

## A FATHER'S ROLE IN EDUCATING HIS CHILDREN

June and July bring with them two important occasions for celebration: Father's Day and Independence Day. Notwithstanding the Left's hostile attitude toward both, each is important and cause for celebration. Of the two, however, Father's Day may well be the more crucial. Not only has it suffered a longer and more ferocious assault from popular culture, it is foundational to the other. If, as a nation, we lose our fathers, it will not be long before we lose our independence. That this is so follows from the fact that fathers, perhaps more than any other single influence, shape the character and thinking of the children in the next generation.<sup>1</sup> If they instill noble character and truth into their children the nation will prosper. However, if they fail to do so, the country will suffer irreparable harm. Such a thesis raises the question of a father's proper role in educating his children. What are his responsibilities and how are they to be accomplished? Due to space constraints it will be necessary to limit our discussion to *religious* education. That is not to say that the biblical authors have no concern for education pertaining to other matters; quite to the contrary they encourage it in a variety of pursuits. Nevertheless, for our purposes, analysis will be limited to this narrower focus. There is no doubt that to be biblical, a father must be involved in his children's religious education. Both the Old and the New Testament are replete with evidence of this fact. Moreover, the alarming defection from the faith of some 80% of young people brought up in church sounds a warning that fathers must do a better job of passing on their faith or there will soon be no one to whom it can be passed.<sup>2</sup> The question, therefore, is what such involvement ought to look like. Three things are highlighted in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. These are succinctly stated by Block who says a father's responsibility for his sons' spiritual development was (1) to model a deep personal commitment to Yahweh and His Torah, (2) to diligently instruct his son in the Torah and the traditions of salvation and covenant, and (3) to give public witness to his own spiritual commitment.<sup>3</sup> These summations are broad enough to capture the essence of a biblical father's responsibilities but they need considerable explanation to be of any practical benefit. The remainder of this article will therefore seek to elaborate on each point in turn.

### Modeling Faithfulness to God

In Deuteronomy 6:5 God demanded of Israel that He be loved, "*with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.*" From a purely logical standpoint this follows from the assertion of verse four, "*The LORD our God is one LORD.*" That Jehovah is the one and only true God necessitates that He alone be given the people's highest adoration. But the injunction hinges on more than logic. In verse fifteen of chapter five, God reminded Moses that Israel had once been, "*...a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm...*" Thus, God's gracious deliverance of the people became the basis of His expectation of love and honor from them. Moreover, to truly love Him, as Jesus later reinforced, demands all our heart, soul, mind and strength. As one commentator explained, "This can mean nothing less than that everything one thinks, does, and feels is to be focused on loving God."<sup>4</sup> Although this command was given generically to the nation at large, in a patricentric society such as that in which the ancient Hebrews lived, this was aimed first and foremost at the fathers. To love God with his whole being was every father's primary and fundamental responsibility. To the extent that this command was obeyed, verse six would become a reality. The words that He commanded would indeed "be in thine heart." As many have pointed out, this means that both the commands and character of God would be reflected in the father's mind and lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> In short, he would become a living embodiment of a biblical worldview. This is what makes the command so crucial. As with all things, godliness is much better caught than taught. If a father can, in a sense, become the word made flesh for his son to see, the chances of the son catching and continuing in the pattern of righteous living are greatly enhanced. It is little wonder, then, that the matter of personally modeling love and faithfulness toward God tops the list of a father's responsibilities in the religious education of his family. For multi-generational faithfulness to God a father must lead by example.

### Instructing In The Scriptures

Ironically, the supreme truth that Jehovah alone is to be worshipped becomes an exercise in futility unless the devotion of one generation can be passed on to succeeding generations. The congregation in Moses' day was not the only one that God desired to know His power, deliverance and greatness.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, God laid a second responsibility on fathers concerning their family's religious education. Deuteronomy 6:7 says, "*And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children...*" Such 'diligent' teaching implies far more than merely repeating the statutes of the Lord over and over *ad infinitum*. Charles Isbell has argued convincingly that 'diligent' teaching derives from a root meaning 'to sharpen' and cannot be accomplished without a multifaceted pedagogical approach including: illustrations, music, poetry, historical examples, questions and answers, and even debate.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, there is some emphasis on the repetitive nature of the teaching to the point that permanent change occurs. To permanently etch God's commands upon the heart of his children, a father must "*...talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up*" (Deut. 6:7). Here Moses has employed a figure of speech known as 'merism'. 'Merism' is a rhetorical term for a pair of contrasting words used to express totality or completeness. For example, the expression "he got soaked from head to toe" does not mean that only the man's head and toes got wet. It means that every part of him was drenched. Moses uses such a device in this verse. 'Sitting' suggest inactivity and 'walking' suggests activity. Together they encompass all

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/fatherhood.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Voddie Baucham, *Family Driven Faith: Doing What It Takes to Raise Sons and Daughters Who Walk with God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2007), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ken M. Campbell, *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 53.

<sup>4</sup> James M. Hamilton, Jr., "That the Coming Generation Might Praise the Lord," *Journal of Family Ministry* 1, no. 1 (2010): 12.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Ellis Nelson, "Spiritual Formation: A Family Matter," *Journal of Family Ministry* 20, no. 3 (2006): 18.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Deut. 6:20-25

<sup>7</sup> Charles D. Isbell, "Deuteronomy's Definition of Jewish Learning," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2003): 115.

human occupation. Likewise, to ‘lie down’ at night and to ‘rise up’ in the morning encompasses the totality of time. Moses’ point is that meditation on and instruction in the truth of God should be going on everywhere and all the time. This process should encompass every aspect of one’s life. In a modern context, this means that whether a father is coaching his children in sports, spending time with them hunting and fishing or merely riding in the car on the way back and forth from school, he must be constantly occupied with the faithful transmission of divine truth. Furthermore, Moses’ injunction “*thou* (masculine singular) shalt teach them...” stresses that this responsibility was not given “to some abstract group of fathers in the community but to each individual father.”<sup>8</sup> A father may supplement his own instruction but no man has the right to abdicate his teaching role to another.

### **Proclaiming His Faith Publicly**

Deuteronomy 6:8-9 advances a father’s educational responsibility one step farther still. “*And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.*” Although this was no doubt a common practice in ancient Israel, it is virtually inconceivable that such a command was limited to the perfunctory activities mentioned. It is far better to understand it as urging fathers to “make their homes places where God dwells, where the Scriptures are honored, and we aren’t ashamed of our faith.”<sup>9</sup> Any house thus marked would reflect the reality that the home was indeed devoted to the Lord. This is in line with the broader educational purpose of helping children “identify themselves with their tradition and teaching them how to affirm their lifestyle.”<sup>10</sup> It is not difficult to understand that the more openly a father displays his faith in God, the greater the sense of pride and heritage will be inculcated in his children and thus in turn the greater the likelihood that they will pass it on to yet another generation. Dr. Block puts the father’s responsibility simply when he says they are to “wear their faith on their sleeves.”<sup>11</sup> In practical terms this means that lifestyle decisions such as: schedules, conversational topics, clothing styles and much more must reflect the teaching of God’s Word. Fathers whose schedule, speech and style reflect little devotion to the Word are neither modeling faithfulness to God nor instructing in the Scriptures as they should. They are, in fact, hypocrites whose inconsistency will render all their other efforts null and void. In this light it is evident that each of the commands in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 are interdependent. They stand or fall together. It is only as fathers model love and faithfulness to God, instruct their children in His Word, and publicly proclaim their faith in Him by living according to His statutes, that the odds of their children following suit become favorable.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude then, it seems clear that these three elements constitute the crux of a father’s educational responsibility toward his children insofar as religious matters are concerned. Whether they want to be or not, fathers are the word in flesh for their children. To live up to the divine ideal, therefore, fathers must model faithfulness to God to the point that they become a living embodiment of a biblical worldview. Moreover, they must take personal responsibility for the faithful transmission of divine truth, engaging themselves in an all-encompassing instructional program. Additionally, fathers must make public lifestyle decisions that reflect and highlight their faith and commitment to God. No part of their life may be omitted without seriously unraveling all the other work they have done. When these elements are in place, a father may have confidence that when his children are grown, they will not depart from the way in which he led them.

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<sup>8</sup> Hamilton: 12.

<sup>9</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 6 vols., vol. 1 (Colorado Springs: Victor Books, 2001), 389.

<sup>10</sup> Nelson: 25.

<sup>11</sup> Campbell, 53.