

**Liz Jones** reminds us of biblical priorities



# THE FAMILY

## biblical basics

### key points

**F**amily breakdown is widespread in our society and Christians are not exempt from domestic troubles.

**T**he Bible contains a lot of wisdom for us about how to run our families. The author, a retired paediatrician, reviews the Bible's guidance on various familial relationships: between parents and children, adult children and elderly parents, and husband and wife.

**S**he dispenses wise advice on child discipline and boundary setting, and discusses the challenges of caring for teenagers.

**J**esus prayed that his people would be protected from the evil one while still living in the world.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere is this protection more needed than in the area of family life. In many ways, there is now a war on for the family. Alarming statistics and consequences are coming out of widespread family breakdown and, as a lot of what one learns about being a marriage partner and a parent is modelled by one's own parents, this trend does not leave room for much optimism about our society's future.

#### God's design

God's creation design was the marriage of one man to one woman and, within that committed relationship, the procreation of children who would then be nurtured by their parents through the developmental stages of their lives. The Bible teaches that a husband, the lover and protector, is the head of his family;<sup>2</sup> his wife is his helper and the bearer of new life;<sup>3</sup> and children are under their parents' authority.<sup>4</sup> This teaching is now being regularly challenged and undermined. Add to this the pressure of work that can so easily erode our time, and it is easy to see how our commitment to family and church can suffer. Life becomes a difficult balancing act: we need the Holy Spirit's wisdom to know what to prioritise and when.

#### Jesus' example

Children are developing human beings who therefore need special protection, encouragement and discipline. The Bible teaches that parents have a God-given responsibility to prepare their children to become independent adults. The gospel of Luke alludes to four dimensions of development during Jesus' childhood<sup>5</sup> – the physical, intellectual, spiritual and social – and it is good to think carefully about these as we bring up our children.

#### Godly marriages

To give a child security, the husband-wife relationship needs to be strong and so prioritised and not neglected.<sup>6</sup> The relationship between a child's parents will be his/her model of intimacy and a model for many of the relationships that child will make in his/her life and the way he/she will deal with the ups and downs of life. The different roles of husband and wife within the marriage relationship are a wonderful example of complementarity where both are needed to make a whole.

*God did not design men and women to be the same... He wanted there to be a complementarity. He deliberately made men with greater physical strength – to protect and provide for others. He purposely made women with greater relational strength – to nurture and care for*

others. The differences were designed to be a source of joy and satisfaction. The relationship between Christ and the church is, as it were, held up by God to a wondering universe, and he proclaims that that is what he designed the relationship between husband and wife to look like!<sup>7</sup>

### Honour your father and mother

Children are to be under the authority of their parents,<sup>8</sup> heirs but not adults,<sup>9</sup> and the extended family are to support but not usurp the position of husband or wife. It is interesting that the commandment to honour father and mother is foundational to the second part of God's moral law.<sup>10</sup> Honouring your father and mother may also involve caring for elderly parents. This requires wisdom and possibly sacrifice but 'it is pleasing to God'.<sup>11</sup>

### Boundaries

Having authority over one's children is not a reason to be harsh. Boundaries are very important but should be instilled with gentleness and patience and it is important we give our children much attention and much encouragement. An attention seeking child is often an attention needing child and parents cannot give attention if they are absent or pre-occupied with 'more important' issues. Fathers are encouraged not to exasperate their children but to 'bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord'.<sup>12</sup> 'Bringing up' is an active term and requires us not to neglect our children, nor to idolise and so fail to correct them. We must receive them as a gift and responsibility from God and train them in his ways and remain teachable and subject to God's word ourselves. Discipline is 'guiding, educating and supervising a child's choices'.<sup>13</sup>

### Watching out

The society in which our children are growing up is both unstable and stressful for them and their parents. Civilised societies have in the past relied on an unwritten code of behaviour between children and adults both in and outside the home. Children were expected to behave with respect towards their elders and in return most adults kept an eye open for children's safety and welfare. Over the last 25 years much of this seems to have evaporated and the goal posts are still moving; moral relativism makes child rearing very difficult. This increasing disconnection between children and adults is having far-reaching effects with experts linking it with young people's increased alcohol and drug abuse, violence and promiscuity.<sup>14</sup>

We also need to ask what our own children are watching, playing and hearing in our technology rich society. The media markets violent games at our little boys and throws tips on dieting and looking sexy at our little girls.

Increasingly too, the state is stepping in between children and their parents: the current push for the

compulsory, explicit sex education of young children; and the provision of the morning after pill and abortion to girls under 16 without their parents' knowledge are examples of this. The possibility of a children's database sharing information about every child in England could be another unwanted intrusion into family life. We must pray for our children's protection in this difficult and ungodly culture, and for their regeneration.

### Teen troubles

Parenting through the teenage years has special challenges of its own. Puberty brings many changes in a young person's life both physically and emotionally and during this time it is normal for the peer group to assume more importance. This brings many tensions especially for Christian families, as much peer influence will not endorse the principles we hold dear and can be downright harmful. It is still important that parents 'hold on with an open hand' and allow a young person gradual and appropriate opportunity to function in a more independent way. Young people need to develop the skills to move on with confidence into the world of work or further education. They need to learn to regulate work and recreation and cope with sexual attraction, relationships and their own fertility in a mature and appropriate way.

The world is a difficult place for today's teenagers to negotiate. They are faced with an excessive number of choices, extreme or permissive experiences, pressure to succeed, less protection and less family support than in past years. As ever, good communication and availability are keys to positive relationships between parents and their teenagers. Make sure they know when you are pleased. It may be necessary to verbalise the conflicts, but do so treating them with dignity and respect; do not 'wound with words'. Love is unconditional. Teenagers need to know that whatever happens, there is always a way back.

### Christian worldview

In a post modern culture where anything goes, we need to give our children a Christian worldview. The suggestion that Christians brainwash their children implies that the society we live in does *not* do so: secular society has an agenda of its own. The father of our Old Testament scriptures, Abraham, was singled out by God to 'direct his children and his household after him, to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just'.<sup>15</sup> And Jesus, our Lord said, 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy' but that he had come that we 'may have life and have it to the full'.<sup>16</sup> We need to identify the activities of the thief as he seeks to rob our families in so many ways. If we resist him he will flee,<sup>17</sup> because 'the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world'.<sup>18</sup>

*Liz Jones is a Lovewise trustee and a recently retired community paediatrician in Newcastle upon Tyne*



Discipline is 'guiding, educating and supervising a child's choices'

### references

1. John 17:15
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3. Genesis 2:18
4. Ephesians 6:1
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6. Malachi 2:15; Ephesians 5:33
7. James S. *God's Design for Women*. Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2002:72
8. Colossians 3:20
9. Galatians 4:1
10. Edwards BH. *The Ten Commandments for Today*. Leominster: Day One Publications, 1996:169
11. 1 Timothy 5:4
12. Ephesians 6:4
13. McDowell J, Wakefield N. *Dad Difference: Creating an Environment for your Child's Sexual Wholeness*. La Vergne, Tennessee: Spring Arbor Distributors, 1989:33
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15. Genesis 18:19
16. John 10:10
17. James 4:7
18. 1 John 4:4