunities for advice, feedback, etc. and marriage can be

modelled to their children. ‘Single’ children need to see the role of mothers and fathers interacting in practice in family situations. The single parent needs contact with both other men and women to keep sane and to keep a balance in their own lives.

God provided me with many wonderful and helpful friends. One dear friend would agonise for days, I found out later, trying to decide on just the right moment to tell me that my young son really needed ‘reining in’. She could see that if I didn’t tackle this soon, I would store up trouble for both him and myself at a later stage. The message was hard to take, even from a good and trusted friend; but how grateful I was for that timely advice. How fortunate I was, also, to have a good model in my own upbringing, and good, practical, biblical teaching on discipline to reinforce this.

Another couple I had come to love and trust, although themselves childless, many times gave me listening ears and good advice. I remember very clearly, when Nicola was in her early teens, agonising over whether or not I should allow her to go to a particular party. She was young, I was nervous about how much to ‘let her go’, and talked it all out with this couple. The outcome was strict coming home times and a strained atmosphere at home for a while. But all was redeemed and more when a couple of years later Nicola commented that when she had told a friend of this decision, the retort was, “Well, at least your mother seems to care about you – mine doesn’t even bother!”

Hard decisions, hard situations, but where would I have been without those who were prepared to give me time and ears to talk and work things through?

How do you model ‘fatherhood’ to a family without one?

With great difficulty is the short answer! Grandparents and other people’s fathers are one answer. Somewhere this issue needs to be addressed because a child needs to learn about the goodness and faithfulness of our heavenly Father. The real challenge is, how do you teach a child to honour an absent parent and to forgive him for abandoning them, at the same time as trying to come to terms with your own painful emotions

about the situation? I was so fortunate to have much very helpful biblical and practical teaching in our church.

What I have realised is that, alongside all the input we have available as single parents, teaching needs to be reinforced in what is given to our children in our young people's work at our churches. They also need the example and availability of some good, strong role models. Again I was very fortunate to have so much of this in place in my own church.

Grandparents and their role

Now I am a grandparent myself, the thought that I might ever be told that I would be unable to see my grandchildren or have access to them restricted, fills me with horror. And yet, this is happening up and down our nation to so many unhappy families. Please allow me to share from my own experience.

I had a very good, close relationship with my mother-in-law and when our marriage fell apart this was her comment. "He is still my son, but I don't condone anything he has done and I will always be there for you." She illustrated that almost immediately by offering to come with me to see my parents to tell them of the break-up. What courage! But that act built bridges that lasted a whole lifetime. My parents kept in touch with my in-laws, exchanged Christmas presents etc. as they had always done and that made such a difference to me and to my children who loved both sets of grandparents equally. Their input into my children's lives was immeasurable.

I had the great pleasure of seeing my mother-in-law come to give her life to Jesus in her early 80's and the privilege of nursing her in the last days of her life just a couple of years ago. She never gave unsought-after advice, always had a listening and sympathetic ear and she had the most wonderful sense of humour.

As single parents, do try and keep the doors open for your children's grandparents. As parents who may experience the shattering experience of seeing your children's marriages breakdown, try hard to build bridges. As grandparents involved in split families, your role is so important and can make such a difference.

Honesty at Home

How and when do you tell your children the truth about the past? An impossible question to generalise about! It must depend on circumstances, the ages of the children, whether singleness resulted because of a relationship breakdown or a partner dying. Ideally, this would probably need to be as the child either begins asking questions or is mature enough in your eyes to understand a little of the background. As with any family situation, this would have to be judged carefully.

After the traumas of those very early days, I have always attempted to be honest about how I am feeling, sad or happy. I have tried to be honest about the way events happened in a language that I believed my children could understand and at a level that was appropriate. I built on this progressively as they grew up, so that eventually they were able to see much of the picture and make judgements for themselves.

Seeing fruit the hard way

My son, in his late 20's now, had a five-year relationship, which quite suddenly fell apart. His experience of how it feels to be rejected was painful to watch but he was able to hug me and say that he felt now that he had a much better understanding of how I must have felt all those years ago when it happened to me. The closeness engendered between us was very special to both of us. The comfort and tender loving care I could give him at this time was that much more acceptable because he realised I'd been there. Being honest and open had paid dividends.

Honesty as an investment

I believe it is best to be honest about all things. Build up a trust with your children, even though this may seem hard at the time. For a child to discover you have only been telling half-truths can be devastating, tantamount to lying even. To find perhaps months or years later that you were dishonest with them, may shatter any trust you have built up between you. I discovered also that they learn to know it is all right to be honest about how they feel if you are too; it gives them permission to be sad, angry etc. After the rejection of a parent's leaving, their sense of being

accepted and valued can be restored through freedom to express whatever is going on inside.

Finances – where ‘the Rubber hits the Road’

In my experience most people are worse off financially when they find themselves as a single parent. Those from already financially stretched circumstances become more stretched, and the more wealthy find they too need to tighten their belts. Children from wealthier parents find their every request for money, previously never questioned, now has to be considered carefully. This can cause still more resentment and bewilderment in the children, and can be another difficulty for the single parent to cope with. In the case of marriage breakdown, often a couple will think that once they are separated all their troubles will be at an end. So often, at least financially, their troubles are only just beginning. This area is so often one of the greatest headaches.

For me the experience of going cap-in-hand to the government’s Social Security department to ask for help was very humbling. The powerlessness and anger inside me at having to go down this road was enormous. Why was this happening to us? How humiliating! My children had to cope too with knowing we had no money for anything except absolute essentials; they struggled particularly with school lunch vouchers and begged me to give them a packed lunch. Our diet, though adequate, was very restricted. No money for fizzy drinks or crisps – to this day my daughter’s idea of a treat is a giant bag of crisps! Daily I literally counted pennies. My dented pride, and seeing my children struggling in this way, was a very heavy burden to bear.

But God was very faithful. No household bill ever went unpaid and I even ran an old car. It was hard. But the rewards have come. My children’s money-handling skills are quite breathtaking. When my son bought his own house, his first task was to save up and put away one year’s mortgage as a cushion against loss of job (which was quite common in his field). Last week he started a new job after being out of work for three months – his good stewardship has borne much fruit.

I Will Restore ...

Where was God in all this struggle? It took me some time to discover, but I can now see that his faithfulness, provision and care were there in abundance. I was a very new and raw young Christian at the beginning of this story. But he stretched me and grew me and remoulded me and indeed this is still ongoing. He put me alongside many loving and gifted saints. He showed me the easy way was not always the best way. He taught my children to be sensitive and caring of others, to honour their father, to be good stewards of all they have in terms of money and possessions. He taught me the principle of forgiveness and how it has unchained me. He has taught me to trust him for provision of all my needs, to be generous in all things and always to give back to him my tithe. He has taught my daughter the value of high standards of discipline and the investment of expecting obedience from her children. He has taught my son to hold his very well-paid job lightly and to be very generous-hearted and thankful for much. He has taught both my son and daughter that if they ever fell on hard times, they could quite easily start again from the bottom – they've been there before!

Before my very eyes!

I live in my own fully-paid-for house and have a part-time job. Both my children have given their lives to the Lord, also my son-in-law and two grandchildren. They have homes of their own and are much blessed in many ways. In spite of the struggles I have so much to be thankful for and the remoulding is still ongoing!

Building a good strong and lasting relationship with your children takes time, effort, tears and just plain hard work. 'You hold their hands for a while but their hearts for ever' is the reward if you're willing to persevere.

I have a 'promise box' on my kitchen windowsill and on this week's little card are these words: "And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten" (Joel 2:25, *KJV*) and that is very much my present experience. Thank you Father for your faithfulness and provision!

Giving Support to a 'Single' Family: Some Practical Suggestions

- Invite them on days out, family outings, and even holidays.
- Invite them round for a meal or a coffee
- Offer to go with them to the social security offices, to Court or to solicitors.
- Help younger children to choose presents and cards for parents at Christmas and birthdays etc.
- Offer them lifts to social events, church or to children's activities
- Sit with them in church and at meetings. Offer to hold the baby!
- Be willing to be called on in emergency situations.
- Be a contact person if anything goes wrong.
- Help in explaining 'the facts of life' to the son/daughter of a single mum/dad.
- Be a committed and trusted friend.

Chapter 8

The Place to Start

Far from being an after-thought, the area we mention here has the same vital, foundational significance as every other area, but would need a book of its own in order to explore it properly!

The Covenant of Marriage

Our first child hasn't been around for very long before we forget what life was ever like without them. It feels like everything about who we are has been taken over, for ever! And of course we do remember that we're married, but time is rather limited for doing anything about that.

If we let that state of affairs go on for any length of time then we are heading for major problems, both for ourselves and for our children. One day the children will all be gone, and we need to make sure now that there's some marriage left when that day comes.

The starting block

Our marriage relationship is based on the covenant we made on the day of our wedding. It is a binding agreement, secured through our promises to each other before God, that our partner is to be the primary human being for life. Our spouse is to be second only to God in importance to us. If we're going to preserve that covenant relationship in the way God intends for us, then there are several things that we need to realise:

- We don't enter into any such agreement with our children! Our children are entrusted to us, but they belong to God. We are doing

the human parenting job on his behalf, so that we can hand them back over when the time comes. They are not supposed to stay with us for ever, and we would be doing them terrible damage if we tried to make them do so. Our relationships with them must take third place in our priorities, however endearing or demanding they may be.

- Marriage is for life, not just for the children! They are the result of our marriage, but not the purpose of it.
- Children will, probably unknowingly, try to make a wedge between us. They will want to feel the most important person, not second in line, and we will need some strategies to prevent this happening. For example, a particularly emotive technique that children use is to engineer themselves into our bed with a skill and perseverance that develops into a habit before we know what's happened. While this can be an occasional treat, or might perhaps even be a necessity in times of sickness or fear, it should not be the norm. If it becomes so, then in a powerful way the child has secured control over our most intimate place, and our marriage loses one of its most significant sources of life: we can't make love with a child in our bed.
- God created man and woman to need each other, and marriage was his idea. His word confirms the principle that two joined together have greater strength than two individuals (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12), and God's presence in the relationship brings an invincibility (v12). We need to be aware that Satan will seek to undermine, divide and destroy this unity; he will attack us relentlessly and subtly until our relationship has no heart any longer – if we let him! God is always there to help.
- Society does nothing to promote permanent relationships. The whole concept of marriage is now so diluted – especially in the West – that it's far from God's idea, and there seems little real understanding of what it means to be committed to someone. Society's influences are insidious and can be alluring when times are tough.

The challenge

The fact that marriage is a covenant relationship doesn't automatically make it work. We need to invest constantly to keep it alive. Emotional, physical and spiritual dimensions will need vision, thought, effort, time, and priority. Below are just a few thoughts on how we can look after our most precious of relationships for the future:

- *Emotional* – trust, loyalty, self-esteem derived from who we are, not what we do; cherishing, open and honest expression of feelings and fears; teamwork, expressing love and significance of each other; support, encouragement, vulnerability etc.
- *Physical* – care for bodies and health, outward appearance to please each other, gentleness, much expression of affection, touch, privacy, making the other feel special, making romance a priority, don't neglect intimacy – be lovers.
- *Spiritual* – commitment to grow individually and together, praying, reading, sharing, worship, confession, forgiveness, honesty, holiness, vulnerability, faith and faithfulness, relationships within the Body, using gifts.

The model

Marriage is the classroom where our children learn about all aspects of relationship, from expressing love to resolving conflict. How we do these things within our marriage is the primary model they will experience – and repeat! We reiterate the point about children learning their life-model, standards, patterns, priorities, etc. from us, whether we like it or not!

Preparing to Let them Go

We will never produce perfect children! And neither are we perfect! All that we do has no guarantees of success, but that would never be a good reason for not doing our best for the people we love most in the world, the people who look to us for direction and example, the people whom God has entrusted to us to train and to cherish. We always need to hold them with open palms, to give and to be whatever they need, and to

Train Up a Child

recognise that, from the moment of their birth, we are ‘training up a child in the way he should go’ so that we may one day let them go.