

"Behold, Children are a gift of the Lord;"
...Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
so are the children of ones youth.
How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them."

Psalm 127:3-5

Children.

Difficult questions are being asked concerning the old fashioned view that people should "get married, settle down and raise a family." In our culture which legalizes abortion-on-demand, encourages materialistic values and glorifies autonomous life-styles, children are seen as an unnecessary burden. Some feel our only real purpose in life is found in duplicating ourselves through our children to carry on the race. Many feel a sense of "immortality" in knowing they have children who will have children, etc. Others, rejecting this notion, feel that significance and purpose is really to be found through a successful self-actualization process. If children facilitate successful self-actualization, fine. If not, they are seen as a burdensome responsibility.

In fact, neither of these perspectives describe the Biblical position. While continuing the human race is a privilege and great responsibility, our children are neither our link with immortality nor our means for attaining significance in this life. On the other hand, while the need to mature and develop as whole human beings is a concern of God's, viewing children only in light of how they will or will not facilitate that goal is absurd. Concerned Christians faced with the dilemma of choosing between these two seemingly unacceptable viewpoints want to understand the Biblical perspective on children and families. In this section we want to examine three issues:

The Biblical view on the value of children

The effect children have on marriage

Some objections raised to the validity of having children

A Biblical View

In Genesis 1:28 and 9:1, God instructs the human race to "be fruitful and multiply." Though this command was given at times in history when the human race was at its lowest population, we see revealed here that God has always intended for the human race to

propagate. We see that bearing and raising children was normative at least in the creation design. Throughout scripture God implies and assumes the human race will carry on in the same way He describes and assumes the continuance of the seedtime, harvest and seasons. Passages which indicate God expects children to be significant are Deuteronomy 6:1-4 where parents are told to teach their children the truths of God regularly. In Matthew 18:1-6, we see Jesus demonstrating the value of children by singling them out for His attention in spite of the objections of the surrounding adults. Ephesians 6:1-4 gives instructions to both the children and the parents on how to work together to have a healthy family relationship. In Psalm 139:13-16 we learn that God is involved with us before we are even born. There are many more passages which either directly or indirectly discuss children and family relationships using direct instruction as well as examples to teach us. The frequency with which God refers to children in the scriptures indicates He considers them as significant.

Aside from the fact that God considers children to be inherently valuable, we can observe other reasons why raising families is a God-given responsibility. Children raised in godly homes are the greatest resource for spiritual leadership for future ministries. In 2Tim.1:5 Timothy is referred to as having been raised in the faith by his grandmother and mother. Later in Acts 16 we learn that while he was yet a young man he had a strong spiritual reputation within his community. So strong that Paul chose him to become his personal disciple. In 1Tim.4:12 Paul instructs Timothy in the details of how to lead a church. Because Timothy was raised in the faith from early in his life, he was fit to serve in a spiritually responsible position at a young age. In examining the histories of many of our great spiritual leaders we find that most, if not all of them, were raised with some form of strong spiritual influence, either from important adults in their lives, or from a church.

Another value in raising children is that they become instruments of God's hand in the lives of the parents. We find as we practice placing their needs before our own, that our strong fleshly selfishness can be broken. As we are confronted with a child's need for nurturing or discipline, we find our own characters and abilities to love being refined and deepened. Finally, as we think about them, set goals for them and plan for their emotional and spiritual growth, we learn new skills in discipleship which spill over into other ministries. All of these things are blessings God gives us through our parenting ministry. Children are a special channel God can use to bring about growth in the parents lives because they are dependent on us through most of their childhood and because we have a lifetime relationship with them.

How Children Affect Marriages

Many young couples are reluctant to have children because of the effect they may have on a marriage. Children will add pressure to a marriage relationship. However we need to understand that if conflict arises, it is NOT the fault of the children. Generally, immaturities

of the marriage relationship are the source of the problems. It is important to note here that sometimes intrinsically wrong and painful circumstances will occur in a family such as chronic illness of a child or prolonged unemployment for a parent due to injury, etc. These circumstances are difficult and often outside of our control. God is compassionate here and often will bless the distraught family in special ways through their hardship (Rom. 8:28). However, often when we encounter sin or difficulty in handling a situation, the circumstance or other person is not the problem, but rather our own selfish natures (Rom. 7:14-23).

If there are weaknesses in a marriage relationship, they will come to light more quickly when children are introduced. Rather than avoiding having children to escape the growing pains we will experience, we should view having them as a positive opportunity to grow. We can respond positively or negatively to these opportunities, our personal maturity determining the outcome. The next section will examine several issues which having children will expose.

Personal Growth

The personal growth each spouse experiences because of the challenge of parenting can have positive effects in the marriage. As God deepens our level of patience or compassion through child-rearing, we will be more appreciative of our spouse and more patient with him or her. Consider the issue of controlling anger. Your pre-schooler displays a "bout" of defiance by answering "no" to your directive. The parent can choose to react in anger or learn to understand that the child's behavior is to be expected due to his or her developmental level. Then the parent learns to correct and direct the child in an age-appropriate manner rather than tolerate, ignore or yell at him. Later when conflict arises between the parent and another adult, perhaps she will again exercise her choice to consider the other person's needs and situation before responding to the situation. As we learn to develop the patient nurturing which successful parenting cultivates, we will find that those skills will come out in other relationships. Hopefully, as we better learn to love our spouse, we will better love our children. Equally, as we gain deeper understanding with our children, we will find we have deeper understanding with our mates.

Another area where the parent will encounter personal growth will come in setting spiritual and personal goals for our children. Through this process we learn how to be more focused effective lovers with others. One of the more exciting things to develop for your child is a vision for her future. What will she be like in her teens or adulthood? How can I develop a godly character in him? What are his particular personal strengths I can cultivate? What are her points of weakness we can address and guard against? Thinking through ideas like these, envisioning your child's future and then planning for and working on it now is exciting! This is the same way we can love others more effectively - by taking the time to think through a vision of what they are like in Christ and then building into their lives towards that

Finally, a child's defenselessness and vulnerability will often firm our emotional lives as we nurture and protect each precious life. In many cases, men and women who have had trouble expressing and experiencing emotional warmth and depth have been "defrosted" through a relationship with a child. Children often stimulate our desires and abilities to be tender, nurturing or spontaneous and carefree.

One special struggle young parents may encounter as they welcome their newborn, is the emotional and physical drain of meeting the many needs of the child. Though babies especially are "high maintenance" requiring extensive care the first several months, the emotional "high" the new parent experiences of invigorate and energizes the parents in spite of their fatigue. Typically the parents will find the greatest demand on their emotional and physical resources when their children are ages 0-5. During these periods the wife may be less attentive to the husband. Likewise, the husband may be more irritable with his wife. On the other hand, often the wife may be deeply moved and encouraged by her husband as she sees a new level of tender concern in him for her and their child. Husbands also may be deeply touched and even attracted to their wives in a new way as they observe their wife's patient mothering. The key to godly and satisfying parenting during these periods is to cultivate a deep appreciation for the child. Look with vision to the future and in faith, invest deeply in the child. The parents energy levels will return as the children grow and become better able to meet their own physical needs.

Often beginning a new relationship with your child will result in a period of adjustment in other relationships. Encourage the parents to resist the temptation to demand their spouse continually meet their emotional desires. For example, adjusting to having children to care for may have an emotionally and physically fatiguing effect on either or both parents initially. The husband may miss the once punctual dinners his wife had regularly prepared. Now he comes home to perhaps a late meal or none at all - and his wife is tired! Far from feeling energetic, she now needs his support and encouragement as well as his help in taking care of the physical responsibilities involved in running a home and family. Each spouse needs to "go the extra mile" in serving the other. Wives too must be patient with the new fathers, understanding they also are tired and are having to learn about their new responsibilities. The church can support the couple by baby-sitting and encouraging the couple to maintain other personal and ministry relationships. This will better enable the couple to emotionally support each other and their child. Some couples once they have children will feel the strong desire or "need" to retreat from their close personal friendships and ministries for the "sake of the family". Some couples will need to rearrange their life-styles to allow for time to nurture their families. However, retreating from close friendships and ministries will ultimately result in stunted spiritual growth and is not necessary if the role, purpose and responsibilities in the family are properly viewed. In supporting a young family through this adjustment we need to extend grace as they make the necessary adjustments, but also help them to understand their needs for maintaining healthy spiritual and emotional lives.

The profound joy a husband and wife experience as they behold the maraculous life they, together with God, have created, is indescribable. There is great satisfaction to be found in accepting the responsibility of nurturing and guiding one of these precious eternal beings. Though there are personal sacrifices and perhaps difficult struggles involved in leading a child to maturity, the rewards of accomplishing this task far outweigh the costs.

Ministry

In I Thessalonians 2, Paul uses parenting metaphors to describe the discipleship work he did. These passages teach us that parenting skills can enhance our discipleship ministry just as our adult ministries will enhance our parenting ability. Empathy, patience and endurance are just a few of the traits enhanced by our parenting ministry. Likewise, the sacrificial love and other skills we learn from discipling adults will help our ability to parent.

One area affected by having children is our schedule. To effectively build positive self-esteem, character and spiritual vision, we must invest time in the child. While "quality" time is essential for the child's development, there is no substitute for "being there". This is not to say we have to spend every available moment with the child and do nothing else. We must continue to work, minister and look after our emotional and spiritual health. However, to succeed in raising children, parents will need to learn to be more focused and efficient with the available time they have. At this point we would like to encourage mothers who are able, to consider "staying home" with their children especially when they are too young for school. Parenting involves nurturing, protecting and guiding the child regularly and consistently. To develop and maintain a close relationship with the child where you are aware of his feeling about things or where you know how she is thinking about the issues in her life, takes time, effort and availability. Not only do we want to know our child well, but we need to have time and energy to pray for them, seek God's wisdom and input, and plan for their spiritual and emotional growth. God's perspective is that children, as part of the human race, are valuable and worth this investment. Parents should carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages of one staying home with their children. Being able to influence your children profoundly especially during the early years when so much of the child's character and sense of self-esteem is formulated, can prove to be an extremely significant investment.

Here are some suggestions you may recommend to parents to help them assure the adequate time needed with their families:

PERSONAL TIME (Mommy's / Daddy's TIME) - time each parent spends individually with each child. Some may have a meal with their child or just go out doing errands together. Whatever is done, this should be a regular - preferable weekly - part of the parents schedule. Effort could be made to maintain this kind of interaction with the child throughout adolescence. Often during adolescence schedules can get so busy that personal interaction is easily neglected. Yet perhaps more

than ever, the adolescent and pre-teen is in need of close input and supervision from both parents. Once the child leaves home, the regularity and frequency of this rapport will change. Until then however, we should zealously guard these precious times of sharing with our children. Learn to use them as opportunities for teaching, guiding and expressing your love, approval and affection for them.

PARENTS TIME - regular time the couple spends together without the children. It is best to have a whole evening arranged to allow time to relax and enjoy each other as well as talk. This can become a practical "impossibility" if it isn't planned. One specific suggestion would be to develop a clear schedule for bedtime for the children. Not only will this allow consistent free time for the parents to relax and interact, but it is also best for the children to have consistency in their schedules. For further ideas on how to develop rewarding time together as a couple, we refer you to the project on "-----" by Louie Basso.

FAMILY NIGHT - one night or afternoon a week where the family is together without interruption. Family time can be a trip to the zoo or the park, or time spent around the fireplace reading books. However it is planned, it needs to be regular and include personal interaction among the family members.

Unity

Couples who experienced a close unified relationship before the first child, can experience an even greater bonding as together they set out to accomplish the goal of raising their child for the Lord. However, relationships which suffer from insecurity or jealousy on the part of either partner may find children exposing these immaturities. When a parent has a felt need for significance, he may try to fill that void with the "love" of the child. Then the parent may feel a "need" for the child's love leading them to retreat into the child's world, neglecting the marriage. Others may try to find significance by "living through" the child - again neglecting the marriage which is one of God's primary channels for meeting the "felt" need of significance. Parents in this situation need to be turned back to the Lord who alone can fulfill their needs for security and significance. Once the couple understands their unique significance and value in Christ, they need to learn how to cooperate with God in expressing these truths in each others lives. Then they will be in a position to freely give love to their child rather than "needing" anything from him.

Children may also expose a couples differences in important philosophical issues such as religion, values, or discipline procedure. These types of differences can not only produce tension in the relationship between the husband and wife but send confusing messages to the children. For example when one parent wants to raise the children "in the church" and the other parent wants the children to be able to "choose religion for themselves" there will be a difference in the parents guide, instruct and correct their children. While one parent may want to have his children involved with the church, the

Other may resent the inconvenience in the family schedule and arguments or this issues frequently occur - perhaps even in front of the children. Meanwhile, the children may learn that whether or not God exists or is important is merely a matter of ones own opinion. God's perspective or values are only one of many possible ways to respond in a situation and an individuals opinion or what works best will be the final judge of how one should behave. Parents need to examine these issues before having children. By studying the Scriptures and many excellent books on raising children, most couples should be able to educate themselves enough to make mature decisions in these areas. Even if a couple who already has children uncovers strong differences, they can come to a unified position by becoming informed and discussing the conflicts. It is important for the children and the marriage to have a Biblical , unified approach to child-rearing.

Objections to Raising Children

Perhaps as in no other time in history, the value of the family is under serious scrutiny. With the strong influence of our self-centered culture and the present anxiety over growing hostility and violence in our society, we find many raising some thought-provoking questions about the validity of bearing and raising children. As Christians living in these urgent times, we are also faced with the question of how to best use our resources and time to do God's work. I would like consider some of the more common questions and objections to having children in this section.

The question of Adequacy

For most of us, as we study the commitment, skills and maturity that are needed to raise children, we quickly judge ourselves inadequate. Perhaps more accurately the struggle is that we realize to raise children requires great personal sacrifice and our selfish nature rebels at such a thought! None of us will ever feel fully adequate to meet the challenges of parenting. But then, do we require ourselves to fully understand every Biblical doctrine before we are willing to teach the Bible to someone else? While it is definitely preferable the parents resolve the more serious cases of emotional damage (such as various forms of abuse, alcoholism, etc.), establish a stable marriage and healthy attitudes and practices towards God and Christian work before having children, God does not require we be perfect before He can use us. Just as in other forms of ministry we don't need to know "everything" before we can begin to serve, neither does God require "adequacy" before we are given children. Instead, the Bible teaches that our adequacy is from God, (2Cor. 3:3-5) not only for ministry but for all things (Phil. 4:13). God will make us adequate for the task if we will turn to Him. If we commit ourselves to praying for our children and our parenting ministry, make use of the wisdom the Bible offers us and expose ourselves to the input and support God provides through His church, we will have the necessary resources to raise our families .