

IN FOCUS

Phyllis Kilbourn

Since you will be receiving your Jan/Feb newsletters shortly before this one goes to press, we are unable to incorporate your feedback and concerns in this issue of Barnabas. However, we are hoping to have your valuable input to share with your colleagues in the next issue! Don't put off writing!

This issue highlights an important concern for ministry with children in crisis, the family.

A first step in preventing child abuse and exploitation is developing healthy, Christian families with a solid moral base. A biblical/ethical model for thinking about the moral vocation of the Christian family is needed to lay a strong foundation. This includes the modeling of Christian family values by the workers.

Christian Fatherhood and Family Ministry is a challenging article focused on the moral vocation of fathers. (And equally applicable to mothers!) Many cultures downplay the importance of the father's presence and role in the home. As Christian workers we must incorporate Biblical principles of family life into the church's teaching. Author David Gushee handles this issue in a culturally sensitive, yet biblical manner.

David's model of Christian fatherhood is based on a four-part pyramid model. This model suggests that the moral responsibilities of the Christian father begin with his "very presence" in the life of his children (base of pyramid). Next is, "doing no harm." If a father is present

but doing serious harm to his children, his presence is a negative, not positive, factor in his children's lives. Sometimes the harm is sufficiently serious that this "negative presence" is worse than "no presence." Only if a father is "doing no harm" can he move further up the pyramid of his moral responsibilities and opportunities as a father.

At the third level, "doing good," he moves into the basic constructive tasks of the Christian father. These tasks, being the focus of Christian witness, tend to center on the most normative work in Christian fathering ethics. The Bible essentially assumes fatherly presence (unless father is dead) and doing no harm. Tragically, as those working with children are painfully aware, we can make no such assumptions in today's cultures.

Finally, at the top of the pyramid, is what David terms "vision." Vision refers to that level of fathering that goes beyond the

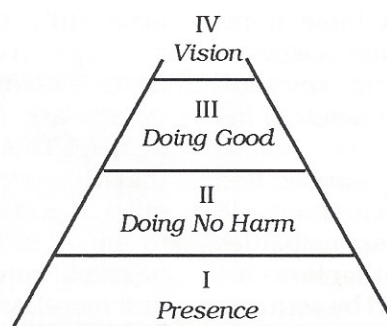
fulfillment of the basic responsibilities of the Christian father. David keeps this category open-ended, limited only by the time, talents, energy, passion and creativity of each family.

The section of David's teaching model highlighted in this issue is, "Doing Good." It contains simple, yet relevant, teaching to be passed on to both mothers and fathers in our churches. Unless a solid, biblical framework of Christian parenting is in place, churches will not be

motivated to respond to the cries of their own children let alone the cries of hurting children in their neighborhoods.

Robert Seiple asks a penetrating question, "Lord, is my faith stronger than what I see?" To be effective work-

ers in morally and physically decayed inner city communities with families broken by poverty, drugs, crime and exploitation, we must trust God to enable us to reply wholeheartedly, "Yes."



Pyramid Chart

Please send us your gleanings

Many of the delegates at WEC's INTERCON last June were interested to learn more about ministering to families. Do you have any resources you could share? Programs, materials, books, video series, your own experience—please give us some input. We will collate and distribute the information via the Barnabas letter.

Christian Fatherhood and Family Ministry

David P. Gushee

Through direct moral exhortation and examples of the activities of fathers, the Bible offers considerable guidance concerning the serious and wide-ranging responsibilities of fatherhood. Given that a father is willing and able to be a constructive presence in his children's lives, as God calls all fathers to be, his biblical responsibilities include a special role in meeting the *spiritual, moral, and physical needs* of his children. He is to meet those needs by providing *nurture and protection* in each area. One could summarize these responsibilities as simply *love*—a father loves his children and his God by acting to meet his children's needs in these areas. Further, he loves his children by seeking to meet their needs in other areas not explicitly the focus of the biblical revelation, including emotional support, intellectual stimulation, and role-modeling. The moral obligations and possibilities of love know no limits. This love is shown not only in the fulfilling of these responsibilities but in the spirit in which they are fulfilled: the father is to love his children "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25).

Spiritual nurture and protection

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your

hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads" (Deut. 6:5-8).

The importance of spiritual instruction of children is powerfully illustrated in this passage from the book of Deuteronomy. The commandments are to be "upon your hearts." This is a way of saying that the love of God and every other aspect of the will of God are to be a father's single most heartfelt concern. Perhaps the first moral issue facing Christian fathers at this level is whether they are, in fact, committed Christians.

These commandments are to be "impress[ed] on your children." This is to occur through regular spiritual instruction and nurture at home. The witness both of Scripture and experience is that instruction in the faith cannot be left to the church; it must occur constantly in the context of the home. Many women report that their Christian husbands are uninterested in, if not hostile to, the idea of family worship and Bible study at home. But the Bible clearly teaches that fathers must be deeply involved at home in instructing their children in the way of faith, as well as being prayerfully alert to the opportunity to offer spiritual

instruction in "teachable moments" anywhere and any time such moments arise. Fathers must see themselves as key religious instructors of their children.

We can also see the responsibility for spiritual *protection* in the reference to "tie [the commandments] as symbols on your hands, and bind them on your foreheads." The biblical writers knew that authentic love for God and obedience to God's will are not easily attained and that the consequences of disobedience are severe. Because "every inclination of [the human] heart is evil from childhood" (Gen. 8:21), and because "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers . . . against the powers of this dark world" (Eph. 6:12), those seeking to love God must be ever vigilant. Fathers must take the words of this passage to heart and provide spiritual protection for their children as best they can, drawing comfort from Jesus' promise that "My Father, who has given [believers] to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:29). Family ministers should consider ways in which they can help both fathers and mothers provide spiritual protection and nurture to their children.

Moral nurture and protection

"My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words.

Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to a man's whole body" (Prov. 4:20–22).

The Bible clearly teaches that the fathers have significant responsibilities in their children's moral formation. The Apostle Paul indicated this indirectly but clearly in the following statement about his own ministry: "We dealt with you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God" (1 Thess. 2:11–12).

There are two basic aspects to this moral instruction; teaching about Christian character and teaching about Christian conduct. When a father instructs a child about Christian character, he is talking about what kind of person a Christian is supposed to be. This is moral instruction as "soul craft"—trying to craft or shape the very souls or character of his children. Our goal is to nurture them toward becoming "good tree[s] bear[ing] good fruit." Such people ultimately "live lives worthy of the Lord" simply because that's the kind of people they are. The Bible exhorts fathers to pour their hearts into such soul craft with their children.

The other kind of moral instruction has to do with teaching children particular rules or principles for conduct. A central biblical resource for this kind of moral instruction (indeed, an example of such moral instruction) is the Book of Proverbs. The whole book is essentially presented as words of moral instruction from a father

to his children (Prov. 1:8; 3:12; 4:1f; 6:1f; 6:20; 10:1; 13:1; 15:5; 23:22f; 28:7). The book is very direct in working on such areas as sexual conduct; improper handling of money; questionable friends; various sins of speech like lying, gossiping, and verbal cruelty; violence and hate; laziness; workplace dishonesty and injustice and so on.

One of the constant themes of the Book of Proverbs is that moral instruction helps to protect the child from "sudden disaster . . . [and] the ruin that overtakes the wicked" (Prov. 3:25). The moral life is indeed fraught with danger; it is all too easy to slip off the "level paths" (Prov. 4:26) and

If our children are going to avoid moral catastrophe—sexual promiscuity, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol addiction, AIDS, suicide, and so much else—they will have to learn how to do so from their parents.

plunge headlong into moral ruin. The danger of moral disaster has always been there, because we live in a sinful world and because the inclination to sin is within us. But such danger is particularly acute today because we live in a society whose mass culture entices to sin. If our children are going to avoid moral catastrophe—sexual promiscuity, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol addiction, AIDS, suicide, and so much else—they will have to learn how to do so from their

parents. Fathers have a special role to play here. Likewise, the lack of moral instructions from fathers is a special curse, both on their children and on society.²

One final word is needed. It is common in evangelical Christian circles to focus on the kinds of "defensive" or protective responsibilities just discussed. While it is indeed critical to seek to protect children from moral disaster, Christian fathers can also inculcate a positive moral vision in their children. For example, Christian fathers (and mothers) are called to teach their children about the responsibility to act with compassion toward the needy and with justice toward those who are being treated unfairly. If they model such behavior before their children as well as teach it, perhaps even involving the children in their own acts of compassion and justice, then their children will be more likely to become compassionate and just people.³

Physical nurture and protection

It is no great revelation to assert that fathers are responsible for providing in a material way for their children's needs. Given our cultural context, this does not mean that fathers are expected to do so on their own, or that physical provision is their only or main contribution to their family's life, but simply that this is one aspect of their responsibility to their children. I list this particular aspect last in part as a corrective to some of these other mistaken notions.

One way to see the importance of this aspect of a father's

responsibilities is to look at the numerous biblical passages having to do with the special vulnerability of the widow and the fatherless, and the special obligation of the people of faith to care for their needs. (Ex. 22:22; Deut. 10:18, 14:29, 24:17, 26:12-13, 27:19; Job 6:27, 22:9, 24:3, 29:12, 31:17; Isa. 1:17, 9:17, 10:2; Jer 5:28, 7:6, 22:3, 49:11; Ezek. 22:7; Hosea 14:3; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5; Acts 6:1; 1 Tim. 5:3-16; Jas. 1:27). Widows and orphans are seen as being especially at risk of economic privation and hunger (Deut. 26:12-13), of injustice in the legal system (Deut. 10:18), even of being sold into slavery (Job 6:27) and murdered (Psalm 94:6).

These texts clearly indicate a father's extremely important role in providing physical protection and sustenance to his children. In biblical times, the absence of a husband and father meant

extreme vulnerability. The father provided physical protection against evil persons; he earned the living that kept his family fed, clothed and housed; and he represented the family's interests in public life—for example, in the legal system. The absence of a father meant the loss of all of these benefits; thus the constant moral and legal exhortations to protect those whose protector was no more.

This discussion reminds us of where we started, with the issue of a father's presence in or absence from his children's lives. Our society is different from those of biblical times, in that households lacking husbands and fathers are not as *completely* vulnerable today. Women have more employment opportunities and legal rights. And yet, half of fatherless families live below the poverty line. Thus our contemporary crisis of father absence

has led to some of the same kinds of material disaster and misery for "widows" and "orphans" that, in a very different social and economic context, the biblical writers most feared.

References:

¹ Horie, M. and Horie, H. (1993). *Whatever became of fathering?* Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity.

² Hardenbrook, W. (1991). "Where's dad?" in J. Piper and W. Grudem (eds.), *Recovering biblical manhood and womanhood*. Wheaton: Crossway.

³ Gushee, D. (1994). *The righteous gentiles of the holocaust: A christian interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Reprinted with permission from *Journal of Family Ministry*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1995.

Journal of Family Ministry,
PO Box 7354, Louisville
KY 40207, is published
quarterly; subscription
\$30 per year airmail.

AIDS a "family disease"

Elsy Regina Carvalho¹ reports that in Central America, civil strife and guerrilla warfare have torn families apart. Guatemala even has an organization for war widows. The number of orphans is appalling.

Women are heads of families in more than 50 percent of the homes in Central American countries. Still considered second-class citizens, women consistently earn less than men, and often they are sole supporters of many young children.

Among Latin America's middle-and upper-class, divorce rates are spiraling. Twenty years ago people didn't even think about

divorce, due to the strong Roman Catholic tradition. But today people have the concept, "I need to go out and look for my happiness, and if I can't find it with you, I'll go find it with someone else." Personal happiness has become more important than commitment within relationships.

It used to be assumed the married Latin male would have a lover or second family, and wives generally closed their eyes to this. Today, however, many women are not willing to put up with such unfaithfulness.

This same infidelity has resulted in the spread of AIDS.

That's why we call AIDS a "family disease": the man brings it into his home, the wife winds up getting it and the children are born with it.

It is discouraging to see and hear about all these pressures and problems facing Latin American families and even more difficult to cross one's arms and do nothing.

Latin churches are growing as never before, but these same churches must be equipped to reach out to the enormous number of hurting people becoming Christians. Who will help Christ heal these broken people, these broken families?

¹ International coordinator of EIRENE International, in Latin America Evangelist/October-December 1994.