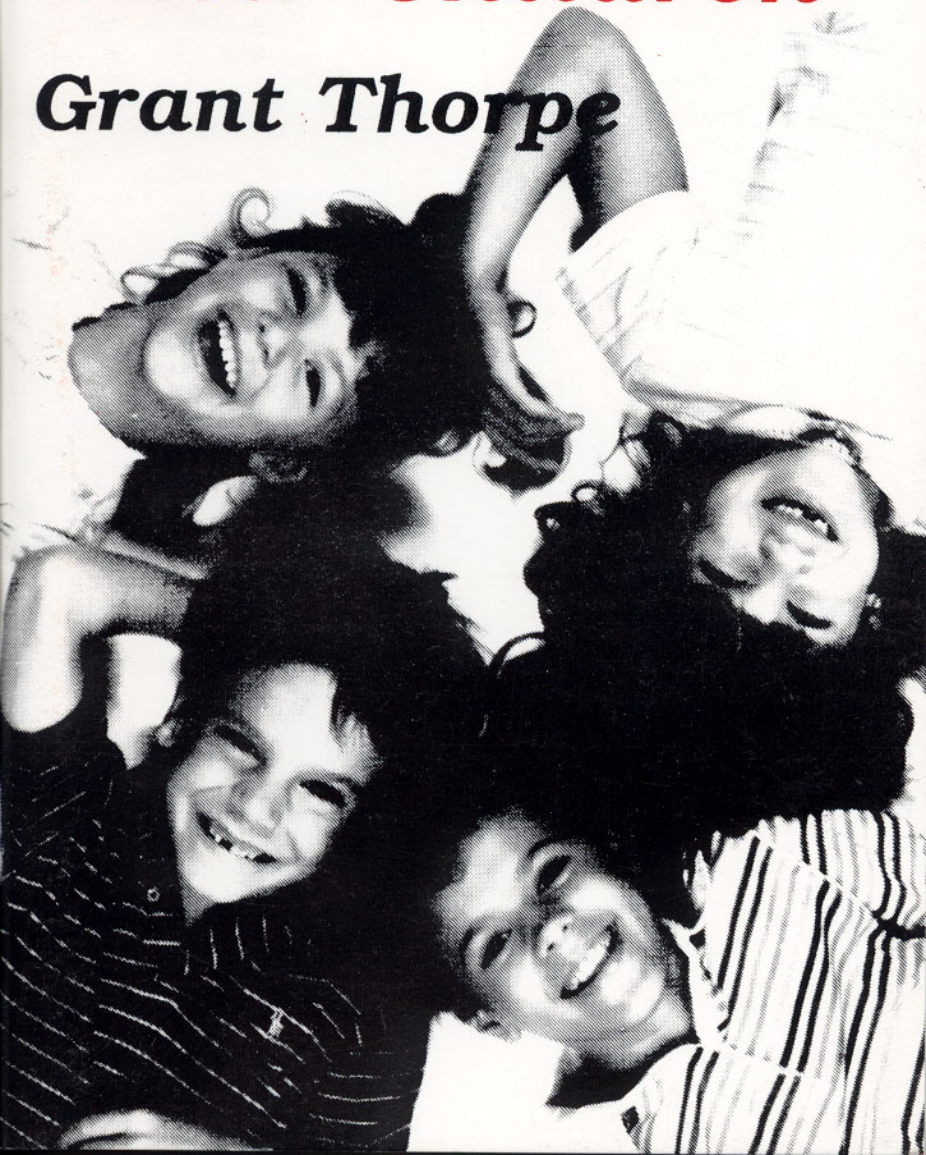


Christian Parents and Their Children

Grant Thorpe



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by Grant Thorpe

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Preface

There is no infallible text book on bringing up children, and this present contribution does not attempt to fill the gap! It would be a bold man who said he knew all about being a parent, or even enough to write a booklet on the subject. But one does not need to be an expert on families to be able to write something useful.

As soon as we attempt to be specific about anything regarding ourselves or our children, both of us fail to meet the specifications, or claim that the 'rules' do not apply in our case! But the thesis of this book is: that only God knows how to deal with sinners; that only God knows what a family is; that our task as parents is to observe him, and submit to him, as Father, and to represent his Fatherhood to our children.

This removes from us any need to be experts on the basis of our own observations, or successes. Just as Paul said that his work as an apostle was, in fact, the grace of God in him, so, our caring for our children must be the revelation of God's grace in us-and none of us will have anything of which to boast, other than his goodness.

I have two reasons for writing about parents and children other than the question of how parents and children manage to get along at home. The first is that if we say we know God, but do not let this influence the way things then get arranged at home, that knowledge of God is deficient-not necessarily invalid, but greatly deformed. By not letting our knowledge of God be 'earthed' in our homes, we are on the way to inventing a heresy to accommodate our false ways. It may not appear immediately, but as sure as can be, our beliefs will have to be modified.

The second is that it is in homes that people are trained for life-in the church, and in the wider community. The church can only be led by persons who have learned to come under authority and have learned to bear responsibility for those who are close to them. The church needs leaders who have learned to forgive at home-where it is impossible to walk away from aggravating situations. The church needs leaders whose social security arises from faithfulness at home and who, therefore, will not be intimidated by their need for social acceptance.

It is the gospel that nerves us for life. Nothing else. But if anyone refuses to let that gospel forge a new responsibility to those closest to them, certain things will never be learned. They will then see both the church and the world as a nursing mother or a social welfare agency, or an entertainment centre, or as an arena in which to perform so as to boost their tender egos. Clearly, the church (and the wider community) needs leadership sturdier than that.

The grace of God has appeared, putting an end to all need for evasion of responsibility. Getting on with things

at home is now eminently possible because of the forgiveness of sins and the hope which God inspires.

Chapter One

The promise of God concerning our children

All familyhood is from God, and for God

There is a central truth which lies behind all that we do for our children, and that is, that they are not primarily our children, but God's. Our task as parents is to observe, enjoy and submit to God's Fatherhood and to represent that to the children God gives to us (e.g. Deut. 6:20-25; Eph. 3:14-15).

Parents who do not understand this are going against what God has created; they have to strain to be parents in their own right, but this will never be convincing, either to themselves or to their children. Interest in our own families may be no more than another idolatry if this is not seen clearly. Parents who expect their children to give them trust and obedience, in their own right, are playing God.

Therefore, it is not primarily our love of which our children need to be assured, but God's-his love incarnated in us. It is not our will with which they have finally to do but with God's. Children need to learn, as they grow, that they have to do with someone far greater than their parents. This is the context for a true honouring of their parents.

Parents, secure before God

The only way children can be secure is if their parents are secure, and, for sinners, this can only be the case by living in the context of God's covenant of grace. The first duty of parents, therefore, is to be confident before God that their sins are forgiven. Where this is not the case, parents will anxiously lay burdens on their children which neither they nor their children can bear (cf. Matt. 23:4). Being unaware that they are justified before God, they will expect their children to justify them before their peers. On the other hand, if parents are convinced that God is gracious to them, they will be able to offer the security gained by that to their children. (So Ps. 127.)

Covenant, the basis of security

Some denominations have emphasized the matter of God's covenant of grace more than others, and, in particular, those denominations which have practised the baptizing of infants. But the matter of covenant relates to far more than baptism. It has to do with the whole manner

of God's dealings with us as sinners and so to the manner of us teaching our children about God.

This booklet is practical in nature and therefore a lengthy discussion of what it means to be in covenant relation with God is out of place. But some spelling out is necessary because we can only represent to our children what is clear to us, and it will only be clear if we are assured that this is the manner in which God is relating to us.

Jesus announced at the Last Supper that he was establishing the new covenant-as promised to Israel, and that it would be sealed with his blood (Jer. 31:31-34; Luke 22:20).

The apostles first spoke their gospel as those who understood that God's covenant was the only way they could relate to God. They knew that all who believed in Christ were included in that covenant (Acts 2:38-39; 3:25-26).

Given that we are creatures, and particularly, sinners, there is no way that anyone can relate to God apart from him establishing the modes and conditions of that relationship.

Fundamentally, being in covenant relation with God means that he is our God and we are his people; he has made us his own, he has borne the burden of what we had become and now works in us to effect all his good purpose. His covenant tells us what he has promised to do, and tells us what he expects us to do.

The great biblical story of God's dealings with his people shows that he is our King and Father: he has directed us by the giving of his law; he has kept us from self-destruction by chastisements; he has sent his Son to

bear our sins and establish us in righteousness; he has assured us that what he has begun he will complete. That is, in everything, he has taken the initiative.

Jesus Christ has come-on our behalf-as the faithful covenant partner. In him, we are reckoned as God's righteous people, well pleasing to him, and as deserving of his blessing.

His covenant has been made, knowingly, with those who have shown themselves to be helpless sinners, and it is a covenant of peace-God putting all reprisals against our sins behind him.

His covenant is inward by nature, not one of mere external demand. In the forgiveness of sins and the knowing of God, we have his law written on our hearts so that we love his ways and fulfil his purposes.

By this covenant we are assured of a future and a hope.*

In the New Testament, these things are all expressed in terms of God's Fatherhood (I Cor. 6:14-18; Eph. 2:13-22), and it is this Fatherhood which we represent to our children.

Covenant membership

But, to whom does this covenant apply? The answer given at the founding of the church was: 'For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off,

* For examples of what it means to live in covenant relation with God, see Deut. 6:7-9; 29:10-15; Ps. 25:6-15; 36:5-12; 103:17-18; Isa. 54:10; Mark 10:13-14; Luke 13:16; 19:9. See also Gal. 3:9, 16-17, 29; Heb. 8:8-12; 10:16, 29; 12:24; 13:20.

every one whom the Lord our God calls to him' (Acts 2:39; also 3:25-26).

(In Galatians 3:17, there seems to be an equation of covenant and promise; or the promise of God always occurs within the context of his covenant with Israel.)

The first group was Israel, the covenant people at that point. They had been chosen to receive God's blessing and to be a blessing in all the earth. Now, they were being shown what was necessary for them to continue as the covenant people. Just as Nicodemus, a member of God's covenant people, was called to be born from above, or to be born of the Spirit, so, all Israel was now being called to inherit what was promised to them.

Throughout the Old Testament period, being a covenant person never assumed that a person was of the Spirit, or knew God. The covenant was the context in which they came to personal obedience to God. Samuel is a clear example (I Sam. 3:7).

Jesus said, 'Many are called, but few are chosen', indicating that there was a true people of God within the nation and that the promises of God would prove fruitless to those persons who did not respond to him as their Messiah.

On the day of Pentecost, the cleaning of Israel's 'threshing floor' began, the pruning of the vine of Israel began (as Judas had been pruned off earlier).

For many in Israel, their days as covenant people were numbered. Paul continued, however, throughout his career, to go to Israel as God's covenant people; he showed that he had a great longing for these people because of the great privilege God had given them in history. But he knew, too, that the covenant people could no longer

be co-extensive with Israel.

Must one be a Christian convert to be within the covenant? Ultimately, the answer must be 'Yes', but, given the wideness of God's mercy, and his patience, and the difficulty of our discerning God's true people, it may frequently be obscure to us as to who these converts are-or are going to be (cf. Rom. chs 9-11).

The second group mentioned by Peter was the children of those present; the succeeding generations of those who were presently his covenant people.

In the making of the old covenant, God always had the succeeding generation in mind and made his covenant with them all (e.g. Gen. 17:7-10; Deut. 1:8-11; 4:37; 5:28-29; 6:4-8; 29:10-15; Isa. 5:1-4; Amos 3:1-2; Luke 13:16), and as a sign of this, the children were circumcised on the eighth day. Very much later, God promised Isaiah that both he and his children would continue to declare God's word (Isa. 59:21).

The purpose of such promises being given is that the promise of God was never limited to the immediate generation addressed. His purpose spanned the centuries, and this is still the case. Just as God would keep his people Israel until their Messiah was born, and keep the testimony of his prophets alive, so he will keep his church vibrantly alive until the end of history. The point lies in the continuity of God's witness rather than the security of individuals, though the personal benefit is a result.

Jesus said that his true family members were those who heard the word of God and did it. We should therefore be careful not to make more of 'your children' than is warranted. They must certainly prove to be hearers of the

word. It is also clear that the new covenant cannot be assumed because of familial or national connections; it is for those whom God calls—those who respond to his Son.

However, those who heeded the word of Peter must have understood that the promise was to their immediate children, and that they were under obligation to instruct their children, as had the Mosaic company, concerning the God who had redeemed them and concerning their consequent obligations (Deut. 6:20-25). Whatever the age of their children, parents would not have considered them as having a different basis of relation to God than they had themselves and would have taught them to know and love Christ and the Father whom he had revealed.

If they knew that God was their God and that they were his people, to whom did their children belong? Hardly to idols! And for Jews, as for us, there can be no neutral territory, no this-worldly limbo in which they roam without a point of reference.

In our very pragmatic and individualistic times, we may very well conclude that each child should make up their own mind about being a Christian, and that that is what they tend to do anyway!

But this evades a critical matter in regard to our coming to the faith. Did we really take the initiative? Was our decision the critical factor in the whole matter? The apostles testify clearly that it is God who brings us to repentance and faith. If the manner of his doing this is by giving us Christian parents—so that we grow up in the faith, and in faith—our conversion is mysterious and miraculous, just as the conversion of those who have

been rank idolaters is mysterious and miraculous.*

I will return to the implications of this in a moment, but the third group mentioned by Peter should also be mentioned.

The third group are ‘all that are far off [Gentiles], everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him’. When the gospel was preached to Gentiles, the writer of Acts is careful to say that ‘as many as were ordained to eternal life believed’ (Acts 13:48; also John 10:16; 11:51-52).

In other words, evangelism happened within the context of election, God taking the initiative and calling his own to himself, and they were included amongst the covenant people of God.†

Covenant and conversion

We now come to what this means for conversion, and for the position of our children before God.

Many Christians have known from the beginning that God called them and enabled them to come to faith, and they know that he will keep them to the end. But some may have perceived that their conversion was something wholly dependent on their own choice and faithfulness.

If we have perceived that our conversion was our

* What of those in the Book of Hebrews who tasted the heavenly gift? Are they those who have been part of the covenant community and so been subject to the benefits of the gospel—without ever espousing it?

† Covenant is not identical with election, but the two are related. God elects his own, and such are those who believe. Covenant is God setting down the terms of the relationship and our responding to meet those requirements. In both cases, God has taken the initiative, and, in our response, we become aware of his powerful and gracious electing and covenantal Fatherhood.

action, we will instinctively sense that the conversion of our children is primarily dependent on them, and therefore also on youth leaders, church programming, etc. But if our conversion is clearly an act of God, there are very real implications for both us and our children.

Children of Christian families are said to be holy-even where only one party is a Christian (I Cor. 7:14). This cannot mean that the children are automatically Christians (or the unbelieving husband would also be a Christian). Rather, it tells us that the family belongs to God-in what way and for what purpose must be left with God. In practical terms, it means that we should put aside all fretfulness with regard to our family life (e.g. I Pet. 3:5-6).

W. Hendriksen in *The Covenant of Grace* writes:

God has not promised that every child of believing parents would be saved, but he has definitely promised to perpetuate his work of grace in the line of the children of believers considered as a group. (pp. 28-29)

(See Ps. 22:30; 72:5; 105:8; Isa. 59:21; Jer. 32:39; Joel 2:28.)

The promise of God is not for our presumption but for our encouragement, and not so much for the benefit of our family as for his. God will see to it that his gospel is proclaimed to every generation, and, to that end, our children have a special place in his purpose.

We must not be introverted about our families because this conflicts with God's purpose, and is also harmful. Children who see that their parents have a frame of trust larger than what is going on inside the family are, by that witness, exposed to the grandeur of the true Father. Parents who are forever letting their guilty fears colour what

they say to their children are teaching them that God is useless when it comes to dealing with their sins.

Only God could know when regeneration occurs in the children of Christian parents. If we have accepted the mysteries of God's call and the wonder of covenant promise, our attention will be focussed on God rather than on our children-and the benefits of this for our prayers, and for our children, should be obvious! The reality of children coming to faith in the context of parental covenant trust is frequently observed.

The matter of what this means for the baptism of our children is dealt with briefly at the end of the booklet.

Teaching children about their God and their obligation to him

The covenant promise made with Abraham was that he would be blessed and be a blessing in the earth. The meaning of this for Christians is that we are blessed in being turned away from our wickedness-by the gospel (Acts 3:26). If the promise is to us and to our children, we may expect that our children also will be turned from their wickedness.

It should be clear that children of Christian parents do not hold covenant membership in their own right but as the children of their parents. As they grow, they must confirm their intention to live as covenant people. But children of Christian parents ought to know from the beginning the covenant under which they are being reared and the covenant whereby their relation to God is secured.

Accordingly, children of Christian parents are to obey their parents 'in the Lord', and fathers are to bring the children up 'in the discipline and instruction of the Lord' (Eph. 6:1-4). The children as well as the parents must have some objective relation to Christ which can be the basis of teaching. (See other references to 'in the Lord' in Eph. 2:21; 4:17; 5:8; 6:10, 21. It is hardly conceivable that Paul envisages parents waiting until the children make a profession of faith before teaching them or expecting them to be obedient. See also, comments on Deut. 11:2 in the next chapter on God 'disciplining' Israel by saving them.)

Children also ought to know how to respond in grateful obedience and faith. They need to come to understand that God calls them to faithful covenant obedience-in Christ. Parents should try to gauge what level of faith and practice is appropriate to their children and encourage them accordingly. This is the context in which they can confirm their own call and election if such is the case (II Tim. 1:5; II Pet. 1:10).

In family terms, the reality of God's covenant is expressed to the children as authority, forgiveness and wisdom-but never as these things apart from the covenant by which we offer them. It should not take long to realize that our representing of God's authority and forgiveness and wisdom are far from consistent, purposive and gracious, and we would soon despair if we thought that we were 'on our own'. We have constant need of God's forgiveness. The moral realism and humility occasioned by this will make us wise in dealing with our children-and make us believable in the eyes of our children. God's covenant love constantly renews us

in the dynamic of his purposes and so we are always beginning with his resources-not our own 'track record'.

We may teach our children of the God who has given us his own Son, and teach them too, that this is the God in whom we have come to trust. Children tend naturally to espouse the things they see in their parents; it will be natural for them to trust in the same way-and they should therefore be assured that they are the recipients of God's grace.

Consistent with that, they are to be taught the way of God and to be shown how to live in it. Israel's family/covenant education occurred when children asked their parents about their keeping of the 'testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances'. That is, it was because the parents kept it, and because it impinged on the life of their children that the children asked questions about it.

It was then that the father was to take the child on his knee. I can't help wondering if some children then wished they had never asked! But then, children love stories; and they love being told stories by their parents because they then have their undivided attention. The stories they were to tell were stories of their parents (ancestors) as helpless slaves, and of God's great goodness to them.

This example reveals important principles: firstly, duty can only be explained when it has been demonstrated; secondly, duty can only be explained by grateful people; thirdly, gratefulness is only possessed by those who know they were helpless and were helped by the grace of God.

If, as a result of our covenantal training, our children

love God in the way that we do, they may be assured of their place in the family of God. If, as they grow, they consistently act out of character with the way of God, they should be warned that they cannot presume on the faith of their parents-that they are responsible, as are all Christians, to confirm their own calling.

Demonstration of covenant love

Children can come to understand covenant love very easily when this is the kind of love husband and wife have for each other. They see the love of their father and mother for each other, the resilience, authority, and proper sense of expectation-coupled with forgiveness, and are greatly secured by that. As the church is secured by the clear relationship between the Father and the Son, so the children can be secure in the love of their parents for one another, and the Father's love they see reflected there.

Parents who raise their children without a spouse, or without a Christian spouse, can still have confidence in God that their children will understand the riches of an assured love; God is a 'Father of the fatherless and protector of widows' (Ps. 68:5; Jer. 49:11) so it seems reasonable to understand that God has particular concern for any whose human experience of family is deficient. The church also has a special function to such families and provides an extended family in which some of the things that are lacking can come from others. This is true, in fact, for all of the families in the church.

Love is fundamentally a giving of oneself to another

without self-interest, a discerning of another's need and, if possible, a meeting of that need—a constant receiving from God and giving to others.

Covenant love can be shown to children in many simple ways: by listening to them; answering them—within reasonable time; treating them as responsible people (i.e. at the level appropriate to their abilities). It can be shown especially by the parents' worship—children then know that above their parents is Another with whom they have to do; children are good discerners of reality and know what parents really want; if they see their parents enjoying God they will be inclined to follow suit.

Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Ruth and Timothy are biblical examples of covenantal family upbringing.

Chapter Two

Representing the Father's authority to our children

The bringing up of our children is shaped, of course, by what we think life is about. If we are training children for this world (as in I John 2:15–17), we must put emphasis on self-protection, self-satisfaction and self-assertion.

But if we are raising children with a view to the purpose of the Father (cf. I Cor. 15:24–28), very different matters become important—notably, the purpose and authority of God, forgiveness, and the wisdom to live by love in a world of hate.

The world scorns the idea of submission to authority; and while it may idealize forgiveness, it is driven back to legalism again and again as the only way to make a liveable world. We may observe in passing that the world's fondness for humanitarian kindness seems not to have increased love so much as it has increased the

demand for it.

While the world may see our values as of no significance to them, we ourselves know that to live before the Father is the one thing most necessary to our well-being both for this age and the age to come.

Families are the place where we are tutored for life (parents, uncles, etc., as well as children). Therefore

the matter of authority and forgiveness in the home is essential to the well-being of us all in the world and before the Father. We look, firstly, at the matter of authority.

The fact of authority

Paul commends for church leadership the men who manage their own households well (I Tim. 3:4, 5, 12; *proïstemi* = to preside, rule or govern).

He commanded that children be brought up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21), showing that parents must not merely be ‘in charge’ but must represent God’s disciplining of his people to their children.

Israel had been told to

‘consider the discipline of the Lord your God, his greatnesshis signs and his deeds which he did in Egypt to Pharaohand what he did to the army of Egypt.....and what he did to you in the wilderness.’ (Deut. 11:2ff.)

The discipline of the Lord

is his mighty activity in covenant history by which he reveals himself.....Hence, the theological basis for an earthly father’s discipline over his son is in the covenant Lord. He

bears the image of his covenant Lord, and as such stands in parallel relationship over his children-chastening, correcting, instructing, providing-which are expressions of an interpersonal relationship of love.*

The role of parental authority, therefore, is not just to prescribe and correct, but to shape a whole environment of living which reflects the reality of God's saving actions and presence.

Its purpose is not order (although that is its result), but that our children may be exposed to the Father's authority and brought to submission to him. Our authority, apart from this, is awry, and it should not surprise us, therefore, if our children treat it as invalid.

However, the imperfection of human authority cannot invalidate the need for it, or the fact of it. Authority is still 'in place' because God established life to function under authority. We can never live for long without reverting to some form of authority.

Those parents who know they are under God's saving authority can act firmly without 'throwing their own weight around'. God's authority makes our responsibility clear and so we can exercise our authority in love and with a view to encouraging our children in their responsibility. Christian parents know that their children must live and stand, not just before them, but before God.

We will look, then, at the way God is exercising his authority and inquire as to how we may represent this to our children.

* P. R. Gilchrist, in R. L. Harris (ed.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, p. 387.

Providing

God is providing for the needs of creation (Ps. 104; Acts 14:15–17; 17:24–28). He has covenanted himself so to do even though the creation is in revolt against him (Gen. 8:21–22; 9:8–17). God’s providence is not predictable, so that we may presume on it, but faithful, so that we may rely on it.

Our own authority should therefore seek to provide a reliable environment in which children can grow. This reliability should not be thought of primarily as the delivery of material goods but of all that is necessary to life and godliness; not as a trouble-free existence but as one which is secure amidst the threats; it should not be attached to either the good or the bad behaviour of the children.

Law

God is dealing with the world according to his moral law. His judgements are in effect for those who abuse his intentions for the creation. Appropriately, parents must provide expectations, which are enforced while children are at an appropriate age, and which are made the basis of arbitration in cases of sibling rivalry and dispute. It is better that they feel the smalls hurts of discipline when they are young than the judgements of God later in life, judgements which will probably have far greater social consequences than a hurt pride or a warm tail.

Fathers, in particular, should beware of leaving the

instructing and correcting of their children to the mother. Both parents should avoid discipline which is no more than a release valve for their own frustrations. (Few, of course, will escape this failing, and we will need to continue to believe in the forgiveness of God and in the forgiveness of our children.)

Children need to work, and in many cases, love to work-to have responsibility appropriate to their age: making beds, saving money, washing dishes. But, be specific; do the task with the child first until they are capable; beware of overload; beware of evasion (people tend to do, not what you expect, but what you inspect).

On a very practical level, and simply by way of example, a few things may be noted. Children should be chastised for disobedience, not for accidents.

'Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him' (Prov. 22:15). This does not mean that corporal punishment is the answer to every crisis, simply that it has its place-given that children are not essentially reasonable. Other forms of punishment may often be preferable, but, one way or another, children (as with all of us) need to know that there are certain limits which cannot be gone over without painful results. (Other matters relating to correction are raised in Chapter Four.)

As the child grows, they can be taught not just the 'what' of discipline, but the greatness of God's purpose for his people, the beauty of obedience to him in covenant relationship. The child can be taught wisdom in understanding God's requirements by working through with them the meaning of his law in particular instances.

Nothing can be secure without authority: there is

nothing to define, direct, encourage or approve our persons or actions; we are afloat in a sea of relativity.

Redemption

The next aspect of authority is more the subject of the next Chapter, but can be mentioned briefly here. God is declaring his saving actions to the creation, through his people. He desires that none should perish. God is redeeming his people, not by the abdication of authority but by the exercise of it. Grace is not softness but the command of the king.

The authority of parents must therefore be full of mercy, ready to forgive and confident of restoration after failure.

Reassurance

God has declared to the people of God that they will be blessed and be a blessing in the world, and that his gracious purpose concerning them will be accomplished. Parents may have difficulty in having confidence in their children but can have confidence for them-as they pray for them and continue to represent to them the authority of God and the assurance of his reliable Fatherhood.

Children who do not find the approval of their parents or the confidence expressed by their parents that they can live responsibly, must reach out to find this in some other quarter-usually their peer group-with frequently unsatisfactory results.

Parents tend to be more critical of their own children than of others. This may be because parents are seeing the reflection of their own faults; or the result of their own faulty parenthood. It may be because they were hoping their children would justify them by 'turning out' well. It may be because their personal interests are interrupted by the constant need for thinking through of issues and taking appropriate action.

But children need the help of their parents to discover their unique traits, their vocation, and their place in the network of life. Parents will do their children an immense amount of good by simply enjoying the things that are good in their children (e.g. Phil. 4:8).

Parents who are realistic about their own day by day performance will be amazed by the confidence with which God speaks of their future. They will be humbled and be grateful. From this, they will realize that some of their fears for their children are unfounded; they may be encouraged to exhort them in love yet again; and in many other ways, will be able to give hope and courage to their children.

Maturation

God has led his people from a period of immaturity (old covenant) to full sonship (new covenant); they now call to him as obedient and trusting sons (Gal. 3:23-4:7).

If parents know that their authority is not primarily so that children will do what they say (though in the immediate situation, this is necessary and functional), but so that children may learn to live responsibly in

the world and before God, they will be eager to encourage self-responsibility, handing over the need to choose with regard to certain things as their ability to do so grows.

As children grow, they instinctively know that they ought to be more responsible for themselves than when they were younger. They may then challenge aspects of the authority of their parents. Parents then need to decide whether or not they have been too directive, and, perhaps, to let the child choose where it is appropriate that they choose. This will inevitably involve risk—we cannot leave only safe options open to our children or they will grow up to be timid. It is better to graduate the level of risk involved in their decision-making and to be around to help them pick up the pieces when they make mistakes than to keep them ‘safe’ and then see them fall badly when they get out of our reach. However, if the challenge to our authority is just that—a challenge, don’t deny their welfare by giving way.

Constancy of the task

We may feel that having constant responsibility for our children is more than we can bear. However, we were created to be servants of others and it is in the giving of ourselves to their welfare that we come to the fullness of God’s purpose for us. This is the way we are prepared for life. The tasks do not necessarily grow easier but we do grow in capacity to cope with them.

The tasks involved in being parents never conclude while the children and ourselves are alive. At every stage,

there is something that can be done: some help given, some comment passed, a warning, an encouragement.

Chapter Three

Representing the Father's forgiveness to our children

The goal which mothers and fathers must have in view is the same as for proclaiming the gospel: love that issues from a pure heart and a clear conscience and sincere faith (I Tim. 1:5). In other words, being parents has as much to do with redemption as with training in behaviour. Children will never have a pure heart, or a clear conscience, or a sincere faith, unless they are recipients of the forgiveness of the Father, and therefore, this must be consistently and clearly displayed to them.

It would be pleasant to think that by caring for our children we could produce a well-managed family that commended us. This is not an altogether wrong expectation: God gave his law to Israel with the expectation that, in their keeping of it, they would commend his wisdom to the surrounding nations (Deut. 4:5-8). In fact, however, Israel, did far from commend God by the keeping of his law. So God displayed the

perfection of

his nature, not in the obedience of his people, but in his forgiving of their sins when they didn't keep his law.

This is the forgiveness to be portrayed to our own children: our virtues will not necessarily be displayed by our children in their doing what we say, but in our 'redeeming' attitude and actions towards them when they do not do what we say.

God's redeeming actions have taught us to love God and his law. The grace of God in us may also lead our children to love us and our instruction. In fact, nothing else will. However, we should never show mercy as though we could condition our children into obedience. That would make for very weak and messy family relationships.

Children know if they are being 'loved' with some objective in view or whether they are being loved freely. Our kindness must simply be a reflection and representation of God's mercy to our children and not a manipulation or 'bribery' of them into our ways of thinking. Let us look closely, then, at covenant forgiveness.

Forgiveness comes from God

The heart of the gospel is that Christ has borne our sins. God has not accounted our sins against us, but against his Son. This means that the forgiveness we have received and represent to our children is not cheap-but it is free.

There is a dignity and purity about God's forgiveness which we cannot produce of ourselves in the presence of an erring person. Sin is an offence against God rather than ourselves. It is subject to his judgements, not our

reprisals. Our sins have been exposed and the sentence on them has been executed in the crucifying of Jesus Christ. This is the forgiveness we have received, but also the basis on which we now relate to one another.

Law and judgement are still in operation, but mercy has triumphed over judgement (not replaced it). Where this is acknowledged we can relate to others with all the dignity belonging to a person for whom Christ died, but can still discharge our duty to maintain law and order in the home.

Children who have erred and who should be punished can be disciplined with honour, control, purpose and hope. They can also rest assured of the constancy of their parents' favour and know that correction is a sign of inclusion, not exclusion (Heb. 12:7-11).

God said to David concerning his son: 'When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of menbut I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul.....' Like David, our children can be assured that steadfast love will never be retracted from them. Forgiveness is not what we give to children after they have been chastened; it is the context in which it occurs and so children can be assured of it as being sure and certain (II Sam. 7:14-15; Ps. 89:30-34; also Exod. 34:5-7).

Forgiveness brings an end to the offence and an end to condemnation

The alternative to being forgiven is to be a child of wrath (Eph. 2:3) and the dynamics of living under wrath are

very powerful. In our twentieth century sophistication we would prefer to dispense with the idea of wrath, but we are not at liberty to change God's dealings with us; nor are we free to dispense with the effects of God's dealings with us. If we are under wrath, that is how it is, and all the sophistication of our thinking will not remove the sense of threat associated with it.

Without the grace of forgiveness, we are locked into the immaturity of insulating and defending ourselves from real loves and responsibilities; we must evade risk and evade exposure; and because of the loss of God's blessing, we must find surrogate satisfactions in the lusts of the flesh.

We become vengeful, self-justifying, perfectionist, legalistic, harsh, bitter, and finally unbelieving-providing Satan with a field day (II Cor. 2:5-11). If parents cannot convey to their children a hearty forgiveness, they are, in effect, saying to their children that they have committed the unforgivable sin. We cannot live under God's wrath-and neither can our children; but we have been given a Saviour.

There are numerous ways of condemning another person other than with words. Distrust, withdrawal, nagging-all of the things opposed to the list of love characteristics in I Corinthians 13. But love covers a multitude of sins (Prov. 17:9; also James 5:20; I Pet. 4:8 with 2:22-23 and 3:7-14).

The action of forgiveness by God shows us that we cannot earn the love we receive. Being reconciled to God we are treated as non-offenders. It follows that others do not need to be worthy of the love they receive from us. They can be treated as though they had never sinned.

Jesus said: 'Judge not, that you be not judged'. An attitude of judgement is an attitude which desires to execute the sentence. Paul said to the Corinthians, as one who had responsibility to deal with their errors, that he was ready 'to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete' (II Cor. 10:6). He preferred to defer a punishment if it meant his people would more readily come to obedience.

It is possible to continue 'punishing' someone well after we claim to have forgiven them-and particularly our children. It may only be a look, or a word, or a mannerism, a coolness or inattentiveness, but it communicates as readily as if we damned them with oaths. We know we have forgiven someone when we are able to freely love them.

Forgiveness means love can flow freely

It is doubtful if anyone is hard to love. The action that dries up our love is not the unloveliness of other persons, or even the provocations to which they subject us, but the fact that we ourselves live under a sense of condemnation and have become shrivelled in spirit (cf. I John 4:17-21).

The tasks of love may be difficult (e.g. Christ's going to his cross!). Many tasks and relationships may cost us dearly. But if the love we have comes from the reality of God's love to us in Christ, it does not dry up. Rather, the Spirit of love flows out to prevent the provocations and dashed hopes from becoming a source of shame and bitterness (Rom. 5:1-5). Love flows readily in and from a person who is reconciled to God. Jesus said his 'yoke

was easy and his burden was light'. This could only be so if each task he performed was the movement of his love.

It is especially important that parents forgive their own parents for their defects. Where this does not occur, the whole of a person's life may amount to no more than one life-long reaction. It can be very painful to be aware of defects in our upbringing because we are part of the problem they created, and we are now responsible to change.

It is equally important to let God's forgiveness cover all of our recurring sins. Those who do not live in the truth of the gospel use the problems of the past, inadequacies of the present and pessimism regarding the future to paralyse any good effort. On the other hand, those who have been forgiven and have forgiven all those who trespassed against them, are vibrantly in touch with life as it is, and are able to display the love of the Father.

If we thought that our caring for our children was only of use when it was right in every particular, we would probably never do anything. There is no excuse for our frequent failings, but neither must there be any excusing of ourselves by saying that there is no use in our trying. God is able to use all things, including our mistakes.

Forgiveness means children can be commended

Probably the most significant factor in a child's maturity is their knowledge of their parents' approval. This means that they need to be commended for things done well and

to be taught not to be upset about things they don't do as well as others. Children who go out into life with no sense of being an accepted member of their own family must find that acceptance in another sphere, probably amongst their own peer group, and with frequently unsatisfactory or even tragic results.

It is very difficult for us sinners to have a sane estimate of our abilities. We seem to have problems of inferiority or superiority, and, very often, both problems sequentially or even simultaneously. But on the grounds of the mercy of God, within the security of his covenant of grace, we can determine what abilities we have to give to the service of God and body of Christ. Finally, there is not superiority or inferiority, only obedience to God.

Parents can assist their children greatly by helping them to discover what they do well and what is most appreciated in them by others. They can help them to enjoy being what they have been called to be—that they are important to the Father and unique in their personhood. They, like all of us fragile saints, will need frequent assurances that their worth is not measured by their ability or accomplishment, but by God's favour of them.

Forgiveness provides a basis for understanding sinners

As sinners, we have quite an extraordinary and unwarranted expectation that we, as sinners, have a right to trouble-free relationships—such as well-behaved children and grateful recognition of our good deeds. But our own frequent need for mercy should make us, not tolerant of

sin, but understanding of its outworking and increasingly grateful for, and dependent on, the gospel.

Some of the most painful experiences of growing up are those associated with self-discovery. Parents can assist their children with the resources they have gained by being honest about their own self-discovery. They will recall some of the excruciating times of living with their own sinfulness and will be sympathetic (not soft) as they recognize the children going through their battles.

Forgiveness keeps us in hope

We can never be despairing, therefore, concerning ourselves and our ability to be a marriage partner or parent. God has hope for us based on his gospel; therefore we must walk away from our pride-our desire to not need constant forgiveness-and walk simply like children ourselves (not childishly). Our perfectionist illusions and expectations can be exchanged for hope.

Those who have found hope for themselves are able to have hope for others. Frequently, it is not what is before our eyes which causes us to despair, but what is behind them! Walk in the hope God has for you, and, in all likelihood, your children will feel a load of despair lift from their shoulders.

Forgiveness is the basis of our wisdom

The resources and wisdom gained from being forgiven again and again enable us to see our children in their true

setting-as fellow sinners needing the grace of God.

We will be more able to see when and how discipline should be applied, and how forgiveness should be conveyed. Many practical matters need to be worked out along the way: does the child need to know that we expect more of them? Do they need to be punished? Do they need to experience God's forgiveness reflected in ours? Do they need to be trusted with another responsibility like the one in which they have just failed? Or all four? The gospel enables us to cease living by a naked law-a perfectionist anxiety-and to show the persistence of God in renewing us.

Infants can learn something of forgiveness by the firmness of parental discipline and the way this is followed by a reaffirmation of love. As a child grows, the level of explanation (not the amount of it, and not the lecturing) concerning forgiveness can develop.

If children are aware of the great saga of God's dealings with his people in Scripture, they will be able to recognize the similarity (or dissimilarity) between God's fatherhood and our actions as parents and a lot of explanation may not be necessary-but this depends on the child and the situation.

It is doubtful whether a child can learn the finer points about their relationship with God while they are in fear of their parents' disapproval! If discipline needs to occur, it should occur simply, and be shown to be completed, simply.

The child needs to see that they are no longer regarded as an offender but as worthy of full parental approval and commendation. This is reconciliation. By this, the child will see the dynamics of their God in operation and be

able to recognize the outworking of the covenant as it has been told to them.

Forgiveness for the unwilling

Can forgiveness be given to an unrepentant person? Clearly, no. The person cannot receive what they have no acknowledgement of needing. However, forgiveness can be offered, as much by attitude and demeanour as in words. This was the manner of Christ who said, before his death, that all sins could be forgiven—even against himself. He told Peter that he would soon be unfaithful, but prayed for him, and explained what was to happen when he was converted. Christ's basis for requesting forgiveness for the soldiers was that they did not understand their actions. Paul received mercy for the same reason.

The Sermon on the Mount teaches us how to live simply in covenant forgiveness, without reprisals (as distinct from parental discipline) against those who frustrate and oppose and even persecute us! It is in the home that both we, and our children, learn how to live by this instruction, and so be tutored for a life of commending God's covenant forgiveness to the world.

Children learning to forgive

If the covenant under which the children have relation to God is one in which he remembers their sins no more, they, as much as adults, have a duty to forgive those who trespass against them. They will need to forgive their

brothers and sisters.

Children are incredible legalists and freedom fighters—for their own rights. It is right of course to surround them with laws so that they learn the good way to live, and it is also right to arbitrate on the basis of law to see that justice is done, as much as possible. But some issues cannot be settled by the making and keeping of rules.

The children need to see forgiving attitudes modelled by their parents, they need to be taught how to handle stressful relationships, how to be reconciled to others. It may be necessary to send children to opposite ends of the house for a while, but if this is the only expedient used to prevent quarrelling, they will learn that the only solution to conflict is separation. The end of that principle is not only anti-social but anti-Christian.

It is impossible to insist that a child forgive another. We can teach them that this is what is expected of them, and we can insist that they behave in a non-retaliatory way, but forgiveness comes from the heart and, by nature of the case, can only be given freely. The restoration of love may come quickly or slowly, but, either way, parents will need to insist that this is the way to live under God's Fatherhood.

Learning to forgive brothers and sisters may prove difficult, but later, they will realize that they must also forgive their parents!

The faith necessary to walking in forgiveness

Who is sufficient for these things? It was when Jesus told the disciples that they must forgive again and again

that Peter said: 'Increase our faith!' (Luke 17:1-6). This is the way ahead. Our faith in God and confidence in his tireless mercy must always be growing, so that we can be clear and fresh in showing his grace to our children.

Our children will probably be better at forgiving us-if we are being honest about our bumbling-than we are at receiving God's forgiveness. But our relationship with them will be calmer and more certain if we let God's forgiveness set us up with the resources of his righteousness to face each day's troubles (Matt. 6:34).

Chapter Four

The Father's wisdom for our children

We come now to the matter of what we have to give our children as wisdom. What can we teach them? Can we assure them that certain things will turn out well-not in the world's eyes, but, none the less, turn out well? And will our advice be vindicated?

Who knows best?

It must be clear that the things we teach our children must first be learned by us. The wisdom we have must, by nature of the case, be pre-digested wisdom. What has not proved palatable for ourselves will not impress the palate of our offspring. But the things we have learned and treasure, will communicate readily enough to the mind and conscience of our children as the things that really matter.

Children are great discerners of what really matters to their parents. If success at earning money or legalistic

attention to what people expect of them is the preoccupation of parents, children will learn to fear what and the opinion of others. If hearing the word of God and walking in line with his Spirit are the things parents do, children may not automatically follow suit, but it will give credibility to their insistence that these are the things that matter.

Just as birds select food and unceremoniously stuff it into the eager beaks of their young, so parents should expect to discover the things that are really necessary for life and make sure that their offspring are well nourished with it. I am not saying that we should emulate the manner of a bird, but, rather, its eagerness, and its conviction that it has found the right food.

Such an illustration may not sit well with present educational theory, but if God is demonstrating his wisdom in the way he has raised up the church, and if God has opened up his wisdom to us in Christ, we can be confident that this is the wisdom our children need. We should be encouraged to take up the responsibility given to us. There is an association in the Scripture between being a wise person and being a parent (Gen. 45:8; Judg. 5:7).

Our confidence in this is tempered by the memory that we ourselves have been foolish, that we have frequently needed to be chastened, and that our present confidence is confidence in God and not ourselves.

The gaining of wisdom

We should note that the Father brought his own Son—though sinless—to maturity, through his earthly life

(Luke 2:40, 52; Heb. 5:8). How then has God brought us to wisdom? How may we grow in wisdom? And how may we represent this to our children?

There are two strands to the gaining of wisdom.

The first is that wisdom comes to us as God's gift, in the person of Christ. God has made him to be our wisdom, our righteousness, sanctification and redemption (I Cor. 1:30; 2:6-16). Outside of Christ, we are so much in the business of reacting, defending, self-justifying, that wisdom can only be worldly wisdom-narrowly directed to the gaining of our own ends. But in Christ, God's wisdom is displayed in the dynamic life of his church (Eph. 3:10).

There is no basis for wisdom outside of the covenant (Ezek. 28:1-10). Nor is there any basis for wisdom for Christians who, in their practice, ignore God (Isa. 5:13, 21; Jer. 18:18), or elevate human teachers above their due place (Isa. 29:13-14; Matt. 23:1-15; I Cor. 3).

But one Psalmist found that in his keeping of God's precepts he had more wisdom than his enemies, his teachers and his elders (Ps. 119:98-100). When we are assured of God's immediate securing of us and leading us in every part of life, things can be seen as they are, love can find a path through many a puzzling maze, and we can trust God in the waiting times and the perplexing times.

The other strand of wisdom is that which comes by the patient living before the Father in all the ups and downs of our life. There are many times when God gives instant wisdom for particular situations, but there is a wisdom which comes by the constant exercise of our heart and mind and conscience, in the context of our

responsibilities, and our failures. (See Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9; I Thess. 5:21; Heb. 5:11-14.)

For Israel, wisdom was an essentially practical matter of asking how things really worked out-and discovering that nothing worked out if God was not feared and trusted in everything (e.g. Prov. 1:7; 3:1-8).

There are no short cuts to wisdom. By nature of the case, sinners are foolish. It is only by heeding the gospel and by applying that in everything-and by learning what happens when we do apply it-that wisdom grows. Wisdom needs to grow every day so that we are ready for the new things that come our way.

Paul said that the only wisdom he knew was Christ and him crucified; but later in the same Letter, he gave his judgement on some matters for which he had no word from the Lord (I Cor. 7:25). There are many situations for which we have no specific revelation, and in these matters, we need to know that we are accounted faithful—as was Paul—so as to reflect the mind of God in the decisions and actions we take.

James refers to ‘the meekness of wisdom’ and says that the wisdom ‘from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity’. He adds that ‘the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace’ (James 3:13-18).

True wisdom will not mix with pride or arrogance. Nor will such a mixture be recognized as authentic by others; a person who ‘knows it all’ is unbelievable. On the other hand, wisdom with humility is often a delight to others, and, in the present instance, we trust it will appear so to our children. Note however, that our wisdom must

gain the approval of God rather than of our children. On many occasions, we will need the assurance that our wisdom is God's gracious wisdom-because our children will imply that we are utter fools!

Wisdom can come from many sources; it does not have to be from the Bible to be true. All kinds of people have insights which we can recognize-from the perspective of the gospel-as authentic. The Book of Proverbs has something of this character. We should be open to any help we can get.

But ultimately, God himself, as Father, is the only teacher (Matt. 23:1-15). We may pass on wise sayings to one another; we may be grateful to this or that person who has helped us; but we are ultimately accountable to have learned from God and his Christ.

Keeping the law

To keep the law of God is the wise way to live (Deut. 4:6-8; Ps. 1). Jesus showed that the teaching of the law would continue to be important (Matt. 5:17-20).

This wisdom will not necessarily be recognized as such by the world, but there are great rewards in keeping God's commands and this should be incentive enough to keep us and our children proud of our Father's law. Men and women of the world will all be brought to confess that those who kept his ways were the truly wise in this life.

Children should not just know the commands of God but appreciate their intention and see how useful and necessary they are to our personal and community life.

(Luther's larger catechism has a useful explanation of the ten commandments which can be read to children from younger teen years. Parents could well read this themselves and so have resources for teaching their children at each stage of growth.)

But this does not mean that we can succeed in bringing ourselves or our children to wisdom by demanding obedience. For us, the law is only usefully accessible through faith in Christ and the gospel (Rom. 8:2-3). That is why Jesus also taught us to hunger and thirst for righteousness (the keeping of the law-Matt. 5:6).

The law must be taught and shown to be the way of life, but if we imagined that we were able, by instruction, to lead children into a life of justice, mercy and a humble walk before God, we would be blind and foolish. The law is intended to have a condemning function; where this is not understood, it is misused (I Tim. 1:6-11; 4:1-4). The law is still in force, but the gospel is primary as the context for all instruction (Gal. 5:22-24; Titus 2:11-12).

For example, if a child has been taught to respect the property and reputation of other children, we should not be surprised when we see him or her fighting ruthlessly for some selfish objective. The 'law' still needs to be enforced in that given situation, but we also need to pray that they will come to understand God's grace, and so, be humbled by something more permanent than our discipline. It is only then that they will have a true regard for those around them.

If wisdom is the practice of righteousness and we are still vainly attempting to produce our own apart from Christ, God will most certainly reveal our whole life to be a bundle of folly. For the same reason, we should beware

of teaching our children to be Pharisees by being so 'right-conscious' that we cannot see when the hearts of our children are far from the love of God (Isa. 29:13-14).

Children should be taught simply, without anger (James 1:5), without an expectation that they mature before a reasonable time (and in ways that we never did). It is desirable to be teaching children in the course of everyday life, to be habituating these things all of the time.

Special instruction sessions before special events may, at times, be helpful, but they may also convey to the child that we do not trust them, or that they will show us up (which is teaching hypocrisy). Special events have many new factors about them for the child and it is better if they go into them knowing that we have confidence in them.

Turning to Christ

Jesus said that the wise person would be the one who heard his word and did it (Matt. 7:24-27). If we know that Christ is our wisdom, our righteousness, sanctification and redemption (I Cor. 1:30), we will be eager for our children to understand that this is the basis of our confidence before God and confidence for daily living.

Jesus Christ should be presented to the children, through regular home instruction (reading of Scripture as a family, or books prepared particularly for children), not just as their example, but as their faithful Saviour, whose word must be followed throughout their life.

This raises the matter of a child's perception of what it means to be converted. As indicated earlier, they may

grow up having always believed in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. If this is the case, parents should not think that their children must follow a particular pattern of conversion. What is important is that they are converted and show this by entrusting themselves to Christ.

Some parents will have baptized their children when infants, and some will anticipate their children's baptism at a later stage, but, either way, patterns of conversion or modes of baptism cannot replace the humility of faith. The important thing is: does the child trust in Christ now? Does the child continue to trust in Christ as it grows?

Life becomes more complex for children as they grow up. They may become more devious, calculating, or presumptive, and, accordingly, their understanding of God's judgements and his grace needs to become, with each new stage of life, more widely and deeply appreciated.

It is at this point that Christian parents have frequently been naive: thinking that they have understood conversion, they have looked only for certain cultural accompaniments of conversion in their children and not for a growing awe of, and dependence on, their heavenly Father and his Christ.

When children show no concern for, or have doubts about, God's favour towards them, they should be taught again, or more specifically, the truth of God's grace shown in Christ. We can tell them about our own trust in Christ. They should be encouraged to receive the forgiveness of their sins and to give thanks to God for the same in their prayers.

If parents become Christians at a point when their children are old enough to recognize and reflect on changes in their parents, the gospel, and the fact of their parents'

response, should be explained to them as much as is realistic for their age. It should be assumed that they will want to follow their parents in this step, with the obvious caution that they may need time to check it all out—there is a new ‘balance of power’ in the home and they may well want to see what it all means before showing overmuch interest!

Receiving God's gifts

The arguments between Christian brothers at Corinth was, in part, due to their not receiving God's gifts with the broadness that had been intended (I Cor. 2:1-3:4; cf. James 1:5-18; 4:13-17). On the other hand, where believers know the wholeness of their access to the Father, the dividing wall of hostility between brothers is broken down. It is in the church, so constituted, that God displays his wisdom (Eph. 2:11-19; 3:10).

Probably one of the major causes of unrest amongst siblings is jealousy over what they perceive to be an unequal share of their parents' affections or acceptance, or some material evidence of the same. Their sinfulness manifests itself in this insecurity. Like the Pharisees referred to in the Sermon on the Mount, they have no real perception of the extent of the Father's provision for them, they are locked into self-preservation and will bicker over trifles.

We may have learned to be content in the Father's care, but we will also readily admit that such contentment is not easily maintained; it is not easy to be at rest when others appear to be more favoured than ourselves. We

need to be determined to be thankful for God's dealing with us.

In similar manner, we will also need to be determined not to let our children's naked unbelief in the goodness of God go unchallenged. Children need constant and firm tutoring, to show them that they have equal access to

the Father's favours-and equal access to ours also. It may sometimes be necessary to list the good things that our children enjoy to show that their resentments are unfounded.

As our children grow, and regardless of how fairly we have dealt with them, they will need to learn that it is pointless to demand equality of ability, opportunity, enjoyment or assistance, and so on. Each human being is unique and they will have to accept the way God has made them and the opportunities he opens to them.

Understanding the kingdom

The context of wisdom for Christians is the kingdom or rule of God. When the disciples of Jesus said that they had understood his kingdom parables, and so, the way God would work in the earth, he said that they should bring from their treasury (of understanding?) things new and old for the benefit of those they would teach (Matt. 13:51-52). In this duty, they were to be vigilant and patient (Matt. 24:45-51).

If parents are in tune with the King-who is over all things-their thinking has a true context, it is in tune with how things really are and with what is really happening.

Many parents, even though they are clever at their

trade or business, are extremely confused by life and so muddle things and leave their children confused.

On the other hand, the simplest Christian who knows how God is working in the world-by his word and his Spirit-and who knows the uselessness of the powers of darkness, has a sense and a steadiness that may well inspire the jealousy of professing atheists.

Being corrected

The Book of Proverbs has much to say concerning folly and sloth, and the need of correction when the child is young, and entreaty when the child is older. A fool should be answered according to his folly lest he consider himself wise (Prov. 26:4-5). We would all like to think that we are reasonable, and that our children are reasonable, and that a little explanation will cure most problems, but such is not the case.

We need, again, to be secure enough in God's covenant of grace to endure the 'home truth' that our difficulties at home have much to do, not with our circumstances, but our weaknesses in dealing with them.

If we are slothful, presumptive, or idealistic, wishful thinkers who are preoccupied with our own interests and hazy in our thinking, we will not have a clear conscience and it will be difficult to entreat God for the well-being of our children.

I am not saying that God demands perfection before he will act (or we would not need a Saviour), but that we must seek his forgiveness and take his call seriously. Our dependence on the grace of God does not excuse our

failures but destroys them, and nerves us for new endeavour that is consistent with the righteousness we have been given.

If we have been slack, we may be inclined to be over strict on our children, to compensate for our failures; or we may give up altogether because we are unwilling to live with the insistence of God's rebukes and exhortations. But if we heed God's chastenings and warnings (as in Heb. 12 for example) they will yield the 'peaceable fruit of righteousness'.

The blessing of all this should make us willing to tutor our children in the same ways, not holding back anything that is good for them, but never disheartening them with our requirements.

Christ himself endured great difficulty in his struggle against sin, but endured. We should not just be praying and hoping that our children will survive, but that they will enter with vigour into the calling God has for them.

Parental agreement

No one should presume that working out what to do for one's children is simple: many things have to be taken into account, many things remembered and compared.

Fathers and mothers need time together to work out what is good for their children. A mother is probably the world's leading expert on her children, but she does not necessarily know what is best for them apart from her husband. A husband should take responsibility for what is happening to his children.

Disagreements between parents about discipline should

be resolved when children are not present.

Grandparents and other people outside the immediate home are needed to help parents reflect on what is happening to their children. Older parents, can assist younger parents by putting very pressing immediate events into a larger context. They can remember their own times of despair about their children. They have had longer to see which 'disasters' are unimportant and that it is sometimes necessary for things to have gone wrong.

Parents need time out, to talk to one another, enjoy one another, worship God and allow themselves to be renewed by God's goodness. It may, frequently, not be possible in these times to resolve all the current disputes and problems associated with our family life. This should not matter-our confidence is not in ourselves but in God, and this can be expressed by our willingness to leave some things unresolved-if that is where the situation lies.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that our families are not an end in themselves but a local expression of the fact that God is Father and that he has designed everything in a familial way.

The whole family of God (the church) is the rationale for our being born and raised in particular families. There is an incompleteness about every family, an incompleteness which, at times, we may feel acutely. But these times teach us that we must live in the large context as well as in the immediate context.

In particular, we have to learn that the constant factor in family life is not our reliability but the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. He is the faithful Son in the family, and, in him, each of us is pleasing to the Father. In him too, we can rise up to our new responsibilities.

I would like to conclude with several encouragements.

We are always learning to be parents

There is no finishing school for parents; we are always

learning. If you have thought that your family just needed a little ‘touch up’, a little ‘enrichment’, then you would not have understood the depth of our dilemma as human beings or the true state of your own family. If we knew the truth about our families, or could face up to it, we would know that things were worse than we had realized. (And you thought Murphy was a pessimist!)

It must be settled in our minds that we are being tutored by our Father, that he continues to discipline those whom he loves (even grandparents), that he does not despair with our slowness, and that he continues to work in our families by his grace.

Children should come to understand the nature of God and of their responsibility in familial terms because that is the way they see things being worked out in our families. We may be realizing how different our particular family is from this ideal. But, we have not been concerned with an ideal. We have been concerned with a God whose grace abounds in the context of our sin-and in this case, our family’s sins.

Let me illustrate. You may have been raised in a family where self-justification, jealousy and anger were the norm. You may feel that that is what you have exposed your children to as well. None of this negates the truth of families being the context for our learning the truth. Whether our families are good ones or bad ones, they are still the families in which God placed us, and it is not in what families should have been that he comes to us but in our families as they are.

God has not bypassed families because they are deficient. The only way to proceed is to let God forgive us for what we are, and to take up responsibility for the

present. That is where God is 'at' and where we must also be 'at'.

Parenting is life-long

I have noted that the form of relating to children alters as the children grow because they must increasingly accept responsibility for themselves. But the increase of their responsibility does not undo our own, it changes it. When Samuel saw that he was no longer wanted as judge over Israel he said: 'far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you: and I will instruct you in the good and the right way' (I Sam. 12:23).

It is a wonderful thing if parents can continue to think about their children and what it means for them to be where they are in life, and to help them be godly and realistic in what they do. In some ways it is necessary for new minds to take on the issues of the new day, but if they must do so on the basis of the older generation having abdicated from any real engagement in present life, they will stumble needlessly.

The imparting of wisdom is different from cajoling, or manipulating, or 'taking over', or 'knowing it all'. (See James 3:15-18.) Where older or adult children realize that their parents respect and love them, they may well be eager to hear what they have to say. They have some forgiving to do of course-they won't learn from someone they still regard as having offended them. We can help our children by telling them some of the mistakes we can now see in the way we went about things.

Homes are built by God's blessing

Let us seek the favour of God upon our homes! If God has not spared his own Son but given him up for us, we may readily come to him with regard to the blessing of our households. We must invest much labour in them, but not the anxious toil of those who believe that God does not care for our homes.

Children are a blessing from God-not a hindrance to it. In due time, we will see what form that blessing has taken and will thank God for the children he has given us. (See Psalm 127.)

Appendix

What does covenant mean for the baptism of our children?

This booklet has been about parents and children, not baptism, and the latter would require a booklet by itself. But because I have described children as included in their parents' covenant relation to God and because many associate this with baptism, some explanation is necessary.

Under the old covenant, the sign of the covenant (circumcision) was given indiscriminately to all Abraham's descendants. During their history, it became clear that this never guaranteed that an individual person was a true member of the people of God, but they all commenced their life under the promise of God.

Under the new covenant, as I have already argued, children have the benefit of covenant membership. Many believe, therefore, that children of covenant parents ought

to be baptized because they see baptism taking the place of circumcision as the sign of covenant inclusion. Colossians 2:11-12 is quoted in justification of this correspondence.

Others say that the correspondence is not clear because it is the significance of circumcision that is being spoken of rather than the rite itself.

They note that New Testament examples of baptism link the rite with hearing the word and turning to Christ, and therefore, that people should be baptized when they profess their own faith in Christ.

The key factor is whether baptism is best related to covenant or personal confession of faith.

While there are some examples of whole families being baptized, there is no example within the New Testament of children of Christian parents being baptized after their parents' baptism, either as infants or as confessors. The matter must be determined on other grounds. In the first few centuries of the church's history, reference to baptizing was restricted to converts and their families.

Questions which need to be asked are: (a) Is there an inviolable link between covenant and baptism as there is between covenant and circumcision? (b) Does the emphasis on the spiritual nature of the people of God in the New Testament provide sufficient reason to treat baptism in a different manner to circumcision? Regardless of our answer to these questions, we can-and in fact, must-raise our children in covenant security regardless of the occasion of baptism.

Each must make up his or her own mind. Child baptizers emphasize the promise of God concerning their children and risk the confusion of non-converted

baptized; confessor-baptizers emphasize conscious faith and risk the confusion of children being baptized into that which they have been taught was already their possession. (E.g. were they heathen after all?) Neither of these need remain in confusion if children are clearly taught what God has promised to them and what he has required of them.

Geoffrey W. Bromily, in his *Children of Promise: The Case for Baptizing Infants* writes:

Since no direct mandate of infant baptism exists, no absolute rule of infant baptism should be imposed on a congregation. This has often been done, causing unnecessary dissension in the church. When parents have conscientious scruples about baptizing their children these scruples must be respected, although a place should be found for quiet discussion to see if the scruples are as well founded as perhaps at first sight they appear. Is it too much to hope that all churches, Baptist included, might provide freedom of this kind with the opportunity, not for contention and propaganda, but for calm scriptural and theological deliberation?
(p. 109)

Either way, the matter of this sacrament ought to be dwarfed by the truth of the gospel and the grandeur of God's covenant relation to us. The manners of our administering it should not long retain the focus of our attention.