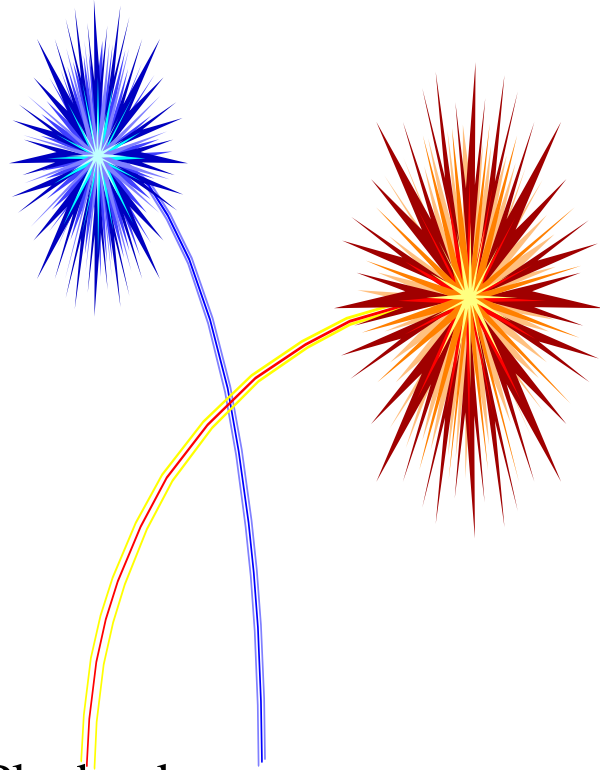


Families Filled With JOY

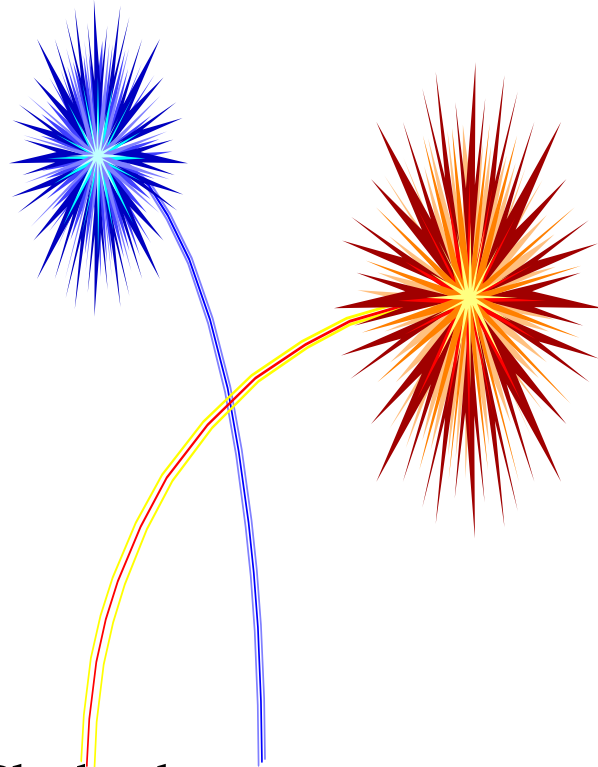


1998 Family Ministries Planbook

Including resources for
Christian Home and Marriage Week—February 14-21, 1998
Family Togetherness Week—September 12-19, 1988

Prepared by
Karen and Ron Flowers, Directors
with
Bryan Craig, Bernie and Karen Holford, & Elaine and Willie Oliver
Department of Family Ministries
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

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A Department of Family Ministries publication.

Prepared by Karen and Ron Flowers
Software formatting by Carlene Baugher

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Preface

The House of the Hapsburgs ruled the Austro-Hungarian Empire from the late thirteenth century until the First World War. The grand imperial funerals of a succession of emperors across six centuries became occasions for a profoundly significant ceremony. David Seamands describes the event in his book *Healing Grace*.

The Hapsburg family crypt is located beneath the Capucin Monastery in Vienna. The funeral processional accompanying the body of an emperor was impressive. The entire court donned full white ceremonial dress and elaborate ostrich-plumed hats. A military band played somber dirges as the cortege wound its way to the emperor's final resting place. Flaming torches lit the passageway into the crypt, illuminating the elaborate coffin draped with the imperial colors of black and gold. As the procession arrived at the great iron doors to the crypt, the voice of the Court Marshall in charge of the procession rang out into the silence. "Open!" he commanded.

On the other side of the huge door the voice of the Cardinal-Archbishop of Vienna responded: "Who goes there?"

At the burial of the last great emperor of the House of Hapsburg, the Court Marshall called out: "We bear the remains of His Imperial and Apostolic Majesty, Franz-Josef I, by the Grace of God Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, Defender of the Faith, Prince of Bohemia-Moravia, Grand Duke of Lombardy, Venezia, Styrgia. . ." and on and on through thirty-seven titles in all!

"We know him not," was all the Cardinal said. In response to yet another entreaty, the question was the same: "Who goes there?"

This time the response came in abbreviated form, one which was allowed in only the most dire of circumstances: "We bear the remains of His Majesty, Franz-Josef I, Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary."

Again the Cardinal's reply was cursory: "We know him not. Who goes there?"

"We bear the body of Franz-Josef, our brother, a sinner like us all!" was all the Court Marshall said.

Whereupon the massive doors opened and the body of Franz-Josef was received within.

**For it is by grace you have been saved,
through faith,
and this not from yourselves,
it is the gift of God.**

The theme for the *Family Ministries Planbook* you hold in your hands is grace, pure and simple. God's amazing grace made known to us in the person of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This Gospel is unlike all the religions of the world which promise that God will smile on those who follow their moral exhortations diligently. The Good News with which Christians are entrusted announces that God has smiled on the whole world already in Jesus. It's the story of a finished work of reconciliation, without a single thread of human devising.

It's an old, old story which for centuries has filled families with joy wherever it has been told. At the same time, it's today's story. *The* story which must be told and retold if families are to find their true identity, and be knit together as family and connected in community. We'll know we've got it when it sets our hearts to singing, binds us together in love, and compels us to shout it from the rooftops!

As Christ's ambassadors, they [God's people] are to search the Scriptures, to seek the truths that have been hidden beneath the rubbish of error. And every ray of light received is to be communicated to others. One interest will prevail, one subject will swallow up every other—CHRIST OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. (Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald Extra*, December 23, 1890)

Karen and Ron Flowers
Co-directors, Department of Family Ministries
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

Grace Changes Everything

by Bryan Craig

Director, Family Ministries, South Pacific Division

Director, Adventist Institute of Family Relations, Sydney

Theme

The grace of God empowers and energizes us to produce happy, healthy marriages.

Theme Text

Ephesians 1-5.

Presentation Notes

Throughout the following outline, superscripts in parentheses such as ⁽¹⁾, ⁽²⁾, ⁽³⁾ will indicate illustrations, quotations and other material found in the section called **Sermon Illumination** that may be helpful in your sermon development and delivery.

Introduction

Seventh-day Adventists believe families are important. We see the family as the primary unit of society, the place where social behaviour and spiritual values are constructed, interpreted and transmitted from one generation to the next. The emotional ties that bind families together create incredibly important bonds of attachment that influence us, often for the rest of our lives.

Social researchers consider marriage to be the cornerstone of the family. They believe it is difficult to develop a happy, secure family environment when the marriage relationship is not stable and vibrant. If a couple is not committed to their marriage, then this lack will inevitably sabotage their family and contribute to problems within it.

When God created and celebrated the first marriage (Genesis 1, 2), it was His intention that our ability to give and receive love would inspire us and enable us to build high quality interpersonal relationships with one another. Human beings all want love and intimacy. By giving and receiving love we grow in our understanding of one another and experience greater closeness and trust.

Marriage and Family Are Being Severely Tested

As social climates rapidly change around the world, homes and marriages are being severely tested. Clear evidence reveals that the increase in family breakdown, the debilitating stress with which many families live, and the changes in contemporary family structure have left many couples and families confused and bewildered. Changes have brought about alterations in the pattern of the family life cycle, shifts in expectations of one another in the family, and the emergence of a wide variety of family forms.⁽¹⁾ Amid all these changes, many have wondered whether anybody still values or believes in family. Younger couples are often afraid to commit themselves to marriage and many choose other types of relationships instead.

A Message of Grace for Difficult Times

We hunger for love and intimacy. We crave the assurance, the knowledge, the feeling that we are special and are understood by another human being, that someone else is committed to caring about us.

With competing interests and conflicting values, however, many people find the development of long term relationships in marriage a difficult and exacting enterprise. Misunderstandings are common. A failure to connect, to form and maintain healthy relationships, leaves many couples confused, disenchanted, and alienated. Few seem to have an adequate model for resolving anger and conflict; reconciliation and forgiveness are difficult. Many couples search for clues to revive a dying or stagnant relationship. For many, relationship issues have become their number one concern.

In this context Paul's letter to the Ephesians seems particularly appropriate. Ephesus was a church passing through difficult times. Arguing and fighting were rife among the "committed" faithful, deep divisions were beginning to appear in the congregation. The letter to the Ephesians follows a style of discourse typical of Paul. First, he emphasises the grace of God as the only basis for salvation and healing. Then he points out the behavioural implications, showing how grace is revealed in the life of the believer. Chapters 1-3 establish the basis for redemption and Christian unity. There the apostle argues that "in Christ" God has destined us to be His sons and daughters. As such we all receive special blessings (Ephesians 1:5-8) and are all made alive by the grace of God (Ephesians 2:4-10). Paul states that true peace and harmony within the community of faith are attainable only through Christ. He affirms that:

- Christ destroys the barriers that separate (2:14).
- Christ breaks down the walls of hostility (2:14).
- Christ creates unity out of diversity (2:15).
- Christ unites us all into one family (2:19).

Peace, harmony, and the development of a sense of unity and togetherness are all made possible and achievable through the grace of God. It is only as God, who is immense in mercy and love, embraces us with His incredible goodness and grace that we can become anything or achieve anything. Paul's emphasis on grace constitutes the cornerstone of his argument about how unity in the church can be achieved and effective relationships between members can be built.

Grace is Paul's favourite theme. For him, the grace of God was not merely a sedative for discomfort. It had transformed his life. God's grace is the dynamic that brings about reconciliation and inspires the development of responsible and satisfying relationships. And it is by grace and grace alone that Christian believers will be motivated as they come together in unity of purpose. As Charles Stanley says in his book *A Touch of His Peace* (1993), "Where grace abounds, peace thrives. Where grace is stunted, peace shrivels."

Having stated his case for grace in the first three chapters of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul now turns (chapters 4-6) to providing some practical suggestions on how grace works in the life—how to "live a life of love" (5:2), "a life worthy of the calling you have received" (4:1, 2).

Ways Grace Influences Marriage

By the grace of God marriage can be transformed. When we learn how the Holy Spirit empowers us and we invite His presence in us, we discover the key to "grace-full" marriages and families. Gerald May in *Addiction and Grace* says, "The power of grace flows most fully when the human will chooses to act in harmony with divine will" (1988, p. 139). Here are a number of ways according to Paul that grace works in the life of the believer. They are vital for happy, healthy marriages. They are simple yet effective ways for us to maintain "the life of love."

Accentuate the positive (Ephesians 4:1-3). Grace leads us to choose to focus on the positive and not the negative. Paul mentions four personal values that will help “keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace” (vs. 3):

- *Humility* - humbly serving the needs of others (vs. 2).
- *Gentleness* - being gentle and respectful, showing that we care and are unwilling to take each other for granted (vs. 2).
- *Patience* - being slow to avenge wrong or retaliate when hurt by another person (vs. 2).
- *Forbearance* - bearing with one another in love. Mutual tolerance enables two human beings to live together in peace and love (vs. 2).

These four qualities are essential for both people in a marriage to have if they are to build bridges of understanding to each other, to take responsibility for their relationship, and to encourage each other's sense of self esteem.

Communicate in love (Ephesians 4:15, 29). Good relationships depend very much on open honest communication. The essence of honest communication is a willingness to be vulnerable—to share the fragile and tender parts of ourselves with another, to risk opening our fears and doubts, and to actively listen to another's thoughts and feelings. Self-disclosure on our part is an invitation to intimacy with another. It invites the other person to know and understand who we really are.

Many relationships flounder because people are simply not willing to trust themselves with another person. Fear drives them to hide parts of themselves from the other person or to engage in a variety of negative exchanges that inhibit understanding and prevent the growth of the relationship. God's grace motivates us to communicate love and acceptance rather than using defensive, self-serving, manipulative tactics. If, instead of the gracious communication of love and acceptance, there is invalidation, minimizing of the other person, indifference or criticism, such toxic exchanges will tend to destroy the relationship and lead to either an escalation of conflict and misunderstanding or to withdrawal and silence.

Deal constructively with anger and conflict (Ephesians 4:25, 26, 31). Paul counsels us to stop recycling our gripes and disagreements. Here he indicates that God's grace enables us to recognize the times when we are angry and to deal with these feelings constructively. Many people think that anger is a sin. They even quote Ephesians 4:26 as their proof text. But anger is a God-given emotion. It acts as a warning system to tell us when we have been hurt by another person. Paul is not condemning anger but pointing out that we need to deal with our hurts and disagreements and not let the days go by without resolving them amicably. Holding on to anger leads to bitterness, resentment, and a desire for revenge.

An inability to deal with anger and conflict is one of the common causes of distress and failure in marriage. “Getting rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice” (vs. 31), suggests that we must learn how to put the past behind us by getting rid of the ghosts of the past.

Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32). While we are called to forgive, in reality forgiveness is not that easy to do. Though forgiveness may not be able to eliminate the consequences of wrong done, true forgiveness means that we are willing to release another person from the full weight of our judgment and condemnation, especially when they have done nothing at all to deserve that release. Letting go of

bitterness, resentment and pain is truly an act of grace, a gift from God. It maintains the vitality of relationships and ends any risk of alienation or rejection.⁽²⁾ Forgiveness involves at least two distinct facets:

- One part of forgiveness is that unconditional forgiveness which we give to those who have hurt us because Christ has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32). Such forgiveness is not natural for us and we must rely on God's Spirit to help us. It is to be given first within one's own heart—that is the hardest part—and then offered humbly, sincerely and with awareness that we as forgivers are not more righteous than the one we're forgiving. Such unconditional, grace-based forgiveness has a freeing effect upon the forgiver, and may create an environment where the offender is drawn to repent, though it is not given for that reason.
- Another aspect of forgiveness has to do with a process which the two persons enter (Luke 17:3, 4). It can only be effective when the first aspect of forgiveness is present with the one who has been hurt and when humility, confession and repentance are present with the offender. If the process is to lead to reconciliation, there must be reciprocity which involves dialogue, a working through of issues that caused the hurt, and a commitment to communicate, handle anger, and solve problems more effectively so that the wounding and estrangement does not continue.

Be mutually submissive (Ephesians 5:21). The principle of equality and mutuality in Christ is clearly established by Paul in Ephesians 2:14-16. The grace of God enables us to submit to one another out of love rather than assuming a position of superiority, domination or control over another. Paul admonishes both men and women, husbands and wives to be “filled with the spirit” (5:18), in order that they might live a life of love and respect towards one another (5:33). Here in Ephesians 5:21 Paul is laying out a central principle which pertains to all Christian relationships, especially to the examples which follow—the marriage relationship (Eph. 5:22-33), the parent-child relationship (Eph. 6:1-4), and the master-slave (employer-employee) relationship (Eph. 6:5-9). Paul is telling us that we need to be willing to offer ourselves in the nurture and service of one another. To show that we accept, respect, and care for one another and have developed a sense of mutuality and accept each others gifts, we must avoid any kind of useless power struggles that result in one being dominant over the other.

Be committed to loving one another (Ephesians 5:1, 2). Paul invites us to “live a life of love.” This is the epitome of the call of grace. Only in the context of grace do we find ourselves motivated to freely and graciously love each other in ways the apostle summons us to do. Love is a choice to behave towards another person in gracious ways that reflect how we feel about them. Paul's notion of love implies more than just a feeling of fondness and affection. For him, love involves *commitment* and *action*. Commitment is a vital ingredient of a long term relationship, an essential component of any love relationship. To make a commitment is to make a statement of loyalty, a pledge to remain faithful and true to the relationship and to the other person. It is a quality that contributes most to the growth, development, and stability of the marriage and family relationship.

Love is also an action word—an attitude that shows in our behaviour. Love is a *choice to behave* towards another person in loving ways that may reflect how we *feel* about them, or perhaps in some cases, *in spite of our feelings* toward them at the time.⁽³⁾ Close relationships produce many feelings, but committed love can confront and resolve difficulties and make possible a lasting relationship. This is the nature of love that we are urged to exhibit in harmony with the life we have been called to live.

Conclusion

Just as the apostle Paul was focused on the grace of God, so we need to “re-vision” our lives with grace at the centre of our being. We, too, will become passionate about God’s incredibly extravagant love for us when we embrace the grace with which He is embracing us. The good news of God’s goodness and kindness towards us, when owned and integrated into our lives, will radically change our marriages. Grace opens the way for us to experience gracious interpersonal relationships that build confidence, trust, and respect in one another, and helps to relieve the stress and anxiety that can come from life together. Grace makes us gracious people!

Sermon Illumination

1. Several significant changes serve to highlight the social transitions in marriage and family:
 - A. Changes in the family life cycle
 - Marriage and childbirth are being delayed as men and women choose to remain single longer.
 - The birth of the first child is occurring later in the family life cycle.
 - Women are questioning their traditional role with the majority now working and fewer are economically dependent.
 - B. Changes in expectations about marriage
 - Most couples today get married for emotional security and social status not for economic support.
 - Many couples are confused about the meaning of love and find it hard to trust in the face of their own dysfunctional and abusive childhoods.
 - When difficulties arise in the marriage, couples are more likely to consider the option of separation and divorce than in the past.
 - C. Changes in parenting styles and roles
 - Traditional authoritarian styles have given way to a more democratic or permissive approach to child rearing.
 - Many dual career or dual earning couples fail to sort out their family roles.
 - D. Changes in family structures
 - The ease with which many relationships now end has helped to produce a variety of family structures (e.g. single parent families, step-families, remarried families).
 - E. Changes in our sense of community
 - There has been a shift away from a community of shared values to a society that is fiercely individualistic. This often leaves marriage and family with a sense of alienation and isolation.
2. In *Surprising Marriages* (1997, pp. 350-365) William J. Peterson tells the inside story of the married life of Billy and Ruth Graham. While God has mightily used these two, their marriage is a study in the blending of two strong wills, in making adjustments, and in learning to forgive. With forceful personalities, yet differing views on many things, their experience, especially in their first few years, has often been marked by conflict. “She admits, ‘Life in the Billy Graham household is not a matter of

uninterrupted sweetness and light” (p. 351). Despite Billy’s Baptist beliefs, for example, she has remained a staunch Presbyterian. His first parish eventually changed its name in order to have wider appeal when she remained unconvinced that she needed to be rebaptized by immersion. Although he has espoused religious views and biblical positions very different from hers, he acknowledges her as a better bible scholar than himself and admits that she has helped him to be more balanced in his views of other religious denominations.

“Once when Billy preached a sermon on the Christian home, he asked his wife (as he usually does) what she thought of it.

“She responded: ‘It was good sermon except for one thing.’

“‘What was that?’

“‘The timing.’

“‘The what?’

“‘The timing. You spent eleven minutes on a wife’s duty to her husband and only seven on a husband’s duty to his wife’” (p. 351).

“They’ve come from two different worlds; they live in two different worlds, but together they have built a strong relationship that has brought blessing to the world” (p. 364). One of the key reasons for their happiness is a favorite saying of Ruth’s: “A happy marriage is a union of two forgivers” (p. 352).

3. Sometimes our choice to love may be in the midst of feelings of confusion, frustration, even anger and hate. The following love story illustrates how a commitment to love can confront and resolve difficulties and make possible lasting relationships. Robert Fulghum (1997) tells of advertising for love stories at one of his lectures and having a respectable, middle-aged businessman show him a pale blue perfumed envelope:

He said, “Before you read this, you should know that I’ve had it for at least ten years, that it’s from my wife, to whom I am still married.” Inside the envelope was a matching sheet of stationery, with these words written with pen and ink:

My dearest Harry:

I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.

Respectfully, with all my love, Edna.

I smiled and looked up, anticipating the rest of the story.

He smiled as he refolded the note and put it back in the envelope.

“That’s it.” he said, and walked away. (pp. 4, 5)

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Helping Our Youth Catch the Gospel

by Elaine and Willie Oliver

Department of Family Ministries, North American Division

Theme

Since values are more often caught than taught, we parents and guardians have the wonderful opportunity of helping children and youth to take hold of the gospel by providing an atmosphere of warmth, openness and grace and allowing our young people to witness our own behavior, including our mistakes and our requests for forgiveness.

Theme Text

Deuteronomy 6:6-9.

Presentation Notes

Throughout the following outline, superscripts such as ⁽¹⁾, ⁽²⁾, ⁽³⁾ are used to indicate items from the section called **Sermon Illumination** which may be used for illustration. The addition of your personal illustrations will enhance the presentation.

Introduction

In Deuteronomy 6:6-9, God gives guidance to parents to help them inspire faith in their children and a desire to know and serve God. His mandates to mothers and fathers include: *having* His commandments in their hearts, *sharing* His commandments with their children, and *modeling* His commandments in their lives at all times.

Having God's Commandments In Your Heart

Parents cannot pass on to their children what they do not have themselves. Faith and commitment to God must dwell in their hearts first. It is impossible for His commandments to be within us in the way God intends without comprehending them within the context of the good news of the gospel. The acceptance of the gospel of Jesus is a prerequisite to having God's commandments in one's heart.

Accepting God's grace through faith. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). Grace and faith are shown here to be two important elements at the core of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Grace is unmerited favor, undeserved good will. Salvation is ours when we accept God's grace by faith. Faith is resting in God, putting one's whole trust in Him. The life of a parent who constantly relies on God for everything he or she is and does demonstrates the meaning of faith to a child (Gal. 3:26; John 3:16; Mark 16:15, 16; Heb. 11:6; John 1:16).

Accepting God's power in your life. "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16a). When one accepts the salvation which God has given to the world in Christ—His gift of grace—we experience God's mighty power to save us in Christ. Our minds and hearts are transformed as He writes His laws within them. His commandments abide in the heart through the power received when salvation is accepted. These truths are for us as parents to experience and we may then share them with our offspring (John 1:12; 2 Cor. 12:9; Titus 2:11, 12; Heb. 8:10; 13:9; Rom. 5:20, 21; 12:2).

Sharing God's Commandments With Your Children

As God instructed Israelite parents to impress upon their children the ways of the Lord, so He would have us do today. This sharing is something He knows can be done in a special way by parents and it is to be given a high priority.

Role of parents in the socialization of children. Parents are predominant in the socialization of children. The family is the main arena for socialization. To be sure, there are other agents (pastors, peers, teachers, the mass media) and other places where socialization occurs (churches, playgrounds, schools, places of entertainment), but parents in the family setting are still the first and most important values teachers in their children's lives.⁽¹⁾ Scripture prescribes this kind of parental involvement (Eph. 6:4) and E. G. White supports it.⁽²⁾

What research tells us about values transmission from parents to children. *Valuegenesis*, the massive research project commissioned by the Seventh-day Adventist Church a number of years ago, clearly demonstrates that the family is the primary place where the faith and values of children are cultivated. In the research, five important elements about family that impact faith maturity in children and youth are identified:

- *Mother.* The mother is comfortable about frequently sharing her faith with her children.
- *Father.* The father is comfortable about frequently sharing his faith with his children.
- *Support.* Parents communicate with children frequently in a positive and supportive way.
- *Control.* Parents have high standards, set time limits, and enforce them with love.
- *Spiritual togetherness.* The family is frequently involved in meaningful and interesting worship together and engaged in service projects to benefit others.⁽³⁾

In order to bring the gospel to youth in the home, then, parents need to have a living faith that is communicated to their children in their everyday interaction—while driving down the street, working in the garden, riding on the train, reading together, playing together, and worshipping together. Children and youth feel most secure in their religious values when there are boundaries that are lovingly enforced. Just as adults feel more comfortable driving across a bridge which has sides, youth will perceive boundaries that are implemented kindly and firmly as a protection and a communication of love and concern by their parents.

Dynamics of spiritual growth in youth. According to *Valuegenesis*, there are four basic things needed by youth in order to grow to spiritual maturity:

- *A grace orientation toward salvation.* Parents need to share with their youth the biblical concept of salvation as the gift of a loving God to undeserving creatures. It is not good behavior which saves us. There isn't anything we can do to earn salvation. All we can do is accept the gift which comes with overcoming power. With the gift comes a yearning for communion with the Giver, a personal relationship with Jesus. It is that relationship that informs and directs our behavior, not our behavior that puts us into favor with God (Eph. 2:8; John 1:12; John 3:16).
- *Joy in worshipping God in all facets of life.* Young people need to understand that there is no dichotomy in the life of the Christian. In every enterprise one should bring glory to God. Whether in the class room or on the playing field, whether at home or at church, whether at work or in

recreation, youth must be encouraged to develop an awareness of the presence of God in their lives and to find joy in the awareness of His presence (1 Cor. 10:31).

- *A climate of acceptance, openness and warmth.* The gospel of Jesus Christ is most compelling in the lives of youth when they are in an environment of encouragement and support as they develop into spiritual maturity.⁽⁴⁾ Instead of putting down or criticizing their youth, parents do well to exercise patience and kindness and to display warmth in order to create a positive atmosphere where spiritual growth is possible and is embraced by youth.⁽⁵⁾
- *Service opportunities for ministry to others.* There is nothing that builds muscle, physical or spiritual, like exercise. A faith that is only theoretical will soon be a faith that is weak and inefficient. Providing youth with opportunities to be of service to others will help develop feelings of worth—"I can make a difference in the lives of others." These feelings translate into a way of life—one of service to God and to one's neighbor. Service is a bridge from theoretical faith to active faith.

Modeling God's Commandments in Your Life

There is a well known saying that states: "Do as I say, but don't do as I do." A television commercial on substance abuse shows a father and son in the son's bedroom. The father catches his son smoking marijuana and in anger shouts, "Where did you learn to do that?" The son angrily retorts, "By watching you." The father is perplexed because he is not involved with illegal drugs. The son has seen him, however, with other "legal," but also detrimental, drugs.

Since values are caught more often than taught, there is no doubt about why our children are so much like us. If parents yell at each other and are impatient, children often yell at each other and are also impatient. We have been amazed at how much our children behave like us—a matter that we have not always been ready to accept. In fact, it is so very easy to attribute the negative behavior in our children to traits in our spouse's family of orientation. We call this denial and self-preservation. Often, the reverse is also true—we ascribe to our own family of orientation all that is positively reproduced in our children.⁽⁶⁾

There is little doubt why God impressed the prophet to write in Deuteronomy about how we should share the gospel with our children. "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 you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads."

To be sure, many of us are concerned about our children who are growing up in our homes and not accepting Jesus Christ and being baptized. This kind of decision does not take place in a vacuum. "By beholding we become changed." It takes more than just telling our children that they need to be baptized. By the way we live daily, we witness positively or negatively to them. All our pious prayers at church are likely to be ineffective if there is harshness, impatience and lack of love at home.

Communicating the gospel to our children is what we might call a "24-7" enterprise—an effort that we make all day, every day, regardless of what we're doing; interacting at home or outside of the home, early in the morning and late at night, by the daily rituals of our lives at home and the priority we give to spiritual matters there, by our kindness, our caring and our love, we testify of Jesus and His saving grace. Even when we make mistakes (and we will), learning how to ask each other and our children for

forgiveness will share the reality of God's forgiveness and willingness to give us a new opportunity and strength to live victoriously for Him.

Conclusion

The writer of Deuteronomy is clear with the directives from God. We must have a personal experience and relationship with our Lord by accepting His grace and being empowered to live for Him. We should be deliberate about sharing our spiritual values with our children in an atmosphere of acceptance, openness and warmth. And we should be mindful of the fact that we are witnessing to our children even when we are not aware of it. So often what we do is more important than what we say.

By ourselves this enterprise is impossible, but "with God all things are possible." If we have been less successful in this enterprise of communicating the good news of the gospel to our children than we had hoped, we can with confidence lift them in prayer before our gracious heavenly Father who knows and understands both us and them. As we turn to Him, we can receive forgiveness for our own shortcomings. We can gain deeper insights into the good news of the gospel, discover more effective ways of using our influence, and receive new strength to continue in our relationships with our children and, hopefully, rebuild relationships that have been damaged. Best of all, we can get a fresh grasp on the assurance that by God's own act in Christ He has cared for our salvation and the salvation of our children. We can trust Him with that. With renewed hope we can go about the wonderful work of issuing, through life and word, the invitation to accept His gracious gift.

Sermon Illumination

1. Socialization of young children has been described as perhaps the single universal function of the family. For thousands of years the family exercised a virtual monopoly over child socialization. Prior to industrialization, small children spent most of their time with parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Since industrialization, child rearing has been the primary function of the immediate nuclear family—parents and siblings. In the past few decades, time with the immediate family has given way to more time spent with peers in day care centers, with babysitters, and in schools. Yet, even with these changes, parents and families remain the central agents and settings where socialization takes place. (Gelles, 1995, p. 290)

2. The father and the mother should be the first teachers of their children. . . . The training of children constitutes an important part of God's plan for demonstrating the power of Christianity. A solemn responsibility rests upon parents so to train their children that when they go forth into the world, they will do good and not evil to those with whom they associate. (*Child Guidance*, p. 21)

3. We know that the family is the crucial laboratory in which the faith and values of our children are developed. Five things have become important due to the research about faith, values and commitment:

Mother. When the mother is highly religious, is comfortable talking about her faith, shares her faith often with her children, and has discussions about faith with the young people, youth are more likely to mature in faith and develop commitment to a religious outlook.

Father. When the father is highly religious, is comfortable talking about his own faith, often shares his faith with his children, and has regular discussions about faith with them, they are more likely to reveal a growing mature faith and a sense of loyalty to their denomination.

Support. When parent-child communication is frequent and positive, when family life is experienced as loving, caring, and supportive, and when parents frequently help their children with school work, youth are more likely to possess a growing, rich faith, and a sense of loyalty to their denomination.

Control. When parents hold strong standards, and enforce them fairly, firmly, and lovingly, punish wrong behavior, and set limits on their child's use of time, the young people tend to grow in mature faith and manifest commitment and loyalty to their church. Though control factors have the least impact of any of the five groups, control seems to be positive for the home environment even though it is not for the religious school and the congregation. When discipline comes from people whom we know love us, it is best received.

Spiritual togetherness. When the family frequently engages in worship together, and that worship is interesting and meaningful, and when the family engages in projects to help other people, the children and youth are more likely to manifest a growing, rich, mature faith and loyalty to their denomination. (Tyner, 1996, p. 5)

4. Do not treat your children only with sternness, forgetting your own childhood and forgetting that they are but children. Do not expect them to be perfect or try to make them men and women in their acts at once. (*The Adventist Home*, p. 196)

5. The heart of a child is tender and easily impressed; and when we who are older become "as little children," when we learn the simplicity and gentleness and tender love of the Saviour, we shall not find it difficult to touch the hearts of the little ones and teach them love's ministry of healing. (*The Adventist Home*, p. 195)

6. Both Jessica and Julian, our children, were born in New York City where we lived for quite some time. If you live and drive in New York City, or if you have ever visited Manhattan and had the good fortune (!) of driving in that volume of traffic you know what we are talking about; you will develop some impatience with the traffic. You begin to talk to the other drivers under your breath. Sometimes it's not under your breath. You shout, "Let's go" and, "Come on man." These are common expressions used as the traffic light is about to turn green and the vehicle in front of you has not yet moved.

We had not noticed how much we had become a part of that driving culture until one day, as we negotiated the grid-lock of rush-hour traffic in the City and were not making much progress, we heard three-year-old Jessica from her car seat in the rear of the car say, "Come on man, let's go!" We were shocked! And we looked at each other with that knowing look that admitted, "We are always modeling even when we do not realize it."

On another occasion, after about 18 months of family worship following the birth of Jessica, we were musing about her future and wondering to ourselves if she would someday decide to become a Seventh-day Adventist Christian. As we knelt to pray to conclude family worship, our daughter began to pray. Her speech was hardly intelligible, but our hearts raced with joy and we were almost overcome with emotion as we recognized that our positive modeling was beginning to pay-off.

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Families Filled With Joy

by Karen and Ron Flowers

Theme

An understanding of the dynamics of families, coupled with a clear presentation of the good news of the gospel, can make it possible for more households to be disciplined together for Christ.

Theme Text

Acts 16:31-34

Presentation Notes

Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses ⁽¹⁾, ⁽²⁾, ⁽³⁾ will indicate illustrations, quotations and other material found in the section called **Sermon Illumination** that may be helpful in your sermon development and delivery.

Introduction

The account of the events in the jail at Philippi is one of the New Testament's most stirring stories. Not only are Paul and Silas miraculously freed from prison, but in the process a family, a whole household, hears the preaching of the gospel at midnight and is baptized by daybreak! The whole story is abridged in a few verses. "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" inquired the jailer. "They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.' Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them, and *the whole family was filled with joy*, because they had come to believe in God" [Acts 16:31-34, *The Thompson Chain-Reference Bible, NIV*. Zondervan. (1983). Emphasis supplied].

Several household conversions are found in the Bible (cf. John 4:46-53; Acts 10:2, 24, 44-48). How is it that whole households find faith in Christ together? What might enable more families—our families—to be filled with joy in the gospel?

The Disappointment of Spiritually Fragmented Families

Many people know the disappointment of living life with family members who do not share their love for Christ. Some of these family members are merely indifferent about the religious faith of others; some are deliberately hostile. This experience is hardest when those with whom we share the most intimate of ties are the ones who are most out of sympathy with our love for Christ. ⁽¹⁾

Many know from personal experience the mixed emotions which arise from making a decision to follow Jesus whom they love, while at the same time sensing that, by this decision, they are creating distance between themselves and others whom they love who do not share their commitment to Him.

When family members reject their faith. Many also feel burdened for family members—a teenager, an adult child, a spouse—who once evidenced commitment to Christ, but no longer seemingly have interest in Christ or the church. The pain of the loss of Christian fellowship with such a dear one is severe. Even more difficult is the concern for that loved one's eternal welfare.

When families do not know joy. Sometimes even Christian families have found little or no joy in the gospel. Some have not understood the good news of all that has been accomplished for them in Christ. They struggle to live perfect lives in order to win the favor of the Savior, rather than finding rest in the good news of His grace. Others have been so damaged by life's experience that they have extreme difficulty comprehending God's love and experiencing it in their family relationships. Others have not had the opportunity to develop the relational skills needed for healthy family functioning. Religious beliefs notwithstanding, these families struggle with anxiety, depression, and unfulfilling relational patterns which breed discouragement at every turn.

In some homes, the kind of religion practiced breeds conflict, discord and unhappiness, instead of contributing to peace, harmony and contentment. Individuals often feel unloved, abandoned, controlled, isolated, manipulated, minimized, or abused. Many actually are. Such families, because they make an outward show of religiosity which belies their true condition, place their members at great risk for abandoning the family faith profession and rejecting religion altogether.

Nonetheless, the good news of the gospel, which came to the home of the Philippian jailer, can awaken joy in troubled hearts today.

Good News for Families

The good news of Immanuel, God with us. The good news is that God knows our pain. He knows because He is all knowing, but He also knows because He became one with us in Jesus Christ (Is. 7:14; 53:3-6; John 1:14; Phil. 2:7-8). Ellen White paints this picture of the God who is with us:

The blessed Saviour stands by many whose eyes are so blinded by tears that they do not discern Him. . . . His heart is open to our griefs, our sorrows, and our trials. He has loved us with an everlasting love and with loving-kindness compassed us about. . . . He will lift the soul above the daily sorrow and perplexity into a realm of peace. Think of this, children of suffering and sorrow, and rejoice in hope (*Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, p. 12).

By our patient discipleship, we may be able to exert an influence for good on those who have not yet chosen to follow Christ (1 Cor. 7:16; 1 Peter 3:1, 2). But God is concerned for our well-being, even as He is anxious to draw these family members to Himself. We can take courage that, when families forsake us, the Lord does not (Ps. 27:10). Jesus Himself knew the pain of having family members who did not understand His mission or His commitment to it (John 7:5). If the natural love of family conflicts with the call to follow Him, commitment to Christ must be valued above all else (Matt. 8:22; 10:36, 37). But should family reject us, there remains the fellowship of a new family—the household of faith (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19).

The good news of God's love for sinners. God's love is unfathomable, almost beyond human comprehension. Listen to what the Bible says; let God's expressions of love for you cascade over you and penetrate deep into your soul like a refreshing mountain waterfall on a warm summer day.⁽²⁾ Our God is portrayed from Genesis to Revelation as the God who goes looking for the lost He loves (Gen. 3:8, 9; Ps. 103:13-18; Hos. 11:1-4, 8, 9; Luke 15; 2 Pet. 3:9). We may take comfort in the certainty that the Good Shepherd never rests until He has found the lost and winsomely drawn them to Himself so that they may avail themselves of the salvation He has made certain in Christ.

The good news of the simple gospel. Paul uses a family metaphor which is simple, yet profound, to give meaning to the Good News he preached. It was undoubtedly the basis for his message to the

Philippian jailor and his household. God inspired Paul to use an ancient extended family concept, well understood in Old Testament times, to explain salvation to his hearers. Paul begins by reminding us that, in our human lineage, we are all family through Adam. The ties that bind us as a human family are so close, the Bible teaches, that when Adam sinned, the whole human race was doomed to die as a result (Rom. 5:12-17). “In Adam all die” (1 Cor. 15:22). That is our desperate human situation.

The prospects for humanity were grim, but for God’s intervention. But the Good News is that by His own sovereign act, God sent His Son Jesus Christ as the second Adam, “the last Adam” (1 Cor. 15:45). In the mystery of the incarnation, Christ linked His life with our lives, with ties God intends never to be broken.⁽³⁾ From that point onward, the life, death, and resurrection events in the life of the second Adam became our events, our history. In Christ’s sinless life, we lived sinless lives. We all died with Him the death which sin required (Rom. 6:5; 2 Cor. 5:14). God “made us alive with Christ” and “raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:5, 6). God has made us family in the closest sense. So Paul can proclaim with assurance, “For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:17). This is truly Good News!

Households in the Lord. The choice now rests with us. To which family will we choose to finally belong—the family of the original Adam or the family of the second Adam, Jesus Christ?

Christ has become the “Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe” (1 Tim. 4:10). In Christ the necessary reconciliation of God and humanity has been accomplished (2 Cor. 5:18). God did this “when we were powerless,” “were still sinners,” and “were God’s enemies” (Rom. 5:6, 8, 10). God waits for us to use our free human will to accept the reality of the reconciliation and “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20) and to continue to choose to remain in Christ (John 15:4, 5). Like Narcissus’ household, our families are households “in the Lord” (Rom. 16:11) by God’s own act (1 Cor. 1:30). All that remains is for us to unclasp our hands and receive the benefits of God’s saving work in Christ.

Brothers and sisters in Christ. To know that our family is in Christ—grandparents, mother, father, children, aunts, uncles, and cousins—causes us to see them in a new way. In addition to the relationships we share on earth, each one is a brother or sister in the family of God! These are the ties which will bind for all eternity. What good news for those who believe! What powerful incentive for sharing this good news with a family member who has not personally received it yet!

Trusting the good news and releasing our loved ones to God. The awareness that our spouses, our children, our relatives are in Christ by God’s own divine act can bring great peace to our hearts. Even before they profess Christ as their personal Savior, they are in Him. Even as they make mistakes, disappoint us as parents, spouses, or siblings—they are nevertheless in Him. Nothing can ever take them outside the circle of God’s love, nor change the divine reality that they are in Christ.

The good news is that the same God who has put them in Christ is perpetually working through the winsome work of His Holy Spirit to draw them to Himself, that they may make personal in their lives what He has already done for them. Knowing this, we can release our loved ones to God. We can let go of what may be a crushing burden of responsibility for their salvation. We can find courage to make amends where possible for our own failures in relationships. We can release others to be free to make choices different from our own, even as Jesus respects the freedom of the human will. He will turn from our dear

ones only in a reluctant, last strange act, in response to their willful, persistent, ultimate choice to decline His abundant salvation.

Restoring the Significance of Families

Throughout history, various factors have influenced our thinking about families and family ties:

- Families have at times been such sources of such pain that their members have given up on them.
- The rise of individualism in recent centuries in some societies has had an adverse effect on attitudes toward the family. ⁽⁴⁾
- The sayings of Jesus (such as Matt. 10:35-37; Luke 9:59, 60) have been used in ways which have minimized the importance of family ties and diminished the profound effects which result when individuals forsake their families as they make a decision for Christ. ⁽⁵⁾

Certainly the strong bonds which bind families together must not be allowed to hinder anyone from making a full and complete commitment to God personally. The good news of salvation must be proclaimed to everyone (Mark 16:15, 16), and it must be individually received (Rom. 10:13, 17; Rev. 22:12). Our ultimate allegiance is to the family of heaven. However, while the reality of a sinful world means that following the spiritual call of Jesus may require stepping apart from family, it is certain that God wants to bring our families together to the Savior. ⁽⁶⁾

Families central to discipling. In the greatest treatise on spiritual nurture in Scripture, Moses calls parents to first love God in their own hearts, and then to share the good news with their children (Deut. 6:4-9). Jesus recognized the centrality of family to discipling when He identified the process of discipling with the transmission of values (John 8:31) and with the development of the capacity for giving and receiving love (John 13:35). There is no influence greater than that of family in the development of a person's values. Likewise, families can either set the stage for family members to understand and experience God's love, or they can make such understanding and experience a virtual impossibility but for a miracle of grace. Families also have the primary opportunity for developing the capacity for self-giving love in their members, the kind of love which makes for winsome witness within the family and in the neighborhood. This elevates family to center stage in the church's response to the gospel commission. ⁽⁷⁾

Working for families can be challenging and difficult. Yet many can testify that when the good news came to their household, life was radically transformed. One such transformation not only brings joy to hearts on earth, but an abundance of joy to the hearts of heaven.

Conclusion

Whole households are waiting—perhaps our own is waiting—for good news which will fill them with joy. Paul and Silas, maltreated, beaten and imprisoned, were miraculously released at midnight. They had good cause to flee from that area, to leave that town. Yet they responded to the cry of a family voiced through the jailer, “What must I do to be saved.” Now was their opportunity to set more prisoners free, a household imprisoned in sin, by sharing the good news that has been entrusted to every believer. “And the whole family was filled with joy, because they had come to believe in God”(Acts 16:34). May our own households and many others experience that same joy.

Sermon Illumination

1. It has often been the case that, when a man embarked on the way of Jesus Christ, his nearest and dearest could not understand him, and were even hostile to him. “A Christian’s only relatives,” said one of the early martyrs, “are the saints.” Many of the early Quakers had this bitter experience. When Edward Burrough was moved to the new way, “his parents resenting his ‘fanatical spirit’ drove him forth from his home.” He pleaded humbly with his father: “Let me stay and be your servant. I will do the work of the hired lad for thee. Let me stay!” But, as his biographer says, “His father was adamant, and much as the boy loved his home and its familiar surroundings, he was to know it no more.” (Barclay, 1975b, pp. 52, 53)
2. There are scores of wonderful passages about God’s love for humankind. You may wish to read several selections together without comment, letting the Scripture speak for itself. Read as many as time will permit so as to create the image of an overflowing cascade of love. For starters: Is. 43:1-7; Jeremiah 31:3; Lam. 3:31, 32; John 3:16; Rom. 8:35-39; Eph. 2:4-6; 1 John 4:9, 10.
3. “When Christ took human nature upon Him, He bound humanity to Himself by a tie of love that can never be broken by any power save the choice of man himself. Satan will constantly present allurements to induce us to break this tie—to choose to separate ourselves from Christ. Here is where we need to watch, to strive, to pray, that nothing may entice us to *choose* another master; for we are always free to do this. But let us keep our eyes fixed upon Christ, and he will preserve us. Nothing can pluck us out of His hand.” (*Steps to Christ*, p. 72)
4. Christians face a challenge to hold in balance beliefs about individualism on the one hand and beliefs about family on the other. While notions of individualism may be important to help swing the pendulum away from extremes of enmeshment, co-dependency, and loss of individual personhood in some families which are too tightly entangled, wherever the philosophy of individualism has been over-emphasized, some appreciation for the family as a group has been lost. The greater the emphasis on individualism, the less attention tends to be paid to the strength and benefits found in the family system (Bellah, 1985). M. Scott Peck (1993) goes so far as to speak of a “lack of group consciousness” altogether. This he calls “the hole in the mind” which has contributed to the loss of civility in society. In his view, the route to recovery of group consciousness and to the cure of ills which plague society must involve a re-emphasis on the family as the basic group or system within which individuals live.
5. David Garland (Garland and Pancoast, 1990) discusses the difficult sayings of Jesus regarding the family and concludes that He did not hold a view of family that was subversive, nor did He see the family as a petty concern or an impediment to commitment to God. Far from undercutting the valuable nurture, support and strength to be gained from membership in families, Jesus addressed the exclusive attitudes of those who trusted implicitly in biological kinship. He redefined family loyalties, putting them in perspective against the higher loyalty to God. He opened the way for service to God to be done, not only within the structure of the biological family, but also in the wider circle of the church which includes others who come from outside that biological group.

Regarding Matt. 10:35-37, Barclay (1975a) offers an insightful comment:

The Jews believed that one of the features of the Day of the Lord, the day when God would break into history, would be the division of families. The Rabbis said: “In the period when the Son of David shall come, a daughter will rise up against her mother, a daughter-in-law against

her mother-in-law.” “The son despises his father, the daughter rebels against the mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and the man’s enemies are they of his own household.” *It is as if Jesus said, “The end you have always been waiting for has come; and the intervention of God in history is splitting homes and groups and families into two.”* (Barclay, 1975a, p. 393, emphasis supplied)

6. One man tells this story: “My father had been reared in an Adventist home but, because of difficulties in the family, he cut himself off from them and the church. When I attended church evangelistic meetings as a lad growing up, no effort was made to reach the members of my family with the gospel message. I was encouraged to step out from my family and join alone. Now, after a number of years, my parents have become believers also. But what a wonderful thing it would have been if we could have attended church together while I was growing up! What encouragement that would have been! What fellowship! What opportunities to talk over with people you live with every day what it means to live as a Christian. We could have supported each other.

“I don’t think evangelism is only about conveying twenty-seven paragraphs of truth from a list of fundamental beliefs. Evangelism is about sharing the gospel and inviting people to respond to it. It is about helping them close the gap in their relationship with God. Often people cannot fully complete that task, or sometimes even undertake it, until they have closed the gaps in their relationships with the people who are closest to them. Evangelism needed to be done in my family at the level of intergenerational reconciliation. Who knows what would have happened if efforts had been put forth to bring about a healing and restoration between my father and his family? An effect as profound as bringing in additional members might have occurred by the working of the gospel among the already existing members. Yet so often we do not take the time or put forth the energy to fully evangelize, to bring the gospel to bear upon the hurts and wounds in people’s lives.”

7. If disciples are those who relate with their teacher in the context of a primary relationship, then the *capacity* to form primary relationships is necessary to the process of disciple making. Secondly, if primary relationships consist of relationship skills that are generalized from one primary group to another, then the family is key in its significance because it is the place where those skills are learned well or learned poorly. And last of all, if the family is the social organization in which these skills are learned first, and thus most essentially, then the family becomes central to the process of disciple making. It is a place where disciplelike relational skills are learned, and it is a primary group in which disciple making takes place. (Guernsey, 1982, p. 11)

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The Vanishing Black Smudge

Adapted by Karen Holford

Many years ago a boy named Davy lived on a farm. It was a big farm, and there was a lot to do to care for the animals and grow food for his family. Davy had a big sister Angie, a big brother Joe, and a sister Mary who was just a bit older than he was.

One day Davy's parents announced that they had to go away for a few days, but they were sure the children were old enough to manage the farm work by themselves while they were gone. They put Angie in charge because she was getting quite grown-up. Davy didn't think she was really grown up. He just thought she was bossy, and he really didn't like to be bossed around by his own sister.

But after Mom and Dad drove off, Angie wasn't so bossy after all. Wow! They were free to do anything they wanted! Go to bed when they wanted, get up when they wanted. Eat anything they liked, whenever they liked. Play when they liked, work when they liked. This was great!

The children had a great week. They made ice-cream and rich chocolate fudge every day. They made popcorn and pancakes dripping with maple syrup. Of course they did their usual chores—milking the cows, feeding the animals, collecting eggs, and chopping wood. But mostly they just had lots of fun.

Then one morning Angie suddenly realized that Mom and Dad would be coming home the very next day. The children looked around at the house. There were dirty dishes on the table. There were toys on the floor. The beds were unmade. There were towels and dirty clothes on the floor. There were blocks and a wagon in the yard outside, and they still hadn't cleaned up the garden tools in the barn for Dad.

Angie looked worried. She wanted everything to look perfect for Mom and Dad when they got home. They had left her in charge and she wanted them to be proud of her.

Suddenly Angie got bossy again. She ordered Joe to clean up the garden tools in the barn. She sent Mary to clean up the dishes and scrub the kitchen floor. Davy was to hurry up and dust the house from top to bottom, except for the parlor. Everyone knew the things Mom had in the parlor were too fragile for Davy to dust! When he was done with that, he could help Angie change the beds and do the laundry. Davy hated dusting. He hated changing beds and doing the laundry. He wanted to be outside helping Joe do grown-up jobs. But Angie was in charge, so he followed her instructions feeling grumpy and angry inside.

Angie was so busy she had no time to cook lunch, so they all ate cold leftovers. Davy was hot and tired. He wanted to make ice-cream and have fun again, but Angie wasn't through bossing.

"You have to help again this afternoon, Davy," she said. "First I want you to polish all the shoes and boots with this black polish and brush. Then you can shake all the rugs. Mary has to go pick the beans in the garden, and Joe has to straighten the yard." Davy was feeling more and more angry inside. The worst job in the world was polishing shoes and boots. It was so messy, and so easy to get big black smudges all over you and everything else.

While Davy was polishing shoes, Angie decided to dust and sweep the parlour so the whole house would be just perfect. The parlour was a beautiful room full of their mother's best things. They weren't allowed to play in there. They only went in there when there were visitors. While Angie was in the parlour she noticed Davy was not working very hard. She told him to hurry up because she had more work for him to do. By this time Davy was so mad that everything bubbled up inside him. Before he knew what he'd done, he had thrown a brush full of shoe polish at Angie. The brush sailed right past Angie's head and landed smack in the middle of the

parlour wall. He stared in horror at the big black mark on the expensive white and gold wallpaper. Then he ran out of the house and hid in the barn.

Davy stayed in the barn a very long time. He thought about how proud his mother was of their beautiful parlour, and how dreadful she would feel when she saw the mess he'd made of it. He thought about what his punishment might be. He was so mad at Angie. "It's all her fault," he thought. "I would never have done such a terrible thing if she hadn't been so bossy and made me so mad!"

It was dark by the time Joe found him. Joe knew what had happened. But he didn't say anything. He just took Davy into the house for a bite of supper before bed-time. Davy didn't sleep very well. He knew Mom and Dad would be back in the morning. He wanted to run away, but there was nowhere he could go. He cried big tears into his pillow.

When Mom and Dad got home, they were very pleased with how well the children had managed the chores and how neat and clean everything was. They thought Davy was a bit quiet, and they did notice that he didn't eat much lunch. Mom even gave him a huge spoonful of nasty tasting medicine, just in case he was getting sick. Davy knew she hadn't looked in the parlour, but he wasn't brave enough to tell her what had happened. He was just miserable.

Then the worst thing possible happened. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson from across the town came to visit. Davy heard his mother welcome them, and invite them into the parlour. Oh, no! She would take them in there and see the mess, and she would be so embarrassed! He expected to hear his mother scream, but instead he heard Mrs. Johnson exclaim, "My, what a lovely parlour this is!"

Davy couldn't believe his ears! What had happened? The black smudge was on the wall opposite the door. There was no way anyone could go in there without seeing that awful mark, spoiling everything else. Davy crept close to the door, and peeped in. He was so shocked by what he saw, he just stood there with his mouth open and stared. The wall looked exactly as it had before he threw the shoe polish brush. The wall paper where the black smudge had been was perfectly white and

trimmed in gold like the pattern on the rest of the wall. His mom saw him in the doorway and invited him in. He sat on a slippery chair and stared at the wall most of the afternoon, his mind racing with what might have happened. After tea and cakes, the Johnsons finally went home. Davy lingered in the parlour so he would be the last to leave. When everyone had gone, he went up to the wall and stared at it closely. Someone had cut a piece of wallpaper to fit perfectly over the nasty mess. The paper had been cut ever so carefully to follow the edges of the pattern all around the little scrolls of gold. Then the edges of the paper had been sanded very thin so that there would not be a bump where the new paper was added.

Davy ate twice as much food at supper time to make up for all he had missed. He started to laugh and joke again, and Mom was pleased to see that her medicine had made him better! After supper Davy found Angie. He gave her a great big enormous hug. "Thank you," he whispered in her ear. "I'm sorry I threw the brush at you, and made that awful mess. You fixed it, didn't you."

"Yes, I found some of the paper in the attic, and I cut it all out, smoothed the edges, and stuck it on with flour paste. I'm sorry too, it was mostly my fault. I shouldn't have been so bossy. No wonder you felt like throwing something at me!"

If they noticed, Mom and Dad never said anything about the mark on the parlour wall. And Davy never forgot how special it was to discover that someone loves you enough to cover your mistake and save you from the consequences you deserve.

Does that sound like another Person you know? Yes! Jesus loves us enough to cover our mistakes with His perfect life. He saved us from the death we deserve because of our sin and gave us another chance to have the best life possible, now and forever. Isn't that Good News!

Adapted from an American pioneer story.

Mother's Hands

by Arthur S. Maxwell, adapted by Karen Flowers

A young mother laid her baby girl to sleep in her cradle. I'll just go to the neighbors for a minute to visit, she thought to herself. I haven't had time to talk to her for such a long time. But while she and the neighbor were chatting, the city fire alarm sent a chill through them both.

"Don't worry," said the neighbor. "Most likely it's only a grass fire. There are lots of them at this time of year. I'm sure the fire isn't anywhere near here."

"But listen," said the mother. "I think I hear the fire engine coming this way. Look! People are running down the street—running toward my house!"

Without another word she dashed into the street and ran with the gathering crowd. Then she saw it. Her own house was on fire! Smoke and flames were already pouring through the roof.

"My baby!" she cried frantically. "My baby!"

The crowd was thick around the house, but she pushed and shoved until she reached the door. A fireman stopped her and said, "You can't go in there! You will be burned!"

But the mother cried, "Let me go! Let me go!" as she broke free and dashed into the flaming house.

She knew just where to go. Running through the smoke and flames, she seized her precious baby, then turned to make her way out. But by now the smoke made it very hard to see and breathe. Nearly overcome, she swayed and fell, and would not have made it out of the house safely if a fireman had not picked her up and carried her out.

What a cheer went up as they appeared! Baby Marjorie was not hurt at all! But the poor mother's hands were terribly burned. Kind friends took care of the baby while the ambulance took her to the hospital. The doctors did their best, but her hands were terribly scared.

Years later, when Marjorie had grown, she suddenly noticed something she had not noticed before. Her mother's hands were so ugly! "Why are your hands so ugly?" she asked her mother when

they were alone.

Tears filled her mother's eyes as she remembered how frightened she was the day the house burned with Marjorie asleep and unaware of the danger.

"Have I said something wrong?" Marjorie asked when she saw the tears.

"No, my dear," replied her mother. "But there's a story I need to tell you."

Then she told Marjorie the story of the fire. She told how the people tried to hold her back, how the fireman tried to stop her, how she battled the flames to rescue her, how she fell, and how they were rescued. Then she held out her scared hands for Marjorie to see.

"They are ugly, in a way, aren't they," Mother said softly. "For me, the only thing that mattered was to save your life."

Now it was Marjorie's turn to shed a few tears. "Oh, Mother," she cried, "You must love me so much! These are the most beautiful hands in all the world!"

Do you know there are hands that were hurt for you? The hands of Jesus.

Soldiers drove great nails through His hands and hung Him on a cross to die so you could go to heaven. Even when He comes again, the marks made by those nails will still be there. If you ask Him, He will show them to you. When you see them, you will know for sure how much Jesus loves you!

Adapted from Arthur S. Maxwell, Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 1966. Vol. 13, pp. 9-13.

Riding the Bus

by Karen Flowers

Richard loved to ride the school bus! Every morning he was up early, ready for school in plenty of time, waiting on the front porch for the big yellow bus to come. He liked to ride in the very back seat next to his best friend Paul.

One reason Richard liked to ride the bus was that he liked Mr. Jacobs, the bus driver. He smiled a lot and usually asked him about his dog Prince. Mr. Jacobs really didn't have to ask; he could just look out his window and see for himself. Prince was always out by the curb barking as the bus pulled away. It was like Prince was saying, "Have a good bus ride. I'll be waiting for you when you get home."

Richard felt safe riding with Mr. Jacobs. He always reminded the children to stay in their seats and he used the bus lights to warn other drivers that he was stopping to pick up someone. Richard never worried for one minute about getting to school safely.

One day school had to be dismissed early because freezing rain and snow had begun to fall and the roads were becoming very slippery. Mr. Jacobs urged the children to get on the bus quickly so they could start for home. Mr. Jacobs drove as carefully as he could, but on the way down a long hill, the bus hit a patch of ice and skidded out of control. Before they knew it, the bus, Mr. Jacobs, and all of the children were in the ditch.

When the bus had come to a stop, Mr. Jacobs jumped quickly from his seat to see if anyone was hurt. Richard and Paul, like some of the other children, had bumped into one another as the bus dipped down into the ditch. But thankfully, no one was hurt. Mr. Jacobs tried to back the bus out of the ditch, but it was hopelessly stuck, with one front wheel twisted in a strange way.

A passing motorist offered to call for help. Soon the police came. While Richard and Paul and the other children watched the flashing lights of the police car out the back window, Mr. Jacobs reported what had happened to the policeman and

told him that there was no way he could take the children to their homes and neighborhoods because the bus was stuck and the front wheel was broken. The policeman went back to his patrol car and spoke into his two-way radio.

"I wonder what that policeman said into that radio," Richard said to Paul. "I guess Prince will be wondering where we are if we don't get home pretty soon."

They didn't have long to wait. As the children watched out their windows, their eyes widened. A big silver motor coach like you sometimes see taking tour groups to special places pulled up alongside their broken-down bus and stopped. It was the biggest bus Richard and Paul had ever seen. They saw Mr. Jacobs and the policeman smiling and talking to the driver. Then Mr. Jacobs climbed back into the school bus and explained everything. Since all the school buses were busy taking other children home, the policeman had phoned the bus station and they had volunteered to send one of their big busses to pick up the stranded children. Eagerly the children left their damaged bus and climbed onto the big silver coach. The driver was very friendly and told them he was sorry about the accident, but soon they would be safely home. Mr. Jacobs would ride along to tell him where everyone lived.

As the big silver coach made its way up and down the neighborhood streets where Richard and his friends lived, parents came out to meet their children. They knew what to be watching for, because the school principal had called them all. Everyone was so happy to see the big silver bus. When they got to Richard's stop, even Prince was there too.

A long time ago when God created Adam, it's like He put the whole human race in a bus together with Adam as the driver. When Adam sinned, it was like Adam lost control of our bus and we all ended up in a bad accident. But this accident was much worse than the accident with Mr. Jacobs. In

this accident, everyone in the bus was hurt so badly they would have died if Jesus had not come to the rescue. But God didn't want any of His children to be hurt or to die. So Jesus came. It's like God put us all into a new bus that could take us safely

home, with Jesus at the wheel. We'll all stay with Jesus, and He'll make sure we get to the home He has prepared for us safely. He's as anxious as Prince for us to get home!

Marriage Where Grace Is In Place

by Karen and Ron Flowers

Theme

Meditation and dialog by couples on the scriptural themes of the gospel can enrich their couple life.

Setting

The following material is designed for use in a marital care group. It could also be used in a marriage program or retreat over a weekend. The marital care group is a small group of several couples who meet on a regular basis for a specific period of time (See *Strengthening Marriage in the Marital Care Group below.*).

Objectives

- To offer an opportunity for scriptural study of passages with significance for marriage relationships.
- To provide an experience of spiritual growth in marriage.

Materials

Article: *Strengthening Marriage through Marital Care Groups*

Presentation Helps #1 *Marital Care Group Guidelines*

Presentation Helps #2 *Grace That Is Not In Vain*

Presentation Helps #3 *Living Lives of Love*

Presentation Helps #4 *Beginners at Forgiveness*

Presentation Helps #5 *Drink From Your Own Well*

Presentation Helps #6 *Marriages Worthy of the Gospel*

Presentation Helps #7 *Display Windows of Grace*

Notes to Program Leaders

- Read the article *Strengthening Marriage through Marital Care Groups*.
- Establish one or more marital care groups. Groups may be formed informally by several interested couples deciding to get together or your Family Ministries Committee may recruit one or more core couples for marital care groups and then post sign-up sheets to fill out these groups.
- Distribute the article *Strengthening Marriage through Marital Care Groups* along with the Presentation Helps to the marital care groups. You may wish to reprint the sections for couple dialog from the Presentation Helps on separate handout sheets. Leave space between the numbered items for couples to write their responses before sharing them verbally with each other.

Strengthening Marriage through Marital Care Groups

What's a Marital Care Group?

A marital care group is several couples who make a commitment to meet periodically for the specific purposes of continuing to learn about God's plan for marriage, enjoying caring fellowship and support, working on common marital issues, and experiencing deeper levels of intimacy within their marriages. Marital care groups operate on these ideas:

- **Couples need other couples.** The encouragement given them through association and interaction with other marrieds provides an affirmation of their own coupleness, helps a couple stay in touch with reality, and helps meet their need for fellowship with others like themselves.
- **Couples can help couples.** In the marital care group, couples experience an environment of trust and acceptance that enables them to examine their own behavior and marital interaction, to observe others and to try alternate ways of relating in order to meet the various needs of their relationship.
- **Couples have strengths on which they can build.** The marital care group affirms their strengths and recognizes that they alone are the only “experts” on their relationship. This support gives the couple freedom and opportunity to build on what they have and to find new areas in which to grow together.

Organization

The marital care group is a small group of 4-6 couples who covenant with each other to meet, perhaps in one another's homes, for 1 2 to 2 2 hours every 2- 4 weeks. The life of the group is limited to 9-12 months, at which time the group terminates or re-covenants for another period.

Participation

Participation in the group is open to couples who are committed to growth in their relationship. Couples who have experienced a marriage strengthening program of some type will likely find that the marital care group helps them practice, refine and reinforce skills they have begun to use. Opportunity to join the group at any time may remain open. However, as time passes, the sense of group trust and sharing may be interrupted by newcomers.

Leadership

One or more couples serve as facilitators of the marital care group with leadership rotating from session to session. Leaders should be open with each other as a couple, willing to share aspects of their relationship in prudent and helpful ways with other couples, and sensitive to others who need emotional support within the group. Leaders should be familiar with group process and have a high degree of propriety. They should be alert to their own limitations and the limitations of the care group. Orientation for group leaders should be provided before launching them upon their task (See Bibliography for resources.).

Content and Process

The marital care group is not therapy or a substitute for therapy. It is not designed to deal with serious marital difficulties. Couples in marital difficulty should be encouraged to seek the services of a counseling professional. Marital care groups exist for the purpose of allowing couples to focus on their own relationship. Although common bonds and socializing will develop within the group, this must be secondary to the primary task of concentrating on some aspect or issue affecting relationships.

Topics. The group should select topics together, taking input from individual couples. The group may construct an agenda of topics for an entire year, for several meetings in advance, or do so on a meeting to meeting basis. Books, tapes, video clips, exercises, scripture verses or other materials may be used as springboards for discussion. (See Presentation Helps #2-7 for suggested topics for six sessions.)

Couple dialog. The marital care group process includes development of group trust, acceptance, commitment to confidentiality and self-disclosure through sharing. Couple dialog, the verbal sharing of feelings and thoughts between spouses, should be private. In some groups, where there is skilled and experienced leadership and high levels of trust, an alternative format may be used which includes some open couple dialog within the group (See “The Deeper Event,” *Caring for Marriage*, 1988).

Guidelines

Acceptance of some guidelines will enable the group to focus on its purpose and avoid marital issues for which it is unequipped (See Handout # 1 *Marital Care Group Guidelines*). These should be covered thoroughly at the onset of the group. They may be referred to from time to time as necessary to help the group stay focused.

Suggested Session Schedule

- 7:30 - 8:00 Social time
- 8:00 - 8:15 Welcome and prayer, introduction to program, guidelines
- 8:15 - 8:45 Theme thought and group discussion
- 8:45 - 9:15 Couple dialog
- 9:15 - 9:30 Planning for Next Meeting; Closing Remarks; Prayer

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MARITAL CARE GROUP GUIDELINES

Encourage a spiritual atmosphere. Invite God's Spirit to be present. Pray often for one another.

Focus on your own relationship. Avoid topics or discussion that detract from this.

Share your own experience. Avoid interrupting, analyzing, confronting, giving opinions or prescribing solutions for other couples.

Speak for yourself. Do not assume you know how the other person feels.

Share voluntarily. No one should feel pressured to share. Silence is respected.

Respect your sacred circle. Avoid sharing aspects of your relationship with others that would make your spouse uncomfortable.

Maintain confidences. Confidentiality is essential to preservation of group trust.

Honor concerns. Whenever an individual has a concern, this has precedence within the group at any time.

Keep commitments. Attendance at scheduled group sessions is expected. The sense of community is lost by irregular attendance of participants.

Grace That Is Not In Vain

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. (1 Cor. 15:10)

The Scripture anticipates growth on the part of believers in response to grace (cf. 1 Cor. 13:11; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 3:17-19; 4:7, 13; 2 Peter 3:18). Interestingly, David and Vera Mace, founders of the Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment, over 50 years ago identified a commitment to growth, coupled with good communication and conflict resolution skills, as the major factor keeping couples together and happily married. Karen and Ron Flowers (1992) tell the story of their special experience learning from the famous, then elderly, pair. Pitched together during the war years in a ministry for Christian young people in Britain, the two had established respect for each other long before love blossomed. But even then they had found each other difficult. David was the epitome of structure and organization, while Vera was much less regimented. Even more than a decade into their retirement and well past their fiftieth wedding anniversary, she still muttered under her breath with a half smile of resignation when he insisted on precisely timing the activities of the marriage enrichment group they were leading.

Theirs had not been an easy marriage. Differences that at first attracted had become like burrs that created festering sores under constant pressure and friction. Stubbornness and anger had reared up between them, forcing them apart despite their desire to become one flesh. Determined, however, to grow toward intimacy throughout all the seasons of their lives together, they were still dialoguing with fervor into their eighties. Etched indelibly on the minds of the couples then present is the vision of a thin, balding husband leaning close and shouting tenderly into the face of his snowy-haired, nearly deaf beloved, both earnestly struggling to understand each other and to grow together in love literally until death did them part.

For group discussion:

1. What is it about God's grace that encourages growth?
2. Why do you think it was so important to Paul that God's grace produce growth in His life?
3. What encouragement do you find in the experiences of couples like David and Vera Mace?
4. Why do you think a commitment to growth was identified as such a significant factor in keeping marriages together?
5. What are some of the barriers to growth that confront married couples?
6. How is your experience together in a marriage support group contributing to marital growth?

For couple dialogue:

1. In response to God's grace, some personal areas in which I would like to grow which affect our relationship are . . .
2. Growth in our relationship which gives me courage for the future . . .
3. Areas in our relationship in which we have made progress but further growth is needed . . .
4. My commitment to you to grow together toward intimacy for the rest of our lives together . . .

References

Flowers, R & K. (1992). *Love Aflame*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.

Living Lives of Love

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph. 5:1, 2)

David Augsburger in *Sustaining Love* (1988, p. 47) identifies eight kinds of “love” which are conditional. Love is conditional, he says, if it:

- Requires agreement: “If you love me you cannot differ from me because when you differ from me you reject me.”
- Expects conformity: “If you love me you will always seek to please me.”
- Denies reality: “If you love me, you will pretend there are no problems in our relationship.”
- Exacts control: “If you love me, you must do as I say.”
- Demands submission: “If you love me, you must respect and obey me.”
- Insists on rescuing: “If you love me, you will let me solve all your problems for you.”
- Compels togetherness: “If you love me you will always stay close to me and support me in everything.”
- Imposes thoughts and feelings: ‘If you love me, you will feel what I feel, think what I think.’”

For group discussion:

1. What are the characteristics of God’s love which we are called to imitate?
2. How does unconditional love differ from conditional love?
3. How does conditional love affect a marriage relationship?
4. Share stories with the group of times you have experienced unconditional love in a relationship—perhaps with a parent, grandparent, teacher, friend, etc.

For couple dialogue:

1. Aspects of God’s love I would like to imitate in my relationship with you . . .
2. Kinds of conditional love which come so naturally to me as a human being . . .
3. My prayer that God will plant His agape love in my heart . . .
4. Ways I would like God’s love to be more evident in the way I relate to you as your beloved . . .

References

Augsburger, D. (1988). *Sustaining Love*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books.

Beginners at Forgiveness

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Eph. 4:31)

Yesterday, we were outraged at one another over something that seems trivial now, but the fire of anger is not quite cooled beneath the surface ashes. Yesterday, I made her cry in frustration. Yesterday, she was mad at me. I know I drive her crazy sometimes. She's not always easy to live with either. Yesterday, old grievances were flung off the shelf where they are somewhat shakily stored.

Yet today we walked up the road to pick sweet corn from a neighbor's patch and walked back down the road hand in hand in our usual way. We're good at forgiving. We have to be. The weather of love comes and goes, and we must let it. It is a required condition of loving someone and being loved back. (Fulghum, 1991, p. 59)

If you never even want to forgive, never even try to remove a hateful memory and restore a loving relationship, you are in a lot of trouble.

If you are trying to forgive, even if you manage forgiving in fits and starts, if you forgive today, hate again tomorrow, and have to forgive again the day after, you are a forgiver. Most of us are amateurs, bungling duffers sometimes. So what? In this game nobody is an expert. We are all beginners. (Smedes, 1984, p. 151)

For group discussion:

1. What does the phrase "just as Christ has forgiven you" add to Paul's directive to forgive one another?
2. What do you think of Fulghum's idea that forgiveness is a "required condition" for lovers?
3. How does your experience verify his observation that "the weather of love comes and goes"?
4. Why is it that old grievances are usually "shakily stored" rather than put away for good in relationships?
4. What is appealing about Smedes' belief that forgiveness is a process not the act of a moment?

For couple dialogue:

1. New thoughts I have had about forgiveness in our relationship . . .
2. Times in our marriage when your forgiveness has meant so much . . .
3. Some old grievances that are still "shakily stored" on the shelves of our marriage . . .
4. Things I can do to open the way for forgiveness and healing in our relationship . . .

References

Fulghum, R. (1991). *Uh-oh*. New York: Ivy Books.

Smedes, L. B. (1984). *Forgive and forget*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Drink From Your Own Well

*Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. . . .
May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. . . may her breasts
satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.
(Proverbs 5:15, 18, 19)*

Robert Fulghum (1995) tells the story of a pastor who invited a bride and groom to bring to their wedding a symbolic meal, something to help them remember that love needs to be nourished just as the body does. It didn't matter what they brought, it just had to be something they regularly ate and drank and which would continue to be part of their daily lives. The particular couple in this story brought two kinds of toast, since their tastes were different. As part of the ceremony, they fed one another bites of toast as a symbol of their willingness to nurture and care for one another's needs daily. They also drank together as a reminder never to become too busy to celebrate the great occasions in their lives. The groom provided sparkling water from the restaurant where he proposed. He had bought a whole case and had already labeled one bottle "First Anniversary," another "Children," and on and on, "Baptisms," "Graduations," "Miscellaneous Great Days." And so their covenant was sealed with ceremony and symbol in the presence of God and their friends.

For group discussion:

1. How does an understanding of God's faithfulness (cf. Hos. 2:19-20) expand our understanding of faithfulness in marriage?
2. Ellen White comments that love is like a tender plant which needs to be nourished. (See *Adventist Home*, p. 196). What kinds of needs do husbands and wives bring to a marriage? What kinds of needs cannot be met by a spouse alone?
3. What kind of marriage relationship do you think is in the wise man's mind as he chooses descriptive words like "drink," "fountain," "rejoice," "satisfy," "captivated"?
4. Why is it important for couples to create meaningful symbols and rituals in their lives?
5. Why are celebrations of significant events in the lives of couples important?
6. Relate stories of meaningful symbols and rituals and celebrations in your lives which you feel comfortable sharing as a couple.

For couple dialogue:

1. Ways in which I am captivated, satisfied, and rejoicing in your love . . .
2. Meaningful symbols, rituals, and celebrations in our lives which bind us together . . .
3. Needs I perceive in you that I would like to talk with you about . . .
4. Things I can do to keep our bond strong . . .
5. Recommitment vows I would like to exchange now . . .
6. My idea of how to celebrate our love . . .

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Marriages Worthy of the Gospel

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. . . .

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. (Phil. 1:27; 2:1-5)

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. . . . Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. . . . (Eph. 5:21, 22, 25)

For group discussion:

1. What do you think Paul meant when he said, “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ”? How does this apply to marriage?
2. What encouragement have you received from being united with Christ? What comfort from His love? How does this affect a marriage relationship?
3. What attitudes of Christ could make all the difference in marriage relationships? (Cf. Phil. 2:6-8; Matt. 20:25-28; Luke 4:18, 19.)
4. What differences do you observe between marriages among Christians and marriages among non-Christians? What kind of difference should Christianity make?
5. Why is it important to balance looking out for one’s own interests and looking out for the interests of one’s spouse? What connections do you see between this and Paul’s call to mutual submission?

For couple dialogue:

1. Attitudes of Christ which have permeated our marriage and sweetened our relationship . . .
2. Ways in which I would like to be more Christlike as your beloved . . .
3. Ways in which you meet my needs for which I would like to thank you . . .
4. Needs I am feeling that I would like to share with you . . .
5. Ways I would like to reach out to meet your needs more fully . . .
6. Ways I can contribute to building our network of support as a couple . . .
7. My commitment to conduct myself as a husband/wife in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ . . .

Display Windows of Grace

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim. 1:15-17)

Ellen White's thought may perhaps create a bridge between 1 Timothy and your marriage: Social influence is a wonderful power. We can use it if we will as a means of helping those about us. (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 354)

For group discussion:

1. What is so helpful about Paul's open acknowledgment of his human frailty?
2. What feelings do you experience as you think about God needing your marriages as "display windows" for His redemptive grace?
3. What needs draw you together as a marriage support group?
4. In what ways are you experiencing the positive effects of "social influence" through the ministry of other married couples as you meet together?
5. How can you extend the ministry of your marriages into the wider circle of extended family, church and community?

For couple dialogue:

1. When I am honest with myself, I must admit that, in terms of my human ability to live out God's ideals as your beloved in marriage . . .
2. As I look back across our history together as a couple, the evidence I see of God's unlimited patience and grace . . .
3. People in our lives for whom God may have been patiently developing with us the testimony of our marriage . . .
4. I believe God would like to work in our relationship right now to strengthen the witness of our marriage by . . .
5. Things I can do to give God the chance to work His miracles of grace in our marriage . . .

Serving Up Milk and Honey: Nurturing Your Child's Spiritual Development

A Seminar for Parents and Lovers of Children

By Karen and Ron Flowers

Theme

Through a clear understanding of both the Christian gospel and the ways children grow spiritually, parents may become more effective in sharing the way of salvation with their children and in acquainting them with the Savior.

Setting

This material is designed for several sessions with parents of children from birth through pre-adolescence. Each session includes text that can be used in developing the seminar and suggested exercises for participants. **Presentation Helps** and **Handouts** are found at the end of the material. Though the material is targeted toward parents of preschool and elementary children, parents of teenagers may benefit from such understanding as well.

Objectives

- To share the Good News of the gospel with parents.
- To help parents to experience the joy and peace of the gospel anew.
- To describe the process of spiritual development in children.
- To enable parents to convey the Good News of the gospel winsomely, so as to increase the likelihood that their children will accept Christ and make Christian values their own.

Seminar Illumination

Throughout the following material, numbers in parentheses ^{(1),(2),(3)} will indicate illustrations, quotations and other material found in the section called **Seminar Illumination** which may be helpful in your seminar development and delivery. Illustrations from your personal experience as a parent will bring added interest to the material.

Session 1 - Parenting By Grace

Introduction

*The people brought children to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. The disciples shooed them off. But Jesus was irate and let them know it: "Don't push these children away. Don't ever get between them and me. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom." . . . Then, gathering the children up in his arms, he laid his hands of blessing on them. Mark 10:13-16, *The Message**

[**Exercise.** Use Presentation Helps #1 — *Agree-Disagree.*]

Relax! Enjoy! Take Heart!

Have you experienced the emotional roller coaster of parenting? Feeling great about yourself sometimes, confident about your parenting, proud of the way your kids are turning out. Feeling so

inadequate frightened, and discouraged at other times you almost wish you had never decided to become a parent? Are you here, just eager to learn all you can about the spiritual nurture of your child? Or have you already faced complications you couldn't have anticipated, problems beyond your own making? Relax! Enjoy! Take heart! God has declared Himself to be in this business of parenting with us.

In Deuteronomy 6, the most complete Old Testament treatise on the spiritual nurture of children, Moses begins with a description of the first work of parents: "Love the Lord your God These commandments that I give you today *are to be upon your hearts*" (Deut. 6:6, emphasis supplied). Loving God is not one more thing we have to *do* to make God happy and to receive His blessing in our parenting. It's just the only place to begin if we want our children to love God too. It's our joy, praise, and gratitude for all that has been done for us by God in Christ that will be contagious! GOOD NEWS is hard to resist! ⁽¹⁾

[Exercise. Distribute Handout #1 — *The Good News*. Divide into groups of 4-6 to think about the essence of the Good News. Read the passages together, pausing to bask in the wonderful news you are discovering. When you have reassembled as a large group, take a few minutes to celebrate the Good News together and reflect on what you have read. Do not hurry this time of sharing. Do not offer your ideas about how people should respond to this Good News. Just rest, rejoice and find courage in the work of salvation accomplished in Christ. Completing sentences like the ones below may help you to get started:

- *The thought that impresses me right now is . . .*
- *I find so much joy in the Good News that . . .*
- *It seems almost too good to be true that . . .*
- *I find it difficult to believe . . .*
- *It brings me great peace to know . . .*
- *The words that are the most precious to me are . . .*
- *I wish I understood better . . .*
- *It's easier for me to believe that . . . is true for others than for myself . . .*

[Note to Leader: To summarize, you will want to share a simple gospel presentation of your own, bringing together your own study with the helps provided. (See Handout #2 — *The Essence of the Good News*.) You may wish to conclude with your own testimony of God's grace to you personally and as a parent.]

The Importance of the Good News In Parenting

The objectives of this emphasis on the Good News are at least threefold:

1. Parents cannot give their children what they do not have. The Good News must first be in our hearts before we can spiritually nurture our children.

2. Parenting will inevitably have its ups and downs, it's moments of ecstasy and pride and its moments of desperation and despair. An understanding of the Good News is central to Christian parenting. It undergirds our abilities in several key areas:

- To provide for our children's deepest needs.
- To convey the core values of Christianity.

- To love unconditionally.
- To set appropriate boundaries.
- To correct redemptively.
- To release our children as they take up adult responsibilities.

3. Children need parents to be what counselors call a “non-anxious presence” in their lives. With all the turbulence of growing up, children need parents who can see the big picture, who can give them time and space to grow spiritually, as well as in every other dimension of their lives. Parents can offer this time and space more readily when they themselves have found peace and rest in the Good News.

Additional Words of Encouragement

After [parents] have done the best they can do for the good of their children, they may bring them to Jesus. . . . As the mother’s heart yearns for the help she knows she cannot give, the grace she cannot bestow, and she casts herself and children into the merciful arms of Christ, He will receive and bless them [both]; . . . These precious words are to be cherished, not only by every mother, but by every father as well. These words are an encouragement to parents to press their children into His notice, to ask in the name of Christ . . . (*The Adventist Home*, pp. 274-276).

Jesus Himself, in His infinite mercy, is working on human hearts, effecting spiritual transformations so amazing that angels look on with astonishment and joy (*Testimonies*, Vol. 5, p. 731).⁽²⁾

Conclusion

[Distribute Handout #2 — *The Essence of the Good News*. Encourage the parents to find time in the coming week to study the passages for themselves and relax in the assurance of salvation the Good News provides.]

Go in peace, with GOOD NEWS in your hearts! It is the best foundation that can be laid for the spiritual nurture of your children!

Session 2 - Preparing Your Child For a Love Affair With God

Introduction

Robert Fulghum in his book *Uh-Oh* (1991) tells the story from his childhood of being taken to Sunday School at about the age of four. One of the first things he learned was the Lord’s Prayer. But when Robert listened to the teacher recite, “Our Father, which art in heaven, *Hallowed* be Thy name,” he heard, “Our Father, . . . *Howard* be Thy name.” (The word “hallowed” and “Howard” sound somewhat similar in English.) Now Robert’s grandfather’s name on his mother’s side was Howard. So grandfather and God got all mixed up in his mind as one and the same. Since he and his grandfather loved each other dearly, and since nobody picked up on his misunderstanding for a long time, Robert grew up with a very warm, comfortable notion about God and feeling pretty well connected in God’s family!

Every Christian parent hopes his or her child will grow up with warm notions about God and feeling good about being part of His family the church. Increasing the likelihood that early feelings of love for Jesus will blossom into a full-fledged love affair with God and His family is what the spiritual nurture of children is all about.

Spiritual Nurture in the Context of Family

The spiritual nurture of children must be addressed in the context of the larger process of Christian parenting. Children can't be neatly divided into component parts, allowing for parents to separate out and attend particularly to their spirituality. Child growth and development is wholistic. It is physical, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual, and the development of each dimension affects all the others. The process of Christian parenting fosters healthy development in every aspect.

Scripture outlines three broad parental responsibilities given by God in order to ensure the best wholistic development possible for each unique child:

- Parents are to **provide** for a broad spectrum of needs universally experienced by children—needs which are physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social (1 Tim. 5:4,8; Eph. 6:4).
- Parents are to **teach** their children what they need to know about living in the world—how to take care of themselves and enjoy positive relationships with God and other people (Deut. 6:6-9; Prov. 22:6; Eph. 6:4).
- Parents are also tasked with the responsibility to **correct** their children. This challenging responsibility is given to parents because most fathers and mothers love their children, and love is the foundation of all discipline (Prov. 3:11, 12). Parents are also in the best position to provide the necessary mix of warmth, love and communication—along with appropriate limit—as a child grows (Prov. 13:24; 29:15; Matt. 7:9-11).

Everything that happens to children—the way their needs are met, what they are taught, and how they are corrected—affects them spiritually. As Armand Nicholi (1979) puts it:

Early family experience determines our adult character structure, the inner picture we harbor of ourselves, how we see others and feel about them, our concept of right and wrong, our capacity to establish the close, warm, sustained relationships necessary to have a family of our own, our attitude toward authority and toward the Ultimate Authority in our lives, and the way we attempt to make sense out of our existence. No human interaction has a greater impact on our lives than our family experience. (p. 11)

Parenting impacts a child's spiritual development both *directly* and *indirectly*. In very *direct* ways, the provision parents make for their children to attend Sabbath School, belong to Pathfinders, go to a Christian school, participate in family worship experiences, etc.—all affect their spiritual development. There are spiritual lessons to be taught at home as intentionally as a parent teaches basic hygiene, assists with mathematics homework, or coaches the development of interpersonal skills. In Scripture, all correction is redemptive by design. It lovingly, but firmly, brings a child back on a course that will lead to God and wholesome living. However, there are also many *indirect* linkages between a child's spiritual development and the way his parents provide, teach, and correct. Richard Strauss in his book *How to Raise Confident Children* (1975) explains:

A person's image of God is often patterned after his image of his own parents, especially his father. If his parents were happy, loving, accepting, and forgiving, he finds it easier to experience a positive and satisfying relationship with God. But if his parents were cold and indifferent, he may feel that God is far away and disinterested in him personally. If his parents were angry, hostile, and rejecting, he often feels that God can never accept him. If his parents were hard to please, he usually has the nagging notion that God is not very happy with him either. (pp. 23, 24)

Ellen White sums it up in one sentence: "Their whole religious experience is affected by their bringing up in childhood" (*Child Guidance*, p. 473).

[Exercise. Give participants five to ten minutes to share with the person next to them a memory from their growing up years which formed a significant base for their adult understanding of God and their feelings about the church. This memory may have been the source of a warm, loving picture of God such as Robert Fulghum's, or it may have created a hurdle which they have had to overcome in understanding God as a loving parent and in feeling good about the church. After dyads have had a chance to share, invite one or two persons to volunteer to share their story with the whole group.]

Conclusion

A father tells the story of overhearing his son and a group of small boys each trying to outdo the other in a discussion about their fathers.

"My father is pretty important," one began, hands on hips. "He knows the mayor of the city."

"That's nothing," bragged another. "My dad knows Cal Ripkin!" [Adapt by inserting the name of any well-known sports personality.]

"You think that's so great," boasted the third, "well, my daddy knows God!"

The father who eavesdropped on this conversation was at first overwhelmed with the responsibility of being the person who in His child's eyes "knew God." And that *is* an awesome responsibility! But there is Good News! It is knowing God as He has made Himself known in Jesus Christ that can lift the heavy load of responsibility from parenthood. A growing understanding and acceptance of all that has been accomplished for us in Christ can quiet our own inner anxiety by calling a halt on our futile attempts to save ourselves and our children. As we leave the saving to the Savior and place ourselves and our children in God's hands, an abiding peace awaits us. God longs to lift from our shoulders the self-imposed weight of raising perfect children who do not need a Savior. He wants to open our eyes to His finished work in Christ and to His patient, persistent and winsome ways of drawing each one to Himself. Nothing can ever place anyone outside the circle of His love.

Sessions 3 & 4 - Making Christianity Irresistible

[Note to Leader: These sessions are by nature very didactic. Be sure to break often for comments and questions. Illustrate as much as you can from your own experience. Ask parents for their reactions and give opportunities for them to share their own stories. Use whatever time has been allotted for your group sessions, then pick up the next week wherever you left off.]

Introduction

“Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” (Prov. 22:6). At least three important insights come from this proverb:

Increasing probabilities. Proverbs are about probabilities rather than promises. They reflect what is likely to occur; they do not guarantee perfectly predictable results. Raising children is not an exact science. There are no guarantees. In this verse the wise man is helping us to understand how parents and others involved in the spiritual nurture of children can increase the likelihood that children will make the spiritual values they have been taught in childhood their own as adults.

A child’s uniqueness. The proverb places emphasis on the fact that successful parents will seek to understand the way he or she—*their unique child*—should go. While we need to understand the broad similarities of children at each stage of development, we must also give special attention to the unique characteristics and needs of each individual child.

The dual meaning of the verb “train.” The Hebrew verb “train” or “train up” had two common usages. It was used to describe the process of subduing a wild horse. Parents of strong-willed children can readily understand the comparison between parenting and taming a wild horse! There was also another intriguing usage. The verb was used to describe a common practice for stimulating the sucking response of a newborn baby. A midwife would stew dates or figs to produce a sweet syrup, coat her finger with the tasty substance, and massage the baby’s lips, gums, tongue and palate until she lured him into sucking her finger. Once the sucking response was firmly established, she would put the baby to the mother’s breast (Swindoll, 1980). The spiritual nurture of children is also about making God and Christianity so attractive, so winsome, so delicious, that our children will find them irresistible.

[**Group Exercise.** Give the group a few minutes to react to these lessons from Proverbs 22:6. In what ways did their parents apply these lessons as they were growing up? What poses the biggest challenge to the application of these principles to their own parenting with each of their children?]

The Importance of Understanding Child Growth and Development

Serving up religion on a tasty smorgasbord, as Roger Dudley recommends in his book *Passing on the Torch* (1986), has much to do with understanding the process of spiritual development and knowing how to facilitate a child’s appropriate and timely passage through the stages.

The Bible views human beings as growing and developing in every dimension of their lives from birth to death. Jesus’ wholistic development—physically, mentally, socially and spiritually—was intentionally marked by the gospel writer Luke (2:52). There is much research to support the fact that growth in human beings generally proceeds in a predictable fashion according to an internal script imprinted by the Creator. As Ellen White explained, “All parts of the human organism . . . were placed under law” (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 415).

A number of Bible passages speak specifically about spiritual growth. There is a time, Paul says, for thinking and behaving like a child (cf. 1 Cor. 3:1, 2; 13:11a). But there is also a time for becoming an adult, for growing into mature faith (cf. Eph. 4:13; 1 Cor. 13:11b; 14:20; 2 Pet. 3:18). Christian parents who understand the natural processes of child growth and development will be better able to capitalize on opportunities for spiritual nurture. They will be more adept at anticipating “teachable

moments” and matching learning experiences with the child’s level of maturation. They will also be better able to detect when a child is ready for the next learning step. As Ellen White wisely noted, “He who seeks to transform humanity must himself understand humanity” (*Education*, p. 78).

Various theories on how children develop spiritually have been put forward. They are helpful toward understanding the *process* of spiritual growth. They are also helpful in determining how and when the *content* of faith—the teachings and values of the Bible—can best be introduced and expanded. The various spiritual development theorists typically emphasize hereditary and/or environmental influences which they believe to be the primary factors determining children’s behavior. Scripture also acknowledges the impact of both heredity and the environment on behavior. The Psalmist affirms his belief that all his days were written in God’s book before he was even born (Ps. 139:15, 16). On the other hand, Manoah and his wife acknowledge the importance of the environment as they plead with God to help them parent the child Samson wisely (Judges 13:8). Paul marks the sincere faith modeled for Timothy by his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice as the seed bed for Timothy’s strong faith (2 Tim. 1:5).

Though heredity and the environment are powerful factors, the Bible also clearly identifies human beings as free moral agents, created by God with the capacity and the God-given right to choose their destiny (Josh. 24:15; 1 Kings 18:21; Rom. 12:2). While the decision about what to do with Christ ultimately rests with each individual, the intentional spiritual nurture of children in the family and in the church vastly increases the likelihood for a personal choice for Christ and the values of His kingdom.

Cognitive Development and Spiritual Nurture

Much has been written on the linkages between spiritual development and intellectual development. Jean Piaget, a French psychologist working in Switzerland in the 1930's, was the first to observe a close relationship between the development of thought processes in children and their capacity to understand spiritual things and make decisions about right and wrong. Subsequent moral development theorists, such as Kohlberg, Peck and Havighurst and others have built their theories on the work of Piaget. Spiritual growth, this cluster of theorists believed, is predictable and sequential, with each stage relating to increasing cognitive development and building on the stage before. [For a summary of Peck and Havighurst’s theory, see the Family Ministries Planbook, *Passing the Torch* (1992).]

Piaget described three cognitive stages between birth and twelve. His fourth stage characterized adolescents and adults. A brief look at these stages and their implications for the spiritual nurture of children will summarize the approach of the theorists who see spiritual development as closely paralleling the cognitive development of a child.

Stage 1: Sensorimotor (0-2 years). The child at this stage is mostly occupied with learning to coordinate different parts of his or her body and exploring the world through the senses by seeing, smelling, touching, hearing and tasting it. Children at this age need an enriched environment with freedom to explore it within the bounds of safety. ⁽³⁾ David Elkind (1981) cautions, however, that while children need an interesting and stimulating environment, too much stimulation can be detrimental. Stimulation becomes harmful when it interferes with unhurried attention to basic needs, such as the need to sleep, to be held close, to enjoy a parent’s undivided attention, to be touched

lovingly at bath or feeding time, to experience soothing comfort when distressed, to grasp and drop an object dozens of times with someone there to pick it up, etc. Growth cannot be rushed.

Implications for spiritual nurture. A child at this stage has no sense of conscience. He does not make moral decisions. He does what he is taught and encouraged to do by his parents. The child's grasp on spiritual lessons will be negligible at this age, but strong impressions are created which form the foundation for a child's feelings about family, God, and church. The parents' role is crucial as they largely determine the quality of a child's human relationships, as well as the child's intellectual stimulation and exposure to the world.

Stage 2: Preoperational (2-7 years). "Operation" refers to a child's process of gathering data from the world around him, bringing it into his mind, and "operating" on it, i.e. putting it where it belongs or filing it in his mind as new information is added with which to solve problems and understand things. Children at this stage are "preoperational," that is they are not yet capable of many of these mind "operations." The most important achievement of this period is the development of language. This stage is a turbulent time of "unsettledness, fears, and confusion" (Balswick and Balswick, 1989), partly because there is so much the child wants to do for herself or himself, but skills and capacities are limited. Other characteristics of a child of this age include:

- *Seeing is believing.* Preoperational children make judgments on the basis of how things look rather than on the basis of cognitive understanding. They will look at two containers with the same amount of water, one tall and thin and the other short and fat, and they will conclude that the tall, thin one holds more because the water level is higher. ⁽⁴⁾
- *Questions.* Children at this stage ask endless questions. "Mom, what makes the sky blue? Do worms sleep at night? What makes toenails thicker than fingernails? When are we going to get there?" Asking questions is how they learn. ⁽⁵⁾
- *Egocentricity.* The child at this age assumes everyone else is experiencing the world the same way he or she is at the moment. If she feels rested and happy, she thinks everyone does. It is difficult for him to understand any other point of view from his own. An important task of this stage is "decentering," gradually moving from this egocentric perspective to being able to distinguish themselves from others and understand that there is more than one perspective, more than one way to experience the world.

Implications for spiritual nurture. Children in this stage imagine God in human terms. They picture Him with physical characteristics similar to their own. Prayer is vaguely understood and consists primarily of requests. However, the establishment of prayer rituals is important. Lifelong habits of prayer at meals, in the morning and at bedtime are often rooted in this period, though throughout life they take on much deeper meaning. Conscience begins to emerge during this stage. Right and wrong are first understood as absolutes—black or white—with no shades of gray. Children at this stage also believe that if you disobey, imminent justice can be expected. Something bad will happen to you. On the other hand, if you are good, God will take care of you.

- *Listen and give truthful answers.* It is important to listen to children and provide simple, truthful answers to their questions. Think through how you can explain spiritual lessons at the child's level without telling them something you will later have to undo. ⁽⁶⁾ If religious

things are taught in ways which do not fully reflect truth, even though you are just trying to keep them simple, there is a danger that the child will later believe he was deceived when he was young. He may even come to the conclusion that religion itself is a lie.

- *Move from specific to general.* Children of this age think from specific to general, not the other way around. Rather than, “Jesus made everything,” say, “Jesus made bananas, apples, papayas, oranges, kiwi fruit, strawberries, and pineapples—all the fruits you like! He made them because He loves you.” Their ability to grasp concepts of time, distance and numbers is also undeveloped. Instead of “Jesus fed 5000,” use “many people.” Instead of saying “Goliath was a giant,” explain that Goliath was “as tall as this room.”
- *Recognize their behavior as often motivated by a desire to please.* Preoperational children want to please. They also want to avoid disapproval and unpleasant consequences. During this stage children can learn about Jesus’ love and will respond with love in return. They want to please Jesus. This is a critical stage in which attitudes toward God, the Scripture and the church are established. It is especially important that they do not get the message that Jesus’ love is conditional upon obedience. Jesus loves unconditionally. We obey because we love Him so much.

Stage 3: Concrete operations (7-11 years). Children are now able to manipulate information in their minds. They can understand that, though poured into several different shapes of containers, a cup of water retains the same volume. They can define, compare and contrast. However, their understanding is still in concrete terms. They do not understand symbolism and figurative language. They can think about what they can see. They can reason on the basis of past experience and understand cause and effect. They still grasp lessons better when you begin with the specific and progress to a more general application.

Implications for spiritual nurture. To teach that Jesus is kind and loving, start with stories about His love and kindness. Object lessons may capture interest, but may not be well understood. Words like “Good Shepherd” will likely be interpreted literally. A child may think that Jesus took care of sheep. Abstract concepts like the “Trinity” are very difficult. Children at this stage, as at every stage, learn best by involvement. As the old proverb says, “Tell me and I will do my best to listen. Show me and I will watch carefully. Involve me and I will understand and remember.” Children at this stage are also characterized by:

Developing conscience. Sin is understood in the narrow sense of specific wrong acts, rather than as rebellion against God or a severed relationship with Him.

Consequences related to actions. Because they now understand cause and effect relationships, children at this age are beginning to understand how consequences are related to actions and to expect correction to be related to misbehavior.

Love of collections. These children love to collect things—a bird list, coins, stamps, bottle caps, shells, evangelistic sermons, etc.—and their collections represent their increased mental ability to sort and classify. This is a natural time period for teaching children the books of the Bible, how they can be classified as books of law, writings, prophets, letters, etc., and how to locate the texts in the Scriptures.

Increased memorization ability also makes it an ideal time for building a child's repertoire of Scripture verses committed to memory. It is important, however, that we work to help them understand the verses, not merely to memorize them in a rote fashion.

Friendships. Because they have a growing number of friends, concrete operational children have a growing sense that God is their Friend. They think of Him primarily in terms of His actions—He takes care of us, He died for us, He is coming back for us, etc. They continue to make requests of God in their prayers, but will begin to be able to talk to Him as they would to a parent or a friend.

Stage 4: Formal operations (12 years+). At this stage children break through the barrier of concrete, literal thinking into the realm of the abstract. As a result:

- They are no longer restricted by a limited understanding of time, space, and numbers.
- They can reconsider thinking they have done previously when new information is available.
- They are ready to move from mere knowledge to an understanding of facts or ideas.
- They can develop skills to apply what they have learned in a variety of situations.
- They can learn to break things down into component parts as well as to construct a meaningful whole out of related information.
- They are capable of judging the value of a plan of action or an idea.

Implications for spiritual nurture. Children are now able to enter into a personal relationship with God and to more fully understand His mercy and grace, His power, His sovereignty, His omnipresence, and His call to live lives worthy of the grace extended to us in Christ. Prayer expands to include more praise, thanksgiving, worship, and intimate conversation. The bigger picture of the great controversy between good and evil can come into perspective. God's creation ideal for human beings can be discerned. The symbolism and figurative language of Scripture can be infused with meaning. The big issues of life can begin to be addressed: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?

Summary. It is important to tailor the spiritual nurture of children to the stage of development where they are. It is equally important to realize that a child's spiritual growth does not just naturally progress as they increase in age. The **capacity** for spiritual growth progresses, but intentional spiritual nurture is required for this growth potential to become a **reality**.

Most developmental theorists agree that in order to facilitate growth, spiritual lessons should be presented primarily in keeping with the developmental stage of the child. But opportunities should also be provided to stretch his understanding to the next stage. In the view of those who link spiritual growth with cognitive development, children function mostly within one developmental level, but may operate at times in the stage they have just left behind, and at other times show ability to function at the next level toward which they are advancing. Thus spiritual lessons should be geared primarily to the age-appropriate stage, with some opportunities to stretch the child's mind toward the next level of understanding. It's our task to gently enlarge their "boxes" of comprehension, to help them see that things are a bit more complex than they had imagined. This will keep them thinking and growing toward maturity in Christ.

Emotional Development and Spiritual Nurture

While most of the study of spiritual development has focused on the linkages between spiritual development and cognitive development, linkages have also been observed with emotional

development. Erik Erikson (Erikson, 1963) proposed eight stages of emotional development based on eight conflicts which confront human beings across their life spans. These conflicts are resolved in the life of each person across a continuum between two opposite extremes. Faith development theorist LeRoy Aden observed a correlation between these eight stages and the process of faith development. He believed that helping children resolve the early stages positively is significant to their spiritual nurture. Aden also believed in the work of the Divine in human lives.

Stage 1: Infancy—faith as trust. According to Erikson, the first conflict of life which confronts the infant is *trust versus mistrust*. A child emerges from infancy with one of three perspectives on the world:

- *Spoiled and pampered.* The child views himself as the center of the universe with all of its resources at his immediate beck and call.
- *Mistrusting.* The child views the world as a cold, unfriendly place where uncertainty exists as to who can be counted on consistently to meet his needs.
- *Trusting.* The child learns he is not the center of the universe; he may have to wait a few minutes to be cared for. However, there are people who love him who will respond to his needs. This child learns to manage his anxiety and be satisfied with the level of comfort he can provide for himself while he waits for a response.

Implications for spiritual nurture. Trust is developed when a child's needs are met in a caring, dependable manner, in an atmosphere of unconditional love. Children need to sense they are loved, regardless of how they behave. Children need a circle of supportive adults, people who give evidence they genuinely like children. The cornerstone for faith in God is laid as the child learns to trust his parents and other caregivers who respond lovingly to his needs. Without the development of trust in childhood, a person will likely struggle for a lifetime to trust other people and to trust God.

Stage 2: Early childhood—faith as courage. Erikson described the major conflict of early childhood as *autonomy versus shame*. If children are allowed to make choices and encouraged to take more and more responsibility as they mature, they will move toward appropriate independence with a healthy sense of self. If, on the other hand, they are made to feel that their attempts at doing things for themselves and taking responsibility are unacceptable, or if they are overprotected, they will likely be plagued with paralyzing shame and self-doubt across their lifetimes.

A person needs a healthy sense of self in order to make the personal choice to believe in God, to love Him and to enter into a personal relationship with Him. A healthy sense of self also provides the courage a person needs to confront the emptiness, meaninglessness, anxiety and trials which are part of our lives because of sin.

Implications for spiritual nurture. Children at this stage need adults to have realistic expectations of them, and they need to know exactly what those expectations are. They also need help to learn how to make good choices and to develop skills appropriate to their ages which will help them feel confident about their abilities. ⁽⁷⁾

Stage 3: The play age—faith as obedience. Around the ages of 3 - 6, Erikson saw the developmental issue needing to be resolved as *initiative versus guilt*. During this period, a child's conscience is developing. If the conscience is insufficiently constructed, the child will be unable to temper his desires and will emerge as a self-centered person with few inner controls. On the other hand, if his conscience is over-developed, if he is made to feel guilty for his initiative, for his desire to be his own person and chart his own course, he will likely emerge as a rigid, moralistic, guilt-ridden, over-responsible person who is exceedingly strict with his own affairs and who seeks to control the lives of others in the same fashion.

Parents who help their children toward a balanced resolution to this conflict leave the child's strong will in place, but also teach him to obey appropriate requests. This balance forms the basis for mature faith. The foundation has been laid for the giving of oneself to God in response to His love and for submission to His will out of reverence for Christ.

Implications for spiritual nurture. Ideally, the child will develop at this stage an appropriate balance between self-assertion and self-discipline. The positive development of initiative has to do with encouraging the appropriate assertion of a child's will. Ellen White spoke of this when she wrote: "Save the strength of the will; in the battle of life it will be needed" (*Education*, 288).

On the other hand, the development of conscience is also important. Conscience is that inner control which contains a child's desire for unlimited self-assertion. A child who is developing healthily is increasingly governed by appropriate inner restraints. The development of conscience is crucial to the development of faith. It is as a child learns to make choices on the basis of wider consideration than his own desires that the stage is set for his response to the claims of God upon his life. Obedience can then be truly a response of love rather than rigid adherence to law out of guilt or concern for what others will think.

Stage 4: School age—faith as assent. Erikson's designation of the conflict at this stage is *industry versus inferiority*. Children at this stage are busy trying to master the skills and competencies valued by those around them. In the process, children develop an image of themselves either as competent or incompetent. Successful resolution of this conflict results in a basic sense of usefulness and productivity, perhaps even a view of oneself as insightful and creative. Failure to resolve this conflict in a positive way results in a crippling sense of inferiority and the perception that one can do nothing well and has little to contribute.

Implications for spiritual nurture. Children need continuing reassurance of their intrinsic value as individuals. They also need parents and others who affirm their developing competencies and gifts. In this way parents and others contribute to the formation of the self-image a child will eventually internalize. This self image will profoundly affect the child's ability to learn and his or her relationships with others.

The resolution of this conflict, positively or negatively, profoundly affects spiritual development as well. As part of children's desire to master those skills and competencies they perceive to be valued by those around them, they become intent upon probing, questioning, and verifying all that they have been taught about God. They do not do this out of disbelief, rather they are working on making what they have been taught their own at a new level. This effort can have the positive effect of moving a

child beyond mere acceptance and obedience to parental values, to what Aden calls *assent* or personal belief. The probing, questioning and verifying initiated at this stage set the foundation for a lifelong quest for truth based on one's own study and a personal response to God.

It is noteworthy that this is the time period in which many young people make a decision for baptism. Parents, pastors and teachers who are in stride with a child's development do well to capitalize on this opportunity to call him or her to a decision for Christ.

Social-Spiritual Development

Despite all the emphasis on stages of growth and development, it has been observed that children sometimes exhibit moral behavior and a capacity to discern spiritual things which seem far beyond their years. The significant factor, which some theorists believe explains this, is a relational one. Warm, positive, stimulating relationships with parents, teachers and other important adults unquestionably promote spiritual growth.

The Russian theorist Vygotsky, for example, believed that the spiritual development of children is impacted by their immediate setting (home, local church and school), by how well these three work together to nurture the child spiritually, by important events which impact the child even though he may not have been directly involved in them, and by society at large. Vygotsky emphasized the importance of mentoring in children's lives. He likened the teaching responsibility of parents and other significant adults in a child's life to scaffolding. Scaffolding supports a building under construction. When the building is able to support itself, the scaffold is removed. Likewise, children need adults who support them as they develop by breaking down tasks into understandable and doable units, verbalizing clear instructions, involving them in doing the task together until they develop proficiency, and encouraging and affirming growth. Then, just as a scaffold is removed when it is no longer needed, so the gradual withdrawal of adult involvement promotes growth by allowing the child to take more and more responsibility.

John Fowler also sees a relational component to faith development. He believes that all human beings develop faith. What differs between individuals is "what" or "who" we put our faith in. Some people spend their entire lives moving from one thing to another, trying to find something, someone big enough to be worthy of worship and complete devotion. Many settle for someone or something far less than sovereign as their object of worship—perhaps a theory, an organization, or another human being. But the God-shaped vacuum described by the early church father Augustine will continue to draw human beings into a search for the Almighty until they find *the* One who alone is worthy of worship.

What joy can be ours as we link hands with the Almighty as He draws our children to Himself at every step of their development! It our greatest privilege as parents. There is no more important calling.

Conclusion

Close each of these sessions with a few "I learned statements" from the group. Take time to respond to questions of clarification. Invite the group to spend time in personal reflection about the stage of development of each of their children and the ideas you have discussed for using age-appropriate means for nurturing each child spiritually. Pray together that God will open your eyes to opportunities to cooperate with Him as He draws your children to Himself.

Session 5 - Practical Keys to Successful Spiritual Nurture of Children

Maintain warm relationships. Think about the person or persons most responsible for your decision to be a Christian. Who influenced you the most as you were carving out your own personal identity? How did they convey spiritual truths to you? Why did you trust them and make similar values your own?

[**Exercise.** As time allows, invite a few responses from the group to the above questions. Remember, all participation, especially when it calls for self-disclosure, should be voluntary. Be prepared to share an illustration from your own life if none are forthcoming from the group.]

Chances are these significant people in your life were people with whom you shared a warm relationship. Children, even adults, tend to be interested in the beliefs and ideas of others they like and who they know like them. Notice the endearing relational terms, “best friends,” “dear children,” “companions,” that Ellen White uses in a comment about the spiritual nurture of children:

As the *very best friends* of these inexperienced ones, they [parents] should help them in the work of overcoming, for it means everything to them to be victorious. They should consider that their own *dear children* who are seeking to do right are younger members of the Lord’s family, and they should feel an intense interest in helping them . . . Parents, watch, watch and pray, and make your children your *companions*. (*Child Guidance*, p. 496, emphasis supplied)

Model your faith. Someone has said that children do not *learn* values, they *imitate* people. Over time, they decide who they like, and who they don’t like, and after whom they will pattern their lives. They do not make lists of spiritual truths they have decided to accept so much as they identify with people who live those truths.

Children must see in the lives of their parents that consistency which is in accordance with their faith. By leading a consistent life and exercising self-control, parents may mold the characters of their children. (*The Adventist Home*, p. 322)

It can be frightening to realize the extent to which our children copy our behavior. To hear your daughter scold her doll in a tone of voice that sounds all too familiar, to see your son control his friend with anger, to see your shortcomings take shape before your eyes in the person of your child, can be overwhelmingly discouraging. Our lives, our family relationships, we must confess, are far from perfect.

But there is hope. Modeling as a means of transmitting values is not about flawless human perfection. Our task is not to rear perfect children who have no need of a Savior. Rather, we who have found the perfect Savior are given the privilege of bringing our children to Him. Modeling is about living up to Christian ideals as best we can. But it is also about showing our children what Christians do when they have made mistakes, how followers of Jesus seek and offer forgiveness and find the courage to begin again. Modeling also means demonstrating how Christians handle their disappointments. Modeling means being authentic human beings, and allowing our children to see God at work in our lives when we experience discouragement and doubt. Modeling means letting our

children see us turn to Jesus for comfort, peace and reassurance. Modeling is allowing our children to watch Him make new people for His kingdom out of the brokenness sin has brought into our lives.

Provide love and limits. Research identifies two factors as characteristic of an optimal parenting style (Balswick & Balswick, 1991; Habenicht & Murdoch, 1991; Joy, 1988):

- Parental love and support.
- Appropriate, consistent boundaries.

Parenting which incorporates these factors increases the likelihood that children will:

- Make their parents' values their own when they become adults.
- Demonstrate higher levels of moral development.
- Become more concerned about the needs and feelings of others as well as their own.

In the writings of Ellen White the terms *kindness* and *firmness* reflect these factors:

Children should not be left to wander away from the safe path marked out in God's Word. . . . *Kindly*, but *firmly*, with persevering, prayerful effort, their wrong desires should be restrained, their inclinations denied. (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 391, emphasis supplied)

Families who provide a good balance between love and limits exhibit qualities such as:

- Warmth and affection.
- Affirmation.
- Open communication.
- Time for fun and laughter.
- Flexibility when situations and the growth of the child call for negotiation and change.
- A few appropriate rules.
- Consistent follow-through on agreed upon consequences when rules are violated.
- Intentional empowerment of children consistent with their ability, enabling them to assume increasing responsibility for their own decision-making.
- Commitment to growth.
- Willingness to develop skills necessary to resolve conflicts so that everybody feels like a winner.
- The capacity to work through the process of forgiveness to reconciliation.

Establish your family altar. In *Valuegenesis: Report 1 - A Study of the Influence of Family, Church and School on the Faith, Values and Commitment of Adventist Youth* (1990), researchers studied faith development among 12,000 Adventist youth in North America. They noted that family worship again surfaced as a significant factor in effective spiritual nurture. Family worship provides opportunity for covenant renewal between the family and God, for rehearsal of religious heritage, for values instruction, and for relationship-building between family members.

[**Exercise.** Take some time to share stories of memorable family worship experiences as a group.]

Parents should also watch for opportunities for spontaneous worship experiences with a child—joy at the wonders of nature, excitement about grandma’s visit, delight in the smothering love of a puppy, a sudden awareness that God is the giver of all good gifts. These are some of the most worshipful, teachable moments in the life of a child, though they cannot be programmed or formalized.

Involve your family in service. Putting spiritual values into action has also surfaced in research as significant to effective child nurture. Children enjoy helping others. The joy experienced in childhood from serving and sharing may well establish lifelong patterns that will benefit both givers and receivers.

[**Exercise.** Make a list of opportunities for families to become involved in service in your church and community, as well as in the home. A few starters are listed below.]

- Start an “adopt a grandmother/grandfather” program.
- Make cheery cards for placement on food trays in the hospital and nursing home.
- Volunteer at a local soup kitchen or homeless shelter.
- Clean up a park.
- Write ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency) for project ideas.
- Rake leaves, cut grass, etc., for an elderly person.
- Bake cookies for students away at school.
- Provide Sabbath School in the home of a shut-in.
- Give each family member a small amount of money to be used help someone.

Family: God’s Primary Center for Disciplemaking

God intends the family to be a natural setting for carrying out Jesus’ directive, “Go and make disciples” (Matt. 28:19). Jesus identified His disciples as people who “abide in His word,” who live by the principles of His kingdom. Families are central to the disciplemaking process because family is the primary place where values are learned.

Jesus also said the community would recognize His disciples by their love (John 13:35). A person’s capacity to enter into a warm, loving relationship with God or with others is developed first, for better or for worse, in the family in which he grows up. If a child experiences love and acceptance in the family, following Jesus may be a natural outgrowth of being raised in a Christian family. On the other hand, if a child is harshly treated or neglected, establishing a love relationship with Christ may be virtually impossible but for a miracle of grace.

Conclusion

- God wants to make your family a discipling center, first to disciple the little non-believers He has entrusted to your care, and second to touch the community around you.
- Understanding the stages of child growth and development—intellectually, emotionally, socially and spiritually—can open our eyes to opportunities for spiritual nurture which otherwise might be missed. In this way we cooperate with Jesus as He draws our children to Himself as their Savior and Friend.
- The Good News is: His energy is always fresh, His love constant, His persistence assured. He will, short of violating persistent, deliberate, ultimate choice, save our children!

Seminar Illumination

1. A pastor tells of a couple who enrolled three years in a row for the church's annual parenting seminar. As they walked in for the third time, the pastor commented in jest, "What are you doing here? You already know everything I know!" Their response was profound. "Oh, they said, you've got it all wrong. The first year we found help for ourselves. The second year we found help for our marriage. We are finally here for the kids!" They had discovered by personal experience what Moses was talking about. Before we can nurture our children spiritually, the Good News must seep deep into our own hearts.

2. [The] Spirit loves to address the children and discover to them the treasures and beauties of the Word (*Child Guidance*, pp. 495, 496).

Angels will be your strong helpers (*Child Guidance*, pp. 548).

You may be evangelists in the home, ministers of grace to your children (*Child Guidance*, p. 479).

3. A father of an eighteen-month-old boy told a parenting class of the stress he and his wife were experiencing with a fussing baby who clung to his knees and would give him and his wife no peace. He jested that, if he could find the receipt, they would take this one back! The teacher suggested that the parents take a few minutes to get down on hands and knees and observe the world from their baby's perspective. At the next class the father reported, "It was amazing. There's nothing down there but bare walls and legs, and Tommy's too young to be interested in those!" The parents decided to decorate the walls in their family room especially for Tommy. To a height of about eighteen inches from the floor, they hung all manner of interesting things of every imaginable color and texture to be fingered, rattled, pulled, tasted, etc. The father later reported that they had scarcely heard from the child all week. Obviously much of this particular child's restlessness was rooted in the need for a more stimulating environment.

4. One kindergarten child offered the following recipe for chocolate chip cookies (Clark, 1975):
6 chocolate chips (Think now. How many chips are there in each cookie?)
a lot of dough
a little bit of milk and water
Mix. Make into little circles and put on pan. Bake at 50 degrees for six hours. (Think again how long the wait seems to a child looking forward to a cookie!)
Take out and eat!
Serves 100 people.

5. A man was working on his lawn and garden one morning when the two little neighbor girls wandered over. They stood and watched for a long time before one of them asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm spreading fertilizer," the man answered.

"What are you doing that for?" they retorted.

The man loved children and wanted to answer their questions, but wondered how to explain fertilizer to a child. "Well, I'm giving the grass something to eat," he finally ventured. But the girls' curiosity was not easily put to rest.

"Mmmm, how does grass eat? Where's its mouth?"

"Well, its mouth is in its roots. I guess you could say that it eats through its toes."

They pondered this for awhile. Then, assured that the man would not belittle them for asking, more questions came. "How do you know it likes that stuff? How can you tell when it's full?" And on and on. Such is the nature of how children learn.

6. A Sabbath School Cradle Roll teacher was explaining heaven to her class. She was talking about heaven being a fun place because you can enjoy being with Jesus and your family and others that love you. But she took great care to explain that mommies and daddies will be there—if they choose to be. It was a subtle point largely lost on the children at that age, but her careful explanation will provide a basis upon which other teachers can later build without having to first tear down part of her construction.

7. A preschooler's mother resisted the desire to simply lay out the clothing she wanted her daughter to wear in the morning. Instead, she allowed her to make a guided choice. Together they talked about what day it was (a weekday, not Sabbath), what the weather was like (hot, not cold), and what she would be doing that day (playing outside with friends). The mother then sent her to her closet to select an outfit. When she returned with her favorite Sabbath dress, they discussed why that was not the best choice. Then, the little girl was sent back to choose again. This time she came with a play dress and a sweater. The mother affirmed the appropriateness of her daughter's choices, but pointed out that the little girl might get too hot with a sweater on. She agreed, however, that the little girl could wear it until she wanted to take it off. Thus the mother helped her child learn the process of making a good choice, while expressing confidence in her daughter's ability to make good choices.

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Agree-Disagree

Invite participants to express their opinions on the following statements. Designate one side of the room as the “agree” side, the opposite side as the “disagree” side. If they agree with the statement as it is read, participants are asked to go to the “agree” side of the room; if they disagree, they are asked to move to the “disagree” side. Inform participants in advance that these statements are designed to “make them miserable” in the sense that the statements intentionally contain some ambiguities. There are not necessarily “right” and “wrong” responses. The statements are just to get the group thinking.

1. Becoming a Christian is a family affair.
2. A child is never too young to understand about God.
3. Success or failure as Adventist parents can be measured by whether or not our children choose to be members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church when they are grown.
4. A child’s spiritual development does not progress as predictably through stages as physical, intellectual and emotional development does.
5. The programs for children provided by the church and the school are support ministries to the family in the spiritual nurture of children.
6. Memorization of Scripture is very important in childhood, whether or not the child understands the meaning of what he or she is learning.
7. The leaders in the children’s divisions hold the most significant leadership positions in the local church.
8. The best choice for the education of children is always a Christian school.

The Good News

Is. 43:1-7

Is. 49:25

Is. 53:3-5

Mark 10:13-16

John 3:16

Rom. 5:1-21

Rom. 8:1-3

1 Cor. 1:30

2 Cor. 5:17-21

Eph. 1:13-14

Eph. 2:4-6

Col. 1:15-23

Heb. 10:14

1 Pet. 1:3-12

2 Pet. 3:9

1 John 4:9, 10

The Essence of the Good News

God had a plan to save us from the beginning (Gen. 3:15). As children of Adam, we were all doomed to die, before we were even born (Rom. 5:12-14). But God saved us by putting the whole human race “in Christ” (1 Cor. 1:30), similar to the way the whole human race was created and fell into sin “in Adam” (Acts 17:25, 26; Rom. 5:18, 19). In Christ we are reconciled to God (Is. 53:3-5; Rom. 5:9-11; Col. 1:15-23; 2 Cor. 5:17-19, 21) and seated even now in heavenly places (Eph. 1:3-14; 2:4-6). In Him we are complete (Col. 2:10), perfect from God’s perspective (Rom. 5:1, 2; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 10:14). Because we are in Christ, no one stands condemned by the law (Rom. 8:1-3).

God calls us to respond by living lives worthy of His marvelous gift to us in Christ (Rom. 6:1-3, 11-14; 12:1, 2; Eph. 4:22-5:10; Col. 3:1-10). The Scripture anticipates a process of spiritual growth in believers toward mature faith, by the power of His Spirit (1 Cor. 3:1, 2; 13:11; 14:20; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:11-15; 2 Pet. 3:18). But we are safe all the while because we are not saved by our own works; we are saved by faith in Christ (Eph. 2:8). He alone is our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9). Don’t miss how good the news is! We are safe and our children are safe in Christ (Is. 49:25). While Scripture clearly calls the believer to turn from sin, to grow in our understanding of truth, and to stretch toward becoming in reality in our personal lives all that God has declared us to be in Christ, our salvation does not depend upon our growth. The growth to which God calls us is always in response to His marvelous grace.

God put us in Christ while we were still powerless, sinners, God’s enemies, dead in sin (Rom. 5:6-10; Eph. 2:5) because He loves us and our children (Is. 43:1-7; Mark 10:13-16; John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:9, 10) and does not want anyone to die but for all to be saved (2 Peter 3:9). A person can only be lost if he or she deliberately, persistently, ultimately refuses the benefits of God’s saving act, for there is no salvation apart from Christ (Mark 1:15, 16; John 3:18, 36; Acts 4:12; Heb. 2:1,2; 10:26, 35-39). If we insist on rejecting Him, God will respect our choice. He will not force anyone to accept His gracious gift in Christ, but will reluctantly let us go (Hos. 11:1-8; Matt. 23:37). But God is long-suffering and patient and does not let anyone go easily (Num. 14:18; Ps. 86:15)! Certainly not one of His beloved children (Mark 10:13-16). Now that’s GOOD NEWS!

The Power of Encouragement

by Bernie and Karen Holford, Family Ministries Directors, South England Conference
with Karen Flowers

Theme

People and families need encouragement. God's grace is a mighty fountain of encouragement meant to be shared. Christians are chosen and privileged to pass it on wherever their lives touch the lives of others.

Setting

The following seminar is adaptable for adults or for use as a multigenerational experience in a variety of settings. It is suitable for a church retreat, a family camp, a Sabbath afternoon presentation, a Family Enrichment Seminar, etc. **Presentation Helps** are provided for the leader(s) and group exercises and other handouts are found at the end of the materials.

Objectives

- To explore the biblical concept of encouragement.
- To apply the biblical concept of encouragement in practical ways to the family and church setting.
- To experience the power of encouragement personally in the seminar setting.

Introduction

In the pages of the New Testament there's a story recorded of a man whose name was Encouragement. That wasn't his real name. His real name was Joseph. He was *given* the name Encouragement by the disciples.

Our first glimpse of this man comes in Acts 4, that chapter which speaks so joyfully of the unity, the sharing, the common life of the early church. Barnabas is a man who knows the joy the Good News ignites in the heart. Life is filled with hustle, bustle and stress for Barnabas as one of the elite estate owners on the emerald isle of Cyprus. Multiplying and protecting his investments, combined with the usual round of social obligations required of the wealthy, occupies his every faculty. Then he meets Jesus, and everything is changed.

Material wealth is no longer important. The Bible says that Barnabas is now absorbed with one desire—to spread the Good News about Jesus and strengthen His church. With no more than a passing thought, he puts his choice real estate up for sale. And when it is sold, he brings the large sum as an offering. What an encouragement to a fledgling church, scarcely recovered from the dramatic closing scenes of Jesus' ministry on earth, and now facing desperate financial straits and imminent persecution.

In the next glimpse of Barnabas which Scripture provides, we witness the immediate aftermath of Saul's dazzling conversion on the road to Damascus. After the visit from Ananias, Saul preaches with astonishingly convincing arguments that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. Immediately the Jews are stirred to plot his death. After a harrowing escape over the city wall in a basket, Saul seeks refuge with the brethren in Jerusalem. But open arms do not await him! The disciples are confused and frightened. They will have nothing to do with this "former" tormenter of Christians. You can imagine their conversations among

themselves. “Slim chance the likes of him could really change! We can’t be too cautious. What if this is a clever ploy to attack the church from the inside!”

Then Barnabas reappears—Barnabas, the kind, perceptive man who possesses the rare gift of seeing the best in others. Barnabas, the one who is always eager to minimize faults, quick to recognize potential, confident of the changing power of an encounter with Jesus. It is Barnabas who brings Saul to the brethren. He does not hesitate to hazard his own good name and reputation on this risky newcomer to the faith. By expressing confidence and trust in Saul, Barnabas opens the way for his acceptance at Headquarters.

In Acts 11 we find Barnabas being sent to reinforce pioneering efforts in the city of Antioch. Generous-hearted, good-natured, sympathetic, full of faith and the Holy Spirit are the words the Bible uses to describe him. Just the kind of person who could take a small group of scattered believers and draw them together into a strong body. Upon arrival, Barnabas finds a real opportunity to make a name for himself. Conditions were ripe for harvest. The numbers would be impressive on his report to Headquarters.

But Barnabas is not concerned with boosting his own reputation. He has been freed by Christ from any concern over who gets the credit. Quickly he surveys the situation. Then he goes to find Saul to bring him to Antioch where he perceives their combined strengths and efforts will be most fruitful for God. Is it any wonder that under such leadership an evangelistic explosion ensues, and there is so much talk of it around town that the popular name for the believers sticks and begins to spread? For the Bible says they were first called Christians in Antioch.

As the threads of the story pick up again, Paul and Barnabas have completed their work in Antioch and have been requested to carry relief money from the Christians there to the believers in Jerusalem now under heavy persecution. James has been killed by the sword and Peter is in prison, slated for execution.

The third character in this drama enters the picture on the night of Peter’s release from prison by the angel. Finding himself alone on the dark streets of Jerusalem, Peter hastens to the home of Mary, a prominent Christian woman in Jerusalem, sister of Barnabas, and mother of John Mark. In the excitement of the next few days, with the church leaders clustered in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas are specially set aside as missionaries and announce their plans for a missionary journey. Barnabas may even have been staying in Mary’s home, and his contagious enthusiasm for sharing the Good News infects the young lad John Mark, who now wants more than anything to join them on their journey.

The Bible is quite sketchy here, but in the tale which unfolds, Barnabas’ gifts stand in stark contrast to Paul’s. It seems that after some good experiences on the Isle of Cyprus, the stresses and strains of missionary work on the front lines are too much for John Mark. Inexperienced and discouraged, he just quits and goes home. This did not set well with Paul. In fact, one of the most intense conflicts recorded in the Book of Acts centers around the opening scenes of Paul’s second missionary journey. Paul suggests to Barnabas that they revisit the cities where they have preached to see how their converts are doing. Barnabas is enthusiastic and wants to take John Mark again.

Barnabas has watched John Mark mature since their first trip. He sees potential in this young man for strong leadership in the church long after men like Paul and he have passed off the scene. With a heart full of understanding and forgiveness, and knowing the value of experience with a seasoned missionary,

Barnabas is ready to give John Mark another chance. The feelings run hot between Barnabas and Paul. Ultimately Paul, unable to forgive and forget, unable to recognize and affirm growth in John Mark, chooses another companion and departs.

And Barnabas? Barnabas unobtrusively moves out of Scripture's limelight as partner to the dynamic evangelist Paul and makes his way back to Cyprus with the young John Mark. Notice how he first takes Mark back to the place where experiences had been good before. There courage and confidence can be built for the challenges which lay ahead. In this gracious, unselfish gesture, Barnabas opens the way for Mark to become the first gospel writer, a powerful leader in the church, a close friend to Peter, and ultimately, even a respected friend to Paul. It's not hard to understand why the disciples changed his name from Joseph to Barnabas—which means Encouragement!

[The story of Barnabas is drawn from Acts 4:36; 9:26-27; 11:22-26; 12:25; 13:5-6, 13; 15:37-39.]

[Group Exercise. Divide into groups of four and allow a few minutes for group members who wish to share to tell stories of people in their lives like Barnabas who have been sources of great encouragement. When the large group reconvenes, ask for a couple of volunteers to share their stories with the entire group.]

A Definition

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines “encouragement” in the sense we are talking about today as “giving courage to” or “to stimulate by help or reward.” The Hebrew word for encouragement, *chazaq*, also means “to strengthen.”

A Word On Encouragement From Thessalonica

[Distribute Handout # 1.] Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-21 responsively.

[Exercise. Divide into small groups and give each group one of the Encouragement Worksheets (See #s 1-4) and the discussion questions which accompany them. If the group is large, you may wish to have several copies of each discussion sheet so that more than one group can be working on the same text and questions. Allow approximately 15 minutes for discussion. Encourage each group to keep some notes of their ideas. Bring the discussion to a close while interest is still high rather than waiting for enthusiasm to fade. Take time for each group to share some of their best ideas.]

Ellen White on Encouragement

Ellen White also highlights the importance of encouragement in the family and in the church family. [Distribute Handout # 2 and invite several members of the group to read the selected Ellen White quotations on encouragement. You may wish to suggest that families cut these quotes apart and place them around the house—on the refrigerator, on a mirror, etc. as reminders.]

A Warning Against Criticism

Notice the devastating effect when encouragement is absent:

Self will ever cherish a high estimate of self. As men lose their first love, they do not keep the commandments of God, and then they begin to criticize one another. This spirit will constantly be striving for the mastery to the close of time. Satan is seeking to foster it in order that the brethren in their ignorance may seek to devour one another. God is not glorified but greatly

dishonored; the Spirit of God is grieved. Satan exults, because he knows that if he can set brother to watch brother in the church and in the ministry some will be so disheartened and discouraged as to leave their posts of duty. This is not the work of the Holy Spirit; a power from beneath is working in the chambers of the mind and in the soul temple to place his attributes where the attributes of Christ should be (*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 189).

Two Poignant Illustrations

The story is told of an old gentleman who once came to visit the great painter Rosetti. He wanted to show him some sketches and drawings to see if they were of any artistic value. Rosetti had to be honest, but as gently as possible he told the old man that there was no real evidence of talent in the sketches. The old man was obviously disappointed, but understanding.

As he picked up to leave, he turned and asked Rosetti if he had another moment to look at some drawings by a young art student. Rosetti agreed. As he looked through the drawings, Rosetti's face lit up. This was talent! "Who is this young man?" he asked. "He should be given every opportunity to develop his skills and all the encouragement possible toward a career in art!" At these words, the old man became deeply emotional. "Is this young artist your son?" Rosetti inquired.

"No," said the old man. "These are my drawings, forty years ago. If only I could have heard your words of encouragement then. The other drawings you have just seen are the work of an old man who became discouraged and gave up too soon."

But consider another story.

Young Benjamin was left at home one day to babysit his little sister Sally. While his mother was out, he found some bottles of ink and pens and began to sketch Sally's portrait. He was so enthusiastic about what he was doing that he didn't notice the ink blots scattering around him. When his mother came home, ink had already begun to stain the floor, chairs and table.

[If Benjamin were your son, how would you feel like responding? Request responses from the group.]

Benjamin's mother took in the whole situation in one glance. Finally her eyes settled on the picture Benjamin had drawn. "Why, it's Sally!" she exclaimed with delight, and she bent down and kissed her young son.

In 1763, when Benjamin West was 25 years old, he was chosen to be King George III's history painter and went on to become one of the greatest artists of his day. When asked what had encouraged him to become a painter, he said, "It was my mother's kiss that day when I painted Sally's picture. Her encouragement did more than a rebuke could ever have done!"

Such is the awesome power of encouragement!

Conclusion

[**Exercise.** Stick a postcard-sized card on the back of every person in the group. Provide each person with a pen or pencil. Give individuals time to move through the group and write one-sentence encouragement notes and words of appreciation on the back of as many as they can. Ask everyone to

make sure that each person has at least six encouraging comments on their card. Take a moment for each person to read their encouragement card at the end.]

Offer your own words of appreciation to the group for their participation and support as you close.

References

White, E. G. (1923). *Testimonies to ministers and gospel workers*. Boise, ID. Pacific Press Publishing Association.

White, E. G. (1952). *The Adventist home*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.

Additional Group Exercises

Bible Study

Study John, chapters 14-17. Count the number and the ways in which Jesus encourages his friends during their last evening together, knowing they will be facing very hard times.

Wish Gifts

Give each person a piece of white typing paper and the name of another person in the group. Then let each person make a symbolic gift out of the paper to give to that person. The paper can be folded, torn, rolled, etc. to create a gift. Encourage the group to think of special needs or desires that they might wish to respond to with their gifts. For example, a young person headed off to college might like a “billfold full of dollars.” Or a person with family on another continent might like an “airplane.” Most anyone would like a “heart full of love.”

All in a Name

Have each person in the group write their first or last name down the side of a piece of paper. Pass the papers around the group, with each person filling in an encouraging thought or a word of appreciation beginning with one letter in a person’s name. When each letter in the name has been filled, pass the names back to their owners.

Encouragement Worksheet # 1

“And now, friends, we ask you to honor those leaders who work so hard for you, who have been given the responsibility of urging and guiding you in your obedience. Overwhelm them with appreciation and love.”

Discussion Questions:

1. How can we encourage the pastor of our church?
2. What can we do to make his or her job easier and more satisfying?
3. How can we *overwhelm* him or her with appreciation and love?
4. How can we extend these ideas to encourage the elders of our church and the other lay leaders?

Encouragement Worksheet # 2

“Get along among yourselves, each of you doing your part. Our counsel is that you warn the freeloaders to get a move on. Gently encourage the stragglers, and reach out for the exhausted, pulling them to their feet.”

Discussion Questions:

1. How can we encourage church members to share in the workload of the church so that no one or small group of persons is overburdened?
2. How can we reach out to the stragglers on the fringes of the church family? What encouragement can we offer that will draw them into fellowship and make them feel nurtured and cared for?
3. Which groups in our church may be feeling exhausted? What can we do to strengthen and encourage those who have a chronic illness or disability, young mothers, single parents, families with heavy workloads, the bereaved, persons who have suffered severe disappointments or who are going through difficult trials?
4. Is there a need for an Encouragement Department in our local church? If there was such a group, what could it do? How can those with a special gift for encouragement be encouraged to use their gift in the church?

Encouragement Worksheet # 3

“Be patient with each person, attentive to individual needs. And be careful that when you get on each other’s nerves you don’t snap at each other.”

Discussion Questions:

1. How can we become more attentive to the individual needs of others?
2. How can we find balance between our own needs, the needs of our families, and finding time to help others?
3. What can we do as a church to encourage members to form deeper bonds of friendship with one another, to be willing to extend ourselves to help one another, to build one another up rather than destroying each other with criticism?
4. What can we do as a church to try to heal the broken relationships in our congregation?

Encouragement Worksheet # 4

“Look for the best in each other, and always do your best to bring it out. Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens. This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live.”

Discussion Questions:

1. Think about the people in your church with whom you find it hardest to build friendships. Think about their best features, and then think how you can show personal appreciation for these qualities. Share some of your ideas.
2. How can we nurture a positive attitude within the church family?
3. How is it possible to have a positive attitude even when church leaders and members make decisions we find hard to accept?
4. What do you think it means to be cheerful no matter what?
5. How can prayer help us to be sources of encouragement to others?
6. What can we do to show our thanks more freely to those around us and encourage others as they have encouraged us?

A Word on Encouragement from Thessalonica

And now, friends, we ask you to honor those leaders who work so hard for you, who have been given the responsibility of urging and guiding you in your obedience. Overwhelm them with appreciation and love.

Get along among yourselves, each of you doing your part.

Our counsel is that you warn the freeloaders to get a move on. Gently encourage the stragglers, and reach out for the exhausted, pulling them to their feet.

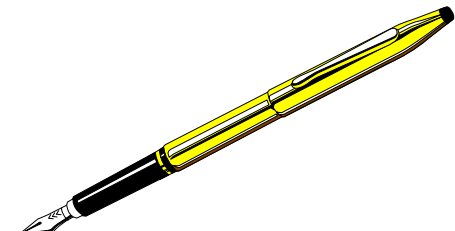
Be patient with each person, attentive to individual needs. And be careful that when you get on each other's nerves you don't snap at each other.

Look for the best in each other, and always do your best to bring it out.

Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens.

This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live.

(1 Thessalonians 5:12-21, *The Message*)



Ellen White on Encouragement

Parents should be much at home. By precept and example they should teach their children the love and the fear of God; teach them to be intelligent, social, affectionate; to cultivate habits of industry, economy, and self-denial. By giving their children love, sympathy, and encouragement at home, parents may provide for them a safe and welcome retreat from many of the world's temptations (*Adventist Home*, p. 185).

Young children love companionship and can seldom enjoy themselves alone. They yearn for sympathy and tenderness. That which they enjoy they think will please mother also, and it is natural for them to go to her with their little joys and sorrows. The mother should not wound their sensitive hearts by treating with indifference matters that, though trifling to her, are of great importance to them. Her sympathy and approval are precious. An approving glance, a word of encouragement and commendation, will be like sunshine in their hearts, often making the whole day happy (*Adventist Home*, p. 190).

Kind, cheerful, and encouraging words will prove more effective than the most healing medicines. These will bring courage to the heart of the desponding and discouraged, and the happiness and sunshine brought into the family by kind acts and encouraging words will repay the effort tenfold (*Adventist Home*, p. 217).

The husband should remember that much of the burden of training his children rests upon the mother, that she has much to do with molding their minds. This should call into exercise his tenderest feelings, and with care should he lighten her burdens. He should encourage her to lean upon his large affections and direct her mind to heaven, where there is strength and peace and a final rest for the weary. He should not come to his home with a clouded brow, but should with his presence bring sunlight into the family and should encourage his wife to look up and believe in God. Unitedly they can claim the promises of God and bring His rich blessing into the family (*Adventist Home*, pp. 217-218).

The Corner of His Eye

An Agape Feast and Communion Service Program Outline
by Karen and Ron Flowers

(Note to Pastor/Program Coordinator: The following program outline may be used as an all-church agape feast and communion service. In preparation, tables should be set and tastefully decorated. Twelve great passages of Scripture on the atonement are included in the materials provided, (Handout #1a, 1b — *Worthy Is the Lamb*). A copy should be placed at each place setting at the tables. These passages will be read at each table during the program. A printed program is also helpful which includes the words to the hymns as well as a simple outline of the program and the names of the participants.

For the agape feast, a simple meal of fruits and breads and drink placed at each table is sufficient. It is meaningful in symbol if you are able to provide a larger portion than usual of the bread and wine for the Lord's Supper. The larger portions symbolize the abundant salvation we have in Christ. You may wish to arrange the communion bread and wine in the center of each table as a centerpiece. A recipe is included for unleavened communion loaves of the type Jesus and the disciples likely shared.

Prelude

Welcome [Request that members not begin eating until they are given instructions about the meal and how it will be shared. You will be directing their participation as the program progresses.]

Opening Prayer

[The narrator reads Scene 1 to direct the thoughts of the participants to the scene in the Upper Room.]

Scene 1

The day had been full, like all days around Jesus. In their bone-tired weariness, the disciples collapsed around the table, scarcely revived by the prospect of lamb and bitter herbs. Two of them muttered to each other that they were the only ones who had a right to collapse and be waited on. Hadn't they spent the afternoon straining their eyes for a man carrying a pitcher of water—following him, making him understand, finishing all the preparations? And what right did Judas have to the seat on the Master's right hand? With all his talk about looking out for others . . . And wasn't it astounding the way James and John were looking after their interests! Who would have thought they would stoop to use their mother . . . ?

By now, everyone had arrived and settled down. The moments were becoming long and awkward as twelve pairs of eyes carefully avoided a pitcher, a basin, and a towel. An inner voice prompted each one to rise up and perform the courtesies of the missing servant. But pride riveted them to their places.

At first the movement in their midst seemed no more significant than the shuffling of aching limbs—until Jesus stood, wrapped the towel about His waist, and prepared the basin. In His action, the eyes of the disciples were opened, and they saw themselves in an altogether new light. Shame and humiliation filled

their hearts. Not one of them could lift his eyes to meet the eyes of Christ as one by one He knelt before them and tenderly took their feet in His hands.

It is in the shadow of this scene that we are invited to follow. To be washed, and then to wash. To know His forgiveness and cleansing, and then to pass on the good news we have found to others.

Foot washing [Give instructions for the foot washing and proceed at this time with the Ordinance of Humility. Quiet music in the background sets a nice atmosphere. When everyone has finished, instruct the group to return to their tables. Sing the hymn to focus everyone again.]

Hymn: “Lord Jesus I Long To Be Perfectly Whole” (SDA Hymnal, #318)

[When the hymn is finished, the narrator reads Scene 2.]

Scene 2

As Jesus made His way, towel and basin in hand, around the circle, a kaleidoscope of memories raced randomly through the mind of the disciple Peter.

The call of a stranger by the sea . . .

The mystery, the challenge, the adventure . . .

The sweet taste of new wine . . .

A funeral procession changed into a parade of praise . . .

A bulging net after a night of fruitless fishing . . .

The suffocating rush of sea water into his nostrils . . .

The touch of a strong hand, an understanding heart . . .

A little boy, five loaves and two fishes, and a hungry multitude . . .

A walking corpse emerging from the hillside . . .

A leper returning to say thanks . . .

Frantic struggling to save a sinking fishing craft . . .

Peace and calm at the sound of His voice . . .

Children waving palm branches, shouting Hosanna to the Son of David . . .

Hard sayings . . .

“You have seen how the Gentiles lord it over those under them, but it shall not be so among you . . .”

“Whoever would be a leader must become a servant . . .”

“Except you become as a little child, you shall not enter the kingdom . . .”

Hard questions . . .

“Peter, who do you say that I am?”

The growing certainty of his answer, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,” would break into full assurance in the heart of Peter in the next few hours and days. It is always in the moments when we are most aware of our need that faith is born.

For Peter, faith was born in a moment of caustic denial followed by a cock's call. It was in two striking moments of personal encounter with Jesus which followed that Peter knew for sure He was saved by grace. It was Jesus' look of compassion as Peter followed the cross in the crowd toward Calvary, and it was a private moment of forgiveness and reconciliation after the resurrection which secured his faith forever. Now Peter is ready for Jesus to speak directly of love and mission. **“Simon, Son of Jonah, do you love me? Feed my sheep.”**

It is in celebration of Christ's marvelous love that we have gathered for this agape meal, this feast of love. As you enjoy the food and the fellowship, talk together of this love that will not let you go.

Blessing for the Food

Agape Feast [Invite participants to enjoy the agape meal provided, but instruct them to wait to share the bread and the wine until given instructions for the Lord's Supper. As participants are finishing their meal, the narrator should read Scene 3.]

Scene 3

It was in the midst of the meal that the true Lamb of God, the One to whom Passover lambs for centuries had pointed, took bread. Reaching forward, He picked up yet another piece of daily living and created an eternal symbol. The Scripture says,

“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying, **‘Take and eat; this is my body.’**”

“Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, **‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’**”

Prayer for the Communion Emblems

Lord's Supper [Invite the group to share together the communion emblems. Note that they have been given the emblems in large measure to symbolize the abundant salvation we have in Christ. As they break bread and drink wine together, invite them to take turns reading the Bible passages in order (Handout #1a,

1b, *Worthy Is the Lamb*). Again, quiet music in the background creates a nice atmosphere. As it becomes apparent that the groups have finished their reading and sharing of the emblems, sing the hymn together.]

Hymn: “Look upon Jesus, Sinless Is He” (SDA Church Hymnal, #412)

Scene 4¹

Surely He needed to focus. Cement His gaze. Shove aside distractions. Marshal His energies.

In a matter of hours, His blood would congeal in the dust. In a matter of hours, His collapsing lungs would suck a final, ragged gasp. In a matter of hours He would strive in single combat with the lord of the abyss, the enemy He had prepared to face since the mists of Eden.

If Jerusalem was the finish line, then Jericho was the last stretch of the journey. The disciples and Jesus were less than twenty miles away from a collision that would jar the foundations of hell. The mighty gears of wrath and redemption were about to mesh. Earth trembled. The cosmos held its breath.

Such an odd time to talk to a little man in a tree.

He stopped His march toward the hinge of history to peer up into the leafy limbs of a sycamore tree. There, in the crook between two branches, feeling perhaps a little foolish, sat a bantam-sized tax agent.

“Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today,” is all He said.

Scripture reveals nothing at all about the reactions of His disciples toward this maddening distraction. Had their response been recorded, the Bible might have said something like, “Then His disciples looked at one another and said, ‘What next?’”

Would they ever understand His mind and methods? Hadn't he just taken them aside to warn that the end was near?

“We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him.”

Pretty ghastly stuff. Something you had to steel yourself to face. So why are we all craning our necks at some publican sitting in a tree? Now we're on the way to his place for tea?

They should have known. After three-and-a-half years, they should have known. When had they gone anywhere to do anything without those endless distractions? It was always something. A leper. Ten lepers. Some pushy mothers and a trainload of kids. A cripple on a stretcher coming down through the ceiling. Naked demoniacs running out of tombs. A Samaritan loser at the village well. What was one more tax collector dropping out of a tree?

The day must have been well-advanced by the time they finally put Jericho and Zacchaeus behind them. One more closed chapter in a perplexing biography. Had they reached the final page? What awaited them up that highway, through those hills? Kingdom or martyrdom? Realization of their dreams or the

business end of a Roman spear? At least now they could prepare themselves for the ordeal. Rivet their vision to the road ahead. Arm their spirits for whatever . . .

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Oh no! What now?

“Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Maybe He would ignore that pitiful, nasal voice from somewhere back in the crowd. Maybe this time He would press ahead and . . . but no, of course He wouldn't. He had already stopped. His eyes were already searching the side of the road.

“Call him,” Jesus said.

So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you.” Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him.

The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.”

“Go,” said Jesus, **“your faith has healed you.”** Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

People distractions. Jesus experienced them from the outset of His ministry. Yet no one was more goal-oriented. No one.

From the beginning, His eyes were locked on Calvary. His step never faltered. His purpose never varied. Thousands of years before Messiah even arrived, Isaiah caught the determined inflection in His voice: **“I have set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.”**

Like a flint. Resolution chiseled in stone.

The long shadow of the cross sent a chill across the brightest moments of His ministry. The frankincense of the magi foreshadowed a funeral. The fragrant nard poured on His feet foreshadowed a waiting grave.

It was ever before Him. A hill. The silhouette of a soldier holding a hammer. Death and worse than death. Hell and worse than hell. A yawning chasm between Him and the Father.

How could He do other than set His face like a flint? How could He not gather up His men and sweep them along to that terrible goal?

Yet somehow, it never seemed that way.

He always seemed to catch a glimpse of someone out of the corner of His eye.

On His way to help a dying child, He stopped to extend hope to a despairing woman who had merely touched the fringe of His cloak.

On His way to face the derision of a hastily convened court which was a mockery of justice, He sought eye contact with a friend who had just betrayed him.

On His way to Golgotha, staggering under the weight of His own cross, He paused to counsel several distraught women at the side of the road.

On His way to securing salvation for the sins of the world, enduring white-hot agonies of body and spirit, He caught a glimpse of His mother below the cross, and appointed a caretaker for her old age.

On His way out of this life, He caught a glimpse of a repentant felon on the cross next door, and issued an invitation to paradise.

For all His relentless sense of mission, there's something about our Lord's peripheral vision that merits a moment's pause.

A person with healthy eyesight can focus on objects directly ahead and still perceive movement on either side. That's peripheral vision. Ophthalmologists can test the functioning of this part of a person's vision and discern blind spots. The onset of diseases like glaucoma kill nerve fibers within the eye responsible for transmitting peripheral vision.

They have a name for that condition. It's called tunnel vision.

It's a funny thing about eye diseases. They come on a person so slowly you hardly even notice a narrowing field of vision. Before you have time to be concerned, you find yourself staring down a tunnel stretching out in front of your nose.

What are you seeing these days . . . out of the corner of your eye?

Any faces on the edge of the crowd? Any tentative hands touching the edge of your coat?

"Ah," you say. "I'm looking ahead. This is the critical decade—the dawn of a new millennium is just around the corner. I'm mission-driven. Task-oriented. Aimed on target. Pressing toward the mark. I've done my strategic planning in one-, five-, and twenty-year increments. I have a personal mission statement in my daily planner that breaks down into achievable, measurable, monthly objectives and daily priorities. Frankly, it doesn't allow for many distractions.

Fine. But now and then it wouldn't hurt to check in with the Great Physician for a vision test. The exam might turn up a blind spot or two.

. . . Maybe a child who's been trying awfully hard to get your attention—and has just about given up.

. . . Maybe an old lady in a downstairs flat who sits at the same window every morning as you hurry off to work.

. . . Maybe a co-worker who used to smile and laugh—but doesn't anymore.

. . . Maybe a neighbor who suffered a stroke last year and can't seem to take care of the weeds in her garden.

. . . Maybe a starving child who tugs at your skirts for a coin or stares up at you from a photograph on an ADRA appeal.

. . . Maybe a spouse who has been quietly, desperately sending you signals for weeks—but can't break through.

Distractions. Time-sapping distractions.

If you're bothered by such as these, you probably wouldn't have noticed Zacchaeus—out of sight, up a tree. Just a forgettable little man with a hungry heart.

Most likely you would have missed blind Bartimaeus—sitting on the shoulder of the Jerusalem expressway. Just one more victim of the enemy, trying to cope with the darkness.

What this pair had in common was coming into the peripheral vision of Jesus of Nazareth. The One who had every right to focus on a goal so huge time couldn't contain it. . . the One who had every right to ignore the broken men and women in the corner of His eye—but didn't.

Setting aside Heaven's cosmic agenda, He reached through their emptiness with a warm human hand.

Then again, maybe that *is* Heaven's agenda. And ours.

Hymn: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (SDA Hymnal, #'s 154 or 155)

Benediction

1. Adapted from Libby, L. (1990). The Corner of His Eye. *Discipleship Journal*, 56, 16-18. Used by permission.

Worthy Is the Lamb

1

Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"
"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.
"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"
Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."
Genesis 22:7, 8

2

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
Isaiah 53:5, 6

3

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.
John 3:16

4

Jesus said, "Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."
John 12:31, 32

5

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!
For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!
Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.
Romans 5:8-13

6

Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.
For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.
Romans 5:18, 19

7

God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:21

8

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”

He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

Galatians 3:13, 14

9

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

Ephesians 1:7

10

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

1 Peter 2:24

11

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love each other, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

1 John 4:11, 12

12

And they sang a new song:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,

because you were slain,

and with your blood you purchased men for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation.

You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.”

Revelation 5:9, 10

Recipe for Communion Bread Loaves

Mix together:

2 cups whole wheat flour (1 lb.)
1 cup water
2 tsp. salt
2 tsp. oil

Knead gently until you have a soft dough. Divide the dough into small balls about 1 1/4 inches (2.5-3 cm). (This will make a loaf for 2-4 persons. If larger loaves are desired, divide dough into larger portions.) Roll out the balls of dough to about 4-5 inches (10-12 cm) in diameter and 1/8 inch (3mm) thick. Preheat the oven to 500 degrees and place the loaves directly on the oven rack to bake. Bake 3-4 minutes, but watch carefully. The loaves will puff up a little, even though there is no leavening. Cool and store in a plastic bag until used. May be frozen.

God Is Love!

An Interactive Worship Program Resource for All Ages

by Bernie and Karen Holford, Family Ministries Directors, South England Conference

Theme

God loves us.

Setting

This is a service which can be used as an all-age family service in a church or camp setting, or as a Sabbath afternoon programme. It is designed to be used where there are children and parents present together, and includes several large and small group activities. Those present without families may be formed into friendship groups or “adopted” by the families who are present. The program can be adapted to suit your needs; you can choose which of the various parts to include.

Singing

(Use songs such as the following, or choose others on the theme of God’s love for us.)

El Shaddai

Father God I Wonder

Come On and Celebrate

I’m Accepted, I’m Forgiven

Shine Jesus Shine

Scripture - John 3:16

Several optional activities are offered here to give fresh perspectives on this bible verse.

- **Enacting the verse.** Body actions make learning bible verses fun and easy for children. (To lead groups in this activity, write the actions on a chalkboard or prepare overhead transparencies using the master copies of Overhead Transparency #1a, #1b *John 3:16 with Actions*.) Demonstrate the actions to the group, and then let the group practice the actions several times. Here are actions for each of the words in John 3:16:

For	Hold up 4 fingers.
God	Point upwards.
so	Use hands in a sewing motion.
loved	Hug body.
the World	Make huge circle with both arms.
that He	Point upwards.
gave	Move hands in a giving motion.
His	Point upwards.
one and only	Put up one finger.
Son	Clasp and swing arms in rocking motion.
that whoever	Point around group.
believes	Left hand on heart and right hand to forehead.
in Him	Point to right palm with left hand and left palm with right hand.
shall not	Shake head and finger at same time.

perish	Draw finger across throat.
but have	Move arms as if collecting something towards you.
eternal	Move both arms out sideways in two hill shapes, one nearer and one farther away.
life	Jump up in air and stretch out whole body vigorously.

- **Kids' verse mix.** Write the words of John 3:16 on separate pieces of white paper. Use squares, heart shapes, or cut the paper into miniature shapes of freshly-laundered white articles of clothing (Stress how Jesus has washed us clean by loving us so much that He died for us.). Hang a line across the front of the room where you are meeting, give each child a word and a clothespin, and let them hang them in the right order to make the verse. The words should be hung facing the congregation, and placed in the proper order for the congregation to read. If you have a small group, give each child more words, for a larger congregation, have several groups working at the same time. Let older children assist any younger children who wish to be involved.

- **Personalized John 3:16.** Use Handout #1 *John 3:16 Personalized*. Work together in groups. Provide each person with a copy of the personalized text worksheet and let them fill in the blanks with their own names. Read these to each other. Talk a few minutes about what it feels like to be loved by God. In groups made up of family members, a parent may read the child's text to their child, and the child (with help to read if necessary) can read the parent's text to the parent. An additional exercise that will encourage family bonding is to give each family group an extra worksheet and have them fill the blanks with their family name—"the Holford Family." Various family members can take turns reading the version that has been personalized for the family. Additional option: Decorate your bible verse and display it in a prominent place at home.

Prayer of Thanks That God Loves us

Singing — We Love God

(Use songs such as the following, or choose others that provide a response to Gods love for us.)

Abba Father
 The Greatest Thing In All My Life
 Father We Love You
 As the Deer
 In Moments Like These
 Praise Him on the Trumpet

Scripture - Psalm 103

Encourage heartfelt praising! The leader reads aloud the psalm. Everyone responds with "Praise God" each time the attributes of God are mentioned. The scripture text with response can be prepared as a handout (See Handout #2 *Psalm 103*).

Prayer of Thanks

- **Alphabet prayer.** Each group forms into a circle and members offer sentence prayers of praise to God with words that use the letters of their alphabet. The person who begins uses the first letter of the alphabet: "I praise You God because You are *Almighty*" (Almighty begins with the first letter of the English alphabet—A). The next uses B, "I praise You God because You are Beautiful (or Bountiful,

Blessed, etc.)” The prayer continues until the alphabet has been used. If someone is having difficulty, others can offer suggestions to help out. An alternate approach with more difficult parts of the alphabet might be: Q: “I praise You God because You *quiet* me” (*quench* my thirst, etc.); Y: “because You are *You*”; Z: “because You are *zealous*.” When the alphabet is finished, say “Amen” together.

- **Alphabet attributes of God.** Invite the children to come to the front and take turns suggesting the attributes of God using the alphabet. Write the suggestions on a chalkboard on an overhead transparency. Or, give everyone a sheet of paper with an alphabet printed down the margin and invite them to supply an attribute or characteristic of God for each letter. Discuss the lists together in groups as or as a whole. Tell what one of the attributes has meant to you personally or to your family. Invite someone to pray and thank God for this particular attribute.

Singing —We Love Others

(Use songs such as the following, or choose others that speak of loving others.)

A New Commandment I Give Unto You
 Bind Us Together Lord
 Let There Be Love Shared Among Us
 There’s a Quiet Understanding

Family or Friendship Group Activity

Provide paper and drawing materials and invite each participant to draw a self-portrait. Ask them to write their names under their drawings. Circulate the drawings among members of the family or friendship group, allowing time for each member of the group to write one positive attribute about the person next to their portrait. Return the drawings to their owners. A time of affirmation may follow, in which older ones in the groups read and affirm the attributes of the younger and vice-versa (parents to children and children to parents, etc.).

Sentence Prayers in Family or Friendship Groups

Invite each member of the family to pray a sentence prayer for each of the other members of his family which includes thanks for something special about that person. For example, “Thank you God for Mummy because she is . . . ;” “Thank You God for daddy; it is great when he plays football with me;” “Thank you God for _____ ; he’s (she’s) bigger than me and he helps me a lot,” etc.

Closing Song

Choose a lively and joyous song to close, perhaps one that has not been sung among those listed earlier.

John 3:16 with Actions

For	Hold up 4 fingers.
God	Point upwards.
so	Use hands in a sewing motion.
loved	Hug body.
the World	Make huge circle with both arms.
that He	Point upwards.
gave	Move hands in a giving motion.
His	Point upwards.
one and only	Put up one finger.
Son	Clasp and swing arms in rocking motion.
that whoever	Point around group .

believes	Left hand on heart and right hand to forehead.
in Him	Point to right palm with left hand and left palm with right hand.
shall not	Shake head and finger at same time.
perish	Draw finger across throat.
but have	Move arms as if collecting something towards you.
eternal	Move both arms out sideways in two hill shapes, one nearer and one farther away.
Life	Jump up in air and stretch out whole body vigorously.

For God so
loved _____ that
He gave His one and only Son,
that if _____ believes in Him
_____ shall not perish
but have eternal life.

John 3:16.

PSALM 103

Oh my soul, bless GOD. From head to toe, I'll bless his holy name! **[Praise Him!]**

Oh my Soul, bless GOD, don't forget a single blessing! **[Praise Him!]**

He forgives your sins—every one. **[Praise Him!]**

He heals your diseases—every one. **[Praise Him!]**

He redeems you from hell—saves your life! **[Praise Him!]**

He crowns you with love and mercy—a paradise crown. **[Praise Him!]**

He wraps you in goodness—beauty eternal. **[Praise Him!]**

He renews your youth—you're always young in his presence. **[Praise Him!]**

GOD makes everything come out right; he puts victims back on their feet. **[Praise Him!]**

He showed Moses how he went about his work, opened up his plans to all Israel. **[Praise Him!]**

GOD is sheer mercy and grace; not easily angered, he's rich in love. **[Praise Him!]**

He doesn't endlessly nag and scold, nor hold grudges forever. **[Praise Him!]**

He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve, nor pay us back in full for our wrongs. **[Praise Him!]**

As high as heaven is over the earth, so strong is his love to those who fear him. **[Praise Him!]**

And as far as sunrise is from sunset, he has separated us from our sins. **[Praise Him!]**

As parents feel for their children, GOD feels for those who fear him. **[Praise Him!]**

He knows us inside and out, keeps in mind that we're made of mud. **[Praise Him!]**

Men and women don't live very long; like wildflowers they spring up and blossom,

But a storm snuffs them out just as quickly, leaving nothing to show they were here.

GOD'S love, though, is ever and always, eternally present to all who fear him, **[Praise Him!]**

Making everything right for them and their children as they follow his Covenant ways

and remember to do whatever he said. **[Praise Him!]**

GOD has set his throne in heaven; he rules over us all. He's the King! **[Praise Him!]**

So bless GOD, you angels, ready and able to fly at his bidding,

quick to hear and do what he says. **[Praise Him!]**

Bless GOD, all you armies of angels, alert to respond to whatever he wills. **[Praise Him!]**

Bless GOD, all creatures, wherever you are—everything and everyone made by GOD. **[Praise Him!]**

And you, oh my soul, bless GOD! **[Praise Him!]**

— *The Message*

Bounteous Blessing in Christ

A Responsive Reading

Leader: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

People: Praise be to God.

Leader: For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

People: Praise be to God.

Leader: In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ. . . .

People: Praise be to God.

Leader: In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

People: Praise be to God.

Leader: And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

People: Praise be to God.

Leader: In him we were also chosen, . . . in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.

People: Praise be to God.

Leader: Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

People: Praise be to God.

Called by His Name

A Responsive Reading

Leader: But now, this is what the Lord says—

**People: He who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:**

*Leader: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name;
you are mine.*

**People: When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.**

*Leader: When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.*

**People: For I am the Lord, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;
I give Egypt for your ransom,
Cush and Seba in your stead.**

*Leader: Since you are precious and honored
in my sight, and because I love you,
I will give men in exchange for you,
and people in exchange for your life.*

**People: Do not be afraid, for I am with you;
I will bring your children from the
east and gather you from the west.
I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’
and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’**

*Leader: Bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the ends of the earth
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.*

Is. 43:1-7

O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing

A Responsive Reading

Leader: Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

People: O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King, the triumphs of His grace!

Leader: You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

People: Jesus! The name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease,
'Tis music in the sinners' ears, 'tis life, and health, and peace.

Leader: Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

People: He speaks, and listening to His voice, new life the dead receive;
The mournful, broken hearts rejoice; the humble poor, believe.

Leader: Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. . . . For what the law was powerless to do . . . God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

People: He breaks the power of canceled sin, He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean; His blood availed for me.

Leader: Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. . . .

People: Hear Him, ye deaf; His praise, ye dumb, your loosened tongues employ;
Ye blind, behold your Savior come; and leap, ye lame for joy!

Rom. 5:1-10; 8:1-3; Col. 1:19, 20; Eph. 2:4-8; Charles Wesley, *O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing*

Households in the Lord: Bringing the Gospel to Families

by *Karen and Ron Flowers*

Numerous household conversions are mentioned in the New Testament. The Jewish nobleman, who sought Jesus to heal his son, returned home to find him well. As a result, his whole household believed (John 4:46-53). Cornelius, who with “all his family were devout and God-fearing,” invited his relatives and close friends to hear the preaching of Peter. The Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message and they were baptized (Acts 10:2, 24, 44-48). Lydia responded to Paul’s Sabbath message by the river in Philippi and either then, or soon after, she and her household were baptized (Acts 16:11-15). There are others—the entire household of the synagogue ruler Crispus (Acts 18:8) and the households of Aristobulus (Rom. 16:10), Narcissus, whose household was said to be “in the Lord” (Rom. 16:11), and Onesiphorus (2 Tim. 4:19). The household of Stephanas, who were baptized by Paul (1 Cor. 1:16) and referred to as the first converts in Achaia (1 Cor. 16:15), have traditionally been thought to be the jailer’s household of Acts 16.

It was not uncommon in bible times, apparently, for evangelists to proclaim the gospel in household settings and for whole family groups to respond together. This can be explained in part, no doubt, by the importance which society as well as family members placed on the cohesiveness of the family unit. As we continue to search for the best way to communicate the gospel to families, it will be important to explore the place of “family” in our lives personally and to rediscover God’s design for the family. We believe there is good reason to strengthen our evangelistic commitment to discipling whole families for Christ.

Many have observed that family members are often set in opposition to one another when one person in a family is baptized alone. Over time, communication often lessens, thus reducing opportunities for discipling additional family members. The new believer often feels torn by the separation from family; even guilty for having in some way abandoned them. Changes in values and lifestyle as well as active participation in the program of the church may dramatically cut back on time and activities the family share. Negative attitudes toward the church may form among family members as a result which may become difficult barriers to discipling them for Christ and drawing them into the community of faith. There is a need to think again about our commitment to evangelizing whole families and to finding the best ways of sharing the Good News with entire households. And when we have done all we can and an individual steps out from their families in their commitment to Christ, we need to find better ways to support them and to help them maintain strong connections with their families. Warm relationships are our best hope for future ministry in their midst.

Heightening Awareness of Anti-family Influences

Throughout history, various attitudes and philosophies have militated against the basic human need for connectedness in marriage and family.

Elevation of virginity and celibacy. The early church fathers struck a major blow when they exalted virginity above marriage as a spiritual good. The pronouncement of Ambrose (340-397),

archbishop of Milan, is notable, “Marriage is the remedy for weakness; virginity is the glory of chastity. Marriage is not reproved; virginity is praised” (*De virginibus* 1, 6, 24 quoted in Dooley, 1948, p. 14). The Middle Ages were marked by a decline in the importance attributed to marriage and “a deep feeling of uncertainty among the faithful as to the meaning of marital partnership for Christians” (Scharffenorth, 1983, p. 14). This was due largely to the high esteem granted to celibacy for the clergy by the papacy and the institution of a number of church-imposed marriage bans for lay people.

Individualism. The rise of individualism in recent centuries in some societies has had an adverse effect on attitudes toward the family. Bellah (1985) notes that, in seventeenth-century England: a radical philosophical defense of individual rights emerged that owed little to either classical or biblical sources. . . . John Locke is the key figure and one enormously influential in America. The essence of the Lockean position is an almost ontological individualism. The individual is prior to society, which comes into existence only through the voluntary contract of individuals trying to maximize their own self-interest. (p. 143)

Individualism is not foreign to Adventism. An individualistic spirit has typically been “regarded as a desirable quality in an Adventist to the extent that it permitted him to swim against the social current as members inevitably have sometimes to do” (Pearson, 1990, p. 39). To be sure, most of us would not like to think that any such espousal of individualism has affected our value of family. However, we must remain open to the point made by Bellah (1985) that wherever the modern philosophy of individualism is found, some appreciation for the family as a group has been lost. Individualism does change our thinking about groups such as the family and eventually can alter our behavior toward them and within them. M. Scott Peck (1993) refers to individualism’s lack of group consciousness as

“the hole in the mind” and points to it as a contributor to the loss of civility in society. In his view, the route to recovery of group consciousness and to the cure of ills which plague society must involve a re-emphasis on the family as the basic group or system within which individuals live.

Scripture recognizes each individual as valuable, possessing a free will (Jer. 1:5; Eze. 18:20; Matt. 10:30, 31; Acts 2:39). The personal attention given by Jesus and the apostles to individuals demonstrates this (cf. Mark 3:14-19; 10:46-52; John 3:1; 4:7; 1, 2 Timothy; Titus; Philemon). Salvation must be proclaimed to everyone (Mark 16:15, 16) and must be individually received (Rom. 10:13, 17; Rev. 22:12). God, it has been said, has no grandchildren. Yet Scripture also affirms the value of being connected to others (1 Cor. 12), calls us to minister to one another (John 15:17; Rom. 15:14; Gal. 5:13; Eph. 4:32), and affirms the significance of families.

Adventists clearly face a challenge to hold in balance the best aspects of individualism on the one hand and a strong commitment to family on the other. While individualism can help to swing the pendulum back from the extremes of enmeshment, co-dependency, and loss of individual personhood in families, the family must be upheld and supported as an incomparable center for nurture, support, socialization and transmission of values across generations.

The hard sayings of Jesus. Some of the sayings of Jesus (Matt. 10:35-37; Luke 9:59, 60) have been used in ways which have minimized the importance of family ties and diminished the profound effects of individual decisions to forsake family when making a decision for Christ. David Garland (Garland and Pancoast, 1990) discusses the difficult sayings of Jesus regarding the family and concludes that Jesus did not hold a view of family that was subversive, nor did He see the family as a petty concern or an

impediment to commitment to God. Far from undercutting the valuable nurture, support and strength to be gained from membership in families, Jesus addressed the exclusive attitudes of those who trusted implicitly in biological kinship. He redefined family loyalties, putting them in perspective against the higher loyalty to God. He opened the way for service to God to be done, not only within the structure of the biological family, but also in the wider circle of the church which includes others who come from outside one's biological family. Regarding Matt. 10:35-37, Barclay (1975) offers an insightful comment that helps us to see that these verses can be understood in quite a different manner that does not minimize families. Jesus is announcing that He as the Messiah has come:

The Jews believed that one of the features of the Day of the Lord, the day when God would break into history, would be the division of families. The Rabbis said: "In the period when the Son of David shall come, a daughter will rise up against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." "The son despises his father, the daughter rebels against the mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man's enemies are they of his own household." *It is as if Jesus said, "The end you have always been waiting for has come; and the intervention of God in history is splitting homes and groups and families into two."* (Barclay, 1975. p. 393, emphasis supplied)

Finding balance. Certainly the strong bonds which bind families together must not be allowed to hinder anyone from making a full and complete commitment to God. Our ultimate allegiance is to the family of heaven. However, while the reality of a sinful world means that following the spiritual call of Jesus *may* require stepping apart from family, it is certainly in God's plan that every possible effort be made to bring our families together to the Savior. The church is

about its mission when it helps families build strong bonds of affection and loyalty that will help family members to better understand God's love and the plan of salvation.

Restoring the Significance of Families

Acknowledging the family as the primary social group. Scripture views the family as the basic unit of society. God recognized the fundamental human need for connectedness and belonging. The Creator did not leave human beings to survive alone in isolation. Family was God's original design (Gen. 2:18); it was He who put the lonely in families (Ps. 68:6). Those who know the joys of a loving family have experienced the wisdom in His plan. Through the family God intended to provide love, intimacy, belonging and many other basic human needs, such as the need for protection, nurture, support and socialization. God has not changed His mind about the importance of families.

- Many of Jesus' miracles affirmed and restored family relationships (Luke 7:12-15; Mark 5:22-42; John 2:1-10). He cared for His own mother (John 19:26, 27). He used family relationships in a positive way in His teaching (Matt. 7:11; 22:2; Luke 14:8). He related to God as a parent (Matt. 6:9; 7:21; John 17:1). He elevated marriage by using it as a figure of His relationship with His people (Mark 2:19, 20).
- Homes were the setting where many believers first heard the good news (Acts 5:42; 12:12).
- Paul and the apostles used family imagery to depict life in the church (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19; 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:5). As did Jesus, they uplifted marriage to represent Christ's relationship with the church (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:31, 32; Rev. 21:2, 9). It is clear through the instruction given believers in how to conduct their household relationships in Christian ways that they saw the gospel as strengthening family relationships (Eph. 5:2-6:9; Col. 3:15-4:1; 1 Pet. 2:18-3:7).

A church is about its mission when it devises every conceivable means of drawing every member of the family into fellowship. It is about its mission when it contributes in every way possible to strengthening family ties.

Recognizing the centrality of the family to fulfilling the gospel commission. Jesus said, “Go and make disciples” (Matt. 28:19). A disciple is someone who is discovering God’s truth and the principles of His kingdom and is growing in his or her ability to make these values a personal way of life (John 8:31). There is no influence greater than that of family in the development of a person’s values. The habits and patterns of behavior which are taught and modeled in families become ingrained in the lives of their members. For better or worse, it is against these habits and patterns that all others which are introduced from the outside are evaluated. For better or worse, making changes will require deliberate thought and action.

Jesus also marked disciples as people whose love for people is so unusual, it makes a deep impression on others (John 13:35). It is in the family that individuals learn first, for better or for worse, about relationships and about love. Families can either set the stage for family members to understand and experience God’s love, or they can make such understanding and experience a virtual impossibility but for a miracle of grace. Families also have the primary opportunity and responsibility for developing the capacity for self-giving love in their members, the kind of love which makes for winsome witness within the family and in the neighborhood. Thus it can be seen that the family is central to the fulfilling of the gospel commission. Dennis Guernsey writes:

If disciples are those who relate with their teacher in the context of a primary relationship, then the *capacity* to form primary relationships is necessary to the process of disciple making. Secondly, if

primary relationships consist of relationship skills that are generalized from one primary group to another, then the family is key in its significance because it is the place where those skills are learned well or learned poorly. And last of all, if the family is the social organization in which these skills are learned first, and thus most essentially, then the family becomes central to the process of disciple making. It is a place where disciplelike relational skills are learned, and it is a primary group in which disciple making takes place. (Guernsey, 1982, p. 11)

Harnessing family support. The following are examples of principles that typically operate in families. Understanding and working in harmony with these principles can make for more successful sharing of the good news with the whole family.

- *Family members typically form strong bonds of attachment and loyalty to one another.* God understands the human need to form such strong bonds. This need is in harmony with His creation plan (Matt. 15:4; Eph. 5:21-25; 6:1-4). Our need for love of family can help us understand the kind of creatures we are at the very core of our being—creatures made for relationships. Our desire for intimate relationships can also help to explain the “God-shaped vacuum” which the early church father Augustine described as universal to human experience. God sent His Son to help us to understand ourselves as we were created and to make possible our connection with the One who alone can fill our deepest desires for love and intimacy. Understanding this fundamental human need can work powerfully for us in disciplinmaking. We need family—earthly family and heavenly family. Relationships in one arena enhance relationships in the other. As we enter into a relationship of love and trust with Christ, our capacities for love and trust among ourselves grows. When we care

for and commit ourselves to each other, we understand more of God's love for us and demonstrate our love for Him (1 John 3:14, 19; 4:7-11; Matt. 25:34-40; Gal. 5:14).

- *Family members typically look to each other first for support and companionship.* Marriage and family relationships are primary sources for support and companionship (Deut. 1:31; Prov. 31:11, 28; S. of Songs 5:15; Mal. 2:14). Family members, who are aware of one another's strengths and struggles, are uniquely able to provide spiritual nurture and support for one another in living the Christian life (1 Thess. 5:11). The church harnesses the family's potential for discipling when it helps family members develop skills which enable family members to "in every way encourage each other in fighting the battles of life" (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 360).

- *Parents typically are anxious for the best for their children.* This parental desire to provide the best for their children is part of the natural script imprinted within human parents by God (Matt. 7:9-11; 1 Tim. 5:8). Providing for the total well-being of children includes their spiritual nurture (Eph. 6:4). Spiritual nurture is best provided to children through positive relationships in the family and the modeling and teaching of parents (Deut. 6:6-9). Discipling children for Christ begins with parents taking their own spirituality and commitment to God seriously (Deut. 6:4-5; cf. 2 Tim. 1:5). To empower parents for their task is the best way to cooperate with God in leading children to accept Him personally.

How much more effective would be our efforts to share the gospel if whole families could be disciplined together. How much better if ways could be found to elevate the significance of the family, to understand the relational principles at work in the family system, and to cooperate with these principles and build on them, rather than ignoring or working against them.

Toward Reconciliation in Families

In the work of sharing the gospel and helping people to receive the good news, we focus most often on reconciliation with God and forming a relationship with Him. Often, however, people cannot fully complete that task—sometimes they cannot even undertake it—until they have been reconciled with the people who are closest to them. Jesus acknowledged this reality when He said, “First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift [your worship of God]” (Matt. 5:24). Reconciliation within families, perhaps extending to several generations, constitutes an arena of evangelistic endeavor that is largely undeveloped. We believe, however, that it is crucial. The gospel must be brought as a healing balm for the real hurts and wounds in the family.

This kind of evangelism will require new approaches, new skills, and much patience with a process that is more complicated, but has the potential for great success as families come believer, instruction from the word of God, and a mighty act of family restoration brought forth her powerful confession of faith. The God of Elijah still blesses patient, persistent efforts to bring the Good News to households today.

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together in the Lord. It is conceivable that such efforts could result in far more households making decisions for Christ. It stands to reason also that the falling away that often occurs in circumstances in which one person has been garnered out of a family would be lessened, for the family as a whole would be together as a source of support.

Conclusion

In the ancient story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:7-24), the prophet lived in the woman's home for some time during the drought in Israel. Daily we can imagine he shared the word of God with her and when her son died, he prayed for a miracle for the boy. When the resurrection miracle restored the child's life, Elijah presented him to the despairing mother. Her response is highly significant. “Now I know that you are a man of God,” she exclaimed, “and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth” (vs. 24). Exposure to the living witness of a

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How Grace Influences the Parent-Child Relationship

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In Ephesians 6, the apostle Paul directs our attention to the relationship between parents and children. He tells us that when children seek to honour and respect their parents by cooperating with them, they will contribute to the peace and harmony of the family and the community of faith and enjoy prosperity and well-being (6:1). Parents are instructed not to “exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (6:4). Other translations and paraphrases provide additional insights:

“Do not provoke your children to anger”
(*Revised Standard Version*).

“Don’t keep on scolding and nagging your children, making them angry and resentful. Rather, bring them up with loving discipline the Lord himself approves, with suggestions and godly advice” (*The Living Bible*).

“Don’t exasperate your children by coming down hard on them. Take them by the hand and lead them in the way of the Master” (*The Message*). In Colossians 3:21, Paul repeats this same advice, “Do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged,” that is, “you’ll crush their spirits” (*The Message*).

Research shows that the quality of the parent/child relationship is the most significant factor in determining the outcome of parenting. If parents have a warm, supportive attitude toward their children, in their teens these children are more likely to:

- Adopt the values of their parents by being committed to and supportive of the same religious faith.

- Embrace a view of God as being a warm, caring, loving, powerful person, relevant to their own lifestyle and faith journey.
- Acquire positive mental health, evidenced by high self esteem, positive ego identity, and a sense of autonomy and growing independence.
- Develop their own religious faith experience by feeling free to internalize their own values without a need to conform to the wishes of or seek the approval of their parents.

The relationship between a parent and child does have a powerful effect on the future directions of a child's life. The quality of the relationship can either reinforce in children a sense of woundedness and moral shame, or it can encourage them to grow beyond their sense of brokenness. Affirming messages of love and support that show that they are valuable, capable and worthwhile foster such growth and development in children and teenagers.

Parents become “ministers of grace to their children” (*Child Guidance*, p. 479) when they demonstrate love to them. This demonstration of love takes place as parents interact with their children in several ways.

Provide care and understanding.

Performance-based parenting tends to produce young people who are anxious and unsure of themselves. When they merely conform to the high expectations of parents, they often do not

develop the self-confidence to act with independent action and a sense of autonomy. It is this rigid overprotective attitude that Paul seems to have clearly in mind in Eph. 6:4 when he says, “don’t exasperate them,” “don’t come down too hard and crush their spirit.” Sensitive, caring parents show that they understand the needs of the child, by connecting with them and seeking to develop their uniqueness (compare Prov. 22:6).

In *Overcoming Anxiety* (1989), Archibald Hart suggests that parents who are “perfect parents” can be dangerous to the life and health of children:

- They never make mistakes, so they never model humility and repentance.
- They never make wrong decisions, so they don’t teach children how to be flexible and change what they are doing if it doesn’t work.
- They never lose their temper, so they create tremendous guilt in their children when the children feel angry.
- They never make mistakes, so their children have impossible standards to live up to.
- They always know what is right, so children don’t get to discuss or debate the rights and wrongs of things. There is never any dialogue in the home.
- They always correct children for what they have done wrong, so the children never enjoy that marvelous feeling that they have gotten away with something!
- They always remember past mistakes and hold them up to their children to see, so the children will strive to be perfect themselves.

Children need to know that they are loved unconditionally. They need to know that they do not have to earn their parents love, perform to gain their attention, or strive to acquire their approval.

Allow children to openly express their feelings. A child’s feelings should not be

suppressed, ignored or discounted. By refusing to allow them to express their anger we can frustrate and discourage our children’s development. Effective communication depends very much on the mutual self-disclosure of thoughts and feelings. Paul indicates that the way of grace is not to provoke anger or discouragement by being provocative or over protective, but rather to encourage and disciple children through the process of open, honest communication. Even though it can be difficult to tolerate a child’s expression of anger, by listening to the needs of a child we can connect with them and affirm how they feel, giving them the freedom to own their own experience and explore ways to resolve negative feelings that aren’t helpful or appropriate. It is important to be available regularly to talk with your child and share with him or her your ideas and feelings about life and God.

Set appropriate boundaries. Paul recommends that we “bring them up with loving discipline, suggestions and Godly advice” (*The Living Bible*). There is a gentle, caring spirit implied in these words. This doesn’t sound like the harsh action of some domineering, authoritarian disciplinarian. Every young person needs help to establish and maintain appropriate boundaries. The enforcement of reasonable consequences for his or her actions when boundaries have been violated enables healthy boundary development. By encouraging young people to live with certain limits or boundaries, we teach them responsibility and help them to foster the development of autonomy.

Provide spiritual leadership. “Bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). Parents are role models for their children, and as such can be effective in the process of affirming and transmitting their beliefs and values into the life and spiritual experience of their children. Recent *Valuegenesis* studies indicate that parents who spend time talking with their children about their faith (especially fathers)

and engaging together with them in family worship, tend to do much better at passing on their values to their children than those parents who omit these activities from daily family life.

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The Difficult Sayings of Jesus Regarding the Family

By David E. Garland

One writer on the family recalls the shock when as a child he first came across these texts of Jesus: “The tone is so fierce, so unyielding” (Mount 1982, 15). We will first identify these disturbing sayings and then briefly note some negative attitudes toward the family in the early church. Then we will examine Jesus’ sayings more carefully to understand better Jesus’ view of the family.

The Gospel of Mark reports that when Jesus’ family heard that the story going around the countryside was that he was “beside himself,” they went out to try to bring him home (Mark 3:21). Jesus, being informed that his mother and brothers were outside, looked at the crowd around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Mark 3:34-35; compare Matt. 12:46-50 and Luke 8:19-21). Jesus’ mother is left with her other sons outside the circle of Jesus’ intimates.

Similar teaching can be found in Luke 11:27-28. Jesus had been addressing the crowds when a woman exuberantly burst forth with lyrical praise, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!” Jesus responded to this outburst, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”

The Gospels record two other less than affectionate encounters of Jesus with his mother as he responded to her with seeming exasperation when she protested something he had done or implored him to do something. When Jesus was still a youth, he failed to return with the caravan to Galilee after his family had made a pilgrimage to

the temple in Jerusalem. A desperate mother chastised him when she found him: “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously.” Jesus replied, “How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:48-49). The implication is clear that he must serve a greater Father than his earthly father.

The other occasion is found in John’s Gospel. Jesus and his disciples arrived for a wedding celebration at Cana. When the host ran out of wine, Jesus’ mother attempted to intercede by telling Jesus they had no wine. Jesus responded “O woman, what have you to do with me?” (John 2:4). While there is no lack of affection or disrespect in calling his mother “Woman” as might seem to be the case, Jesus’ answer does imply that he and his mother are on completely different wave-lengths. She was concerned about the world of mundane amusement, a wedding party; Jesus was concerned about his vocational destiny (“My hour has not yet come”). The two are worlds apart.

Jesus also had some rather startling things to say regarding the families of others. When Jesus called one to follow him, the would-be disciple replied, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” It seems a reasonable request; but Jesus responded, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:59-60; compare Matt 8:21-22). To another who offered to follow him after he had first said farewell to his family, Jesus said, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:61-62).

At another time, Jesus warned his disciples that he did not come to bring peace but a sword:

For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it (Matt. 10:35-39; compare Luke 12:51-53).

In Luke 14:26, Jesus told the great multitudes that accompanied him, "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." We are hardly surprised at the report in the Fourth Gospel that many disciples drew back and no longer went around with him (John 6:66); the cost was too high, if not totally unreasonable. But apparently some took Jesus at his word and became loyal disciples. Peter informed Jesus, "Lo, we have left our homes and followed you." Jesus attempted to reassure him by saying, "There is no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life" (Luke 18:29-30; compare Matt 19:27-29; Mark 10:28-30).

These texts are hardly prized as great ones for Mother's Day sermons or Family *Enrichment Sunday*; they do not even seem to be very helpful texts on which to build a biblical view of the family. In fact, many have considered Jesus' views as subversive to family life. Ieuan Ellis (1985) cited the view of the noted nineteenth-century *Life of Christ* by Ernest Renan wherein Renan asserted that Jesus' "cared little for the relations of kinship." They were rather petty loyalties and a hindrance. In what he describes as a "bold revolt against nature," Renan claimed that Jesus trampled "under foot

everything that is human, blood, love, and country" (Renan 1897, 97-98).

Developments in the Early Church

In the development of early Christianity, various groups arose who discredited marriage and family ties. Some of these sayings of Jesus must have been very congenial to those groups opposing marriage, if the sayings were not in fact responsible for spawning antimarriage attitudes. From Paul's reactions (see 1 Corinthians 7) to misconceptions we can see that aberrant views concerning marriage arose early. When one reads between the lines and tries to establish what the opponents argued from Paul's counter arguments, it seems that some at Corinth considered sexuality and marriage hindrances to salvation. They therefore dissuaded the un-married from marrying and encouraged sexual abstinence for married partners. Apparently, they believed that sexuality defiled one in some way and that renunciation of it would elevate the Christian to a higher spiritual plateau. Celibacy was a badge of an exalted spiritual state. Jesus himself said:

The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die any more, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection (Luke 20:34-36).

This kind of saying, if separated from its immediate context, could have easily and erroneously fueled an ascetic view that opposed nuclear family relationships. That would be particularly true if some believed, as seems to have been the case in Corinth, that they were already on the level of angels.

One finds other evidence in the New Testament that a negative attitude toward the family seems to have been a problem in the early church. Some apparently forbade marriage (1 Tim. 4:1-3). The

fact that the writer of Hebrews felt obligated to enjoin that marriage should be held in honor by all (Heb. 13:4) suggests that some held it in dishonor. That the writer of the Pastoral Epistles needs to affirm the goodness of childbearing—“a woman is saved through bearing children” (1 Tim. 2:15); “I would have younger widows marry, bear children, rule their households” (1 Tim. 5:14)—indicates that some must have disparaged this role for women.

In fact, that is exactly the attitude that is found in New Testament apocryphal works such as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the *Acts of Thomas*, the *Acts of Peter*, and the *Acts of Andrew*. These works give the impression that the central teaching of Christianity is that virginity is the supreme good. In these stories, a Christian heroine typically renounces marriage and/or family responsibilities, including caring for an infant, to obey what she considers to be a higher calling. We also find in the second century that the Marcionites would baptize only virgins or married partners who vowed sexual abstinence, and some Christians considered celibacy obligatory for all.

This perspective was later judged heretical and prompted reactions from later church fathers. For example, Clement of Alexandria interpreted the saying in Matthew 18:20, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them,” to mean that the two or three are husband, wife and child because the husband and wife are joined by God (*Stromateis* 3:10). The only reason that he would adopt such an unlikely interpretation of this saying is because he was countering those who devalued the family.

The Sayings of Jesus Reconsidered

An antifamily current has been present in church history; at times, it has been the mainstream. And one can see how it might have developed from the teaching of Jesus. Rather than choose the bits from the Bible to suit the case for a positive view of the family, the hard sayings of Jesus need to be explored in greater depth to see what his view of the family was.

“Leave the Dead to Bury the Dead”

One can hardly conceive of a more valid excuse to postpone following Jesus than the disciple’s request to bury one’s father. This was particularly the case in the time of Jesus. For a Jew, burying a parent took precedence over all other duties and was considered a chief responsibility of a son (see Gen. 49:29; 50:5, 25; even the apocryphal Tobit contains examples—Tobit 4:3; 6:14; 14:11).

Jacob, for example, was promised by God that the hand of his lost son, Joseph, would one day close his eyes (Gen. 46:4). Closing the eyes was the first act done for a dead person, and it normally fell to the son.

It may not have been that the father of this would-be disciple had just died and that he was requesting time to proceed with the funeral preparations which normally took place on the same day as the death. It is possible that the father was elderly and nearing death, and the son was asking permission to care for his father until he died. Having fulfilled that duty, he would then be free to commit himself to the cause of Jesus. Whatever was the case, to forbid a son to bury his father or to care for him until he died was unparalleled and seemingly unconscionable. It ran counter to the law, which commanded one to honor parents. It ran counter to piety, which had so exalted burying the dead that it was one of the highest of all good works (see *Mishnah Peah* 1:1; Mark 14:5-9). It ran counter to custom, which in both the Greek and Hebrew world considered the refusal to bury someone the greatest impiety.

Scholars have duly noted that this saying was uniquely offensive by calling it, “completely unthinkable to Jewish sensitivities, a purely sacrilegious act of impiety” (Hengel 1981, 14). In the Old Testament, when Elijah placed his prophetic mantle on Elisha, Elisha requested, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you” (1 Kings 19:20). Elijah naturally consented to this; and Elisha went to his home,

bade farewell to his parents, and even threw a going away banquet for his friends. What Jesus said, then, was shocking. No other rabbi would have ever said or would have even thought of saying this to a disciple. Jesus' saying appears to be antifamily.

But some precedent for this kind of absolute demand can be found in the Old Testament. Yahweh is the one who makes such demands. For example, God forbade the prophet Ezekiel to lament his dead wife or to carry out a mourning ritual for her (Ezek. 24:15-24). The purpose of this unsocial, unthinkable behavior was to convey God's judgment against the people. God also forbade Jeremiah from lamenting the dead or comforting the mourner, again, to show God's displeasure with the people (Jer. 16:5-7).

Therefore, when Jesus insisted that this favorably-minded follower disregard the Fourth Commandment and common decency, he was demanding what only God had enjoined on the prophets. Jesus was not antifamily but was proclaiming the impending judgment that was to befall the people (Hengel 1981). Jesus believed that his ministry was in complete accord with the will of God, that he could act with the authority of God, and that the time was urgent.

Disciples of Jesus learn that there are no excused absences from the kingdom of God, whether they be business commitments, social obligations, or family duties. Jesus labels those who do not follow him the spiritually dead, and plenty of them will be around to take care of the task of burying the physically dead. This incredible statement makes it quite clear that discipleship for Jesus, as Tannehill puts it, "is not merely another commitment which we add to the long list of our other commitments, but it is *the* commitment—demanding a reordering of our lives from the bottom up" (Tannehill 1975, 159).

Jesus' saying, then, is not an expression of his attitude toward filial responsibility. It was intended to be a dramatic pronouncement clarifying the

seriousness and urgency of his mission, not declaring the irrelevance of family commitments.

Jesus believed that the call of God surpassed the call of family, but one should not conclude that Jesus depreciated the value of family or the need for family members to care for one another. For example, when Jesus happened on a funeral procession as they carried the body of the only son of a widow out of the gates of Nain, he did not tell her to leave the dead to bury the dead (Luke 7:11-17). Instead, he showed compassion on the widow by raising the son from the dead. Jesus, touched by her bereavement, recognized that she would be all alone in the world with no male family member to care for her in her old age and no son to close her eyes at death. Jesus moved to rectify the tragic circumstance and restore her only son to life. Jesus' compassion is further seen in his words on the cross to his mother. He made arrangements for the care of his mother by commending her to the beloved disciple and him to her. From that hour, the text says, that disciple took her to his own home (John 19:26-27).

Jesus also condemned the casuistry that found a loophole in the law which enabled a son to avoid providing financial support for parents. In Mark 7:9-13 (see also Matt. 15:3-7), we read of Jesus' attack on the legal tradition that sanctioned a man notifying his father or mother, "'What you would have gained from me is *Corban*' (that is, given to God)." A son could take a vow that something that normally could be used to assist in the support of his parents was now dedicated to God and could not be used for support of the parents. The catch was that it need not be actually offered to God by being donated to the temple. It was destined for God eventually, but for now it was no longer something that the parents could claim or use. Jesus' anger was directed at the rigid legalism that would condone this type of action and permit a vow to override helping one's aged parents. In countering this kind of pettifogging, Jesus cited the familiar words of Moses, "Honor your father and your mother," and "He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die" (Mark 7: 10).

In this passage, Jesus assumed that the duty to father and mother was not to be negated even by holy vows. Jesus labeled as a willful perversion of the law of God any attempt, however legal, to evade this responsibility. In fact, the well-known parable of the prodigal son turns on this assumption. The original listeners, including the teller of the parable, would have assumed that it was the duty of the son to stay home with his father, to labor in the fields, and to obey. The younger son becomes the “prodigal” by abandoning his duty to his father for foolish and selfish reasons. The younger son becomes the hero, we know from sermons and hymns, when he penitently returned to his father, presumably to finish his days laboring in the fields and obeying his father.

The weight of scriptural evidence, then, suggests the seriousness with which Jesus viewed filial responsibility. Only one’s obligation to God superseded it in his teaching.

“Who Is My Mother?”

The second saying is Jesus’ reaction to the news that his mother and brothers had come to see him. Jesus said, “My mother and brothers and sisters are those who do the will of God.” This response reveals Jesus’ understanding of the family and the reign of God. First, nepotism will have no place in the reign of God. In Hebrew society, the advance of one member of a family meant the advance of all other members of that family. For Jesus, however, biological descent has nothing to do with participation or priority in the reign of God. This differed dramatically from the way earthly kingdoms normally operated in the ancient world.

For example, if the mother of James and John could have had her way, appointments to the high positions in God’s kingdom would be attained the way political appointments are made. She came and knelt before Jesus saying, “Command that these two sons of mine may sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom” (Matt. 20:21). Domestic selfishness is the guiding principle behind this request. But Jesus taught that

the reign of God is the only consideration, and family ties are irrelevant.

Second, it should be noted that the family of Jesus was not making a friendly visit but had come to seize him. They were worried that his continuing asocial behavior endangered his life and would bring shame to the family name. They assumed that Jesus would accede to the authority of his family, and that family obligations took precedence over all else; the brothers of Jesus acted to try to preserve family honor by bringing him under their control. Jesus challenged their assumptions about the traditional authority of the family, particularly in the face of the greater responsibility of giving obedience to God. God ranks above family and family honor.

Third, the saying assumes a central tenet in the preaching of Jesus, namely, that God is the Father of all. This can be seen in Jesus’ uniquely familiar address to God as *Abba*, “Daddy.” Jesus prayed and taught his disciples to pray, “our Father,” and *Abba* became a confession of the early Christians (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). Jesus preached that a new and intimate relationship with God as *Abba* was available to all. But the saying assumes that God is the Father of those who *behave* as God’s children and those who give God their ultimate allegiance.

Fourth, this saying redefines family. When Jesus asked, “Who is my mother?” the answer seemed obvious. The obvious answer, however, was wrong. Jesus’ family consisted of those who chose to obey God and follow him. Nuclear family relationships are not based on choice but on birth. Belonging to the family of God, however, is a matter of choice. One can choose to be obedient to God’s will and thereby be joined to others in a family comprised of those who accept God’s rule. In the family of God, obedience and membership are completely voluntary.

Those who are deprived of traditional family relationships can therefore become members of a greater family, as is illustrated in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch found in Acts 8:26-40. Philip

happens upon a eunuch reading the book of Isaiah. He was reading the Bible, even though the Bible clearly states the eunuch is to be excluded: “He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the Lord” (Deut. 23:1). Why, then, was he reading the Bible that would seem to offer him no hope? Perhaps he was reading it in hope against hope. Hope is extended in Isaiah 56:3-5 for even the eunuch: “Let not the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a dry tree’” and it promises, “I will give them an everlasting name which shall not be cut off.” There was his name—dry tree, cut off, no possibility of family! After reading Isaiah 53, he asked Philip about whom this Scripture was speaking. Philip told him about Jesus Christ, and that one without a family can now be a part of Jesus’ family. This family is open to all and especially those who are normally cut off from family relationships.

Other sayings of Jesus show that membership in the family of God transcended this life. The Sadducees, who did not believe in a resurrection, regarded the family as the only part of a person that lived on. This is the assumption behind the riddle that they put to Jesus to make the belief in the resurrection seem ridiculous. They confronted him with the conundrum of seven brothers. The first brother died with no children to carry on his name. Each of the other brothers married the widow according to the custom of the Levirate marriage and died childless, until finally the widow died. Hardly concealing their glee, the Sadducees asked Jesus, “‘In the resurrection, whose wife will she be?’” (Matt. 22:28). They mistakenly assumed that family is all there is to life. Their faith was placed in the family.

Jesus responded to the riddle that in the resurrection there will be no marriage, and that God “‘is not God of the dead, but of the living’” (Matt. 22:32). This answer assumes that, first, one does not need an heir to thwart death. Second, family relationships in the life to come will be transcended. In this world, family relationships are time-limited. How long is one a husband or a wife? The answer is, till death do us part. Earthly families live on only

in memories and photographs that soon fade away. The family of God lives on in God’s heart and never fades. For Jesus, the life here and now was to be governed by the values of life to come. Therefore, life could not be totally centered around the biological family.

In the Old Testament, “life” is used almost interchangeably with family (*mishpaha*). We can see this reflected in Jesus’ saying, “‘If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life . . .’” (Luke 14:26). One’s family was one’s life, and to reject family or to be cast out of one’s family was to lose one’s life. But from Jesus’ perspective, life under God was no longer to be defined by relationships in a biological family. Therefore, one’s ultimate allegiance is owed to God as the head of a new divine family.

When the disciples also expressed their concern about what they would receive for having left everything including their families, their very lives, to follow him, Jesus responded by saying,

“There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.” (Mark 10:29-30)

This is not an antifamily response; but, again, it teaches that the family of God extends beyond traditional clans. The saying implies that the new family will consist of the caring fellowship to be found in a group of mutually committed believers. This was echoed in the sharing of goods and meals that marked the fellowship of the early Jerusalem church, according to Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37. Family was not depreciated by Jesus; it was enhanced.

On the cross, Jesus brings to fruition the promise of family. John reports that Jesus’ mother

and the beloved disciple were standing close by when Jesus was being crucified. Jesus spoke to his mother, saying, ““Woman, behold, your son!”” To the disciple, he said, ““Behold, your mother!””(John 19:26-27). This new relationship between his mother and the beloved disciple is the fruit of the completed work of Christ (Bampfylde 1969). Jesus’ death enables people to become family to one mother in a new and different way.

The new relationship also involves Jesus’ Father. Jesus referred to God as “my Father” throughout the Gospel of John. After his death and resurrection, a change occurs. In Mary Magdalene’s encounter with Jesus at the tomb, he instructed her to inform my brethren that he was ascending ““to my Father and your Father, to God and your God”” (John 20:17). This is the first time in the Gospel that Jesus identified his disciples as his brothers (in 15:15, they are “friends”), and the first time that he referred to God as their Father as well as his own. Jesus’ death and resurrection, then, had repercussions on the nature of the family.

Jesus said that he had come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). We may also say that Jesus had come not to destroy the family but to fulfill God’s intention for the family. No longer is it to be a self-serving kin group; instead, it is to be the source of nurture and the channel of God’s love for all of God’s children. Those who for various reasons have been deprived of traditional family relationships now can belong to a family (Garland and Garland, n.d.).

“To Bring a Sword”

Jesus says that he has come to divide families with a sword. This flies in the face of the expectation of some that the messianic age would be a time of unparalleled peace (Isa. 11:6-9; 65:25; 2 Apoc. Bar. 73:6). The reference to the division within families is a quotation from Micah 7:6 (compare Jub. 23:16; 1 En. 99:5; 100:12; 2 Esd. 6:24; *m. Sota* 9:15)¹ that suggests that the time before the end would be marked by unusual discord. The division between loved ones is not to

be understood as the result of Jesus’ desire to drive a wedge into family loyalties. Allegiance to God can and will cause conflict and division in the families of some of Jesus’ followers, which cannot be avoided as long as there are some “who loved the darkness rather than light” (John 3:19). But when considered in the light of the saying about “who is my mother?” it is clear that those who might lose family because of their loyalty to God are not familyless. They are a part of the new family of faith.

Jesus did not intend deliberately to create strife in families. The opposite was true, if we consider what precipitated his parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21). A brother, presumably a younger brother, interrupted Jesus’ teaching with a demand that Jesus force his elder brother to share his inheritance. Jesus responded, ““Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?”” Jesus was obliquely saying to this man that he should feel shame for wrangling with his brother over a few shekels. Jesus was not a third-party arbitrator over legal disputes, but he was instead a peacemaker, a healer. He says through the parable that there is something greater to be gained than getting an inheritance and something greater to be lost than losing an inheritance (Bailey 1980). To drop the dispute might mean that this brother would lose out on some money; but he might regain a brother, which for Jesus was more important.

"Hate Your Family"

One last hard saying of Jesus concerning the family is his insistence that his followers must hate their families. This saying, phrased for dramatic effect, is found in a series of warnings that discipleship should not be entered into lightly. He did not wish to scare away potential disciples but to make sure that disciples enlisted were carefully willing to stake everything.

Jesus insisted that one’s commitment to God was to be even greater than commitment to family, the greatest human bond. His statement that to be a disciple you are to hate your family is a Semitic

idiom that means essentially to love less. When one said, "I love this and I hate that," one was saying, "I prefer this to that." For example, in the Old Testament it says that Jacob loved Rachel and hated Leah (Gen. 29:30-31; compare Deut. 21:15-17); and that God loved Jacob and hated Esau (Mal. 1:2-3). This does not mean that Jacob actually hated Leah or that God literally hated Esau, but that Jacob preferred Rachel over Leah and God preferred Jacob over Esau. Jesus, then, was simply saying that families were not to be preferred over God. One is to love one's family, but one is to love God more.

Jesus was not intent on undermining family bonds and, for example, exalted the sanctity of marriage. Wives were not to be discarded as if they were a useless appendage. Marriage makes a man and woman one flesh, and therefore Jesus rejected divorce entirely. Even though we have a saying in the Gospels that the disciples left everything to follow Jesus (Matt. 19:27), Paul later reminded the Corinthians that Peter and the other disciples are accompanied by their wives on their mission trips (1 Cor. 9:5). Apparently, these disciples did not leave their wives or families for good.

The analysis of these hard sayings leads to the conclusion that we must be cautious in reading Jesus' statements about the family in the Gospels. They should be carefully interpreted before using them to make pronouncements about models of family relationships. Jesus was responding to concrete situations; he never laid out a systematic theology of the family. To one he says leave your family (Matt. 8:22); to another he says, in effect, stay with your brother (Luke 12:13:21). To one he says, "Follow me" (Mark 1:17-20); to another he says, "'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you . . .'" (Mark 5:19).

Conclusions

While it is difficult to systematize biblical teaching about the family, the following observations can be made.

First, one cannot conclude that Jesus' view of the family is subversive, or that Jesus considered family relationship to be either a petty concern or an impediment to commitment to God. But it should also be clear that Jesus did not share the traditional view of the family prevalent in his world.

The context for much of what Jesus said about the family was his vision of the coming crisis of God's reign which would turn ordinary life on its head. He perceived the coming of the kingdom to be a revolutionary event; the family could no longer provide true security nor absolute trust. The advent of the kingdom of God required a change in one's basic orientation. One must be prepared to abandon the security that a family provides, the duties that a family might expect, and the affection that a family offers for what one considers to be a greater good. Supreme loyalty to God puts all other loyalties in perspective, and circumstances might arise for some that would force them to reject family attachments. For this reason, family ministry should be cautious not to elevate the significance of family relationships over the relationship between the individual and God. Intimate, satisfying family relationships, as valuable as they may be, must not be allowed to substitute for an intimate relationship with *Abba*.

Second, the will of God can be done within the structure of the biological family; it can also be done without the structure of the family. The common pursuit of the will of God produces a higher bond than family bonds. This leaves the circle open to others who may not be one's family, and this is precisely the emphasis that is to be found in the rest of the New Testament. Paul said that all who are called to God's household become children of God, heirs, and fellow heirs (Rom. 8:17). Therefore, one is in Christ rather than simply in a biological family. That is why, as a Christian, Paul no longer identified himself in terms of race or tribe as he once did. He once boasted that he was of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, and a Hebrew of Hebrews (Phil. 3:5). Now he identified himself through his faith in Christ (Phil. 3:7-9).

This allows others who believe in Christ to be accepted as fellow heirs, as brothers and sisters. According to Paul, all, Gentiles and even Jews, receive adoption as children into the spiritual family of Abraham (Gal. 4:4-6). This is why Paul urged Philemon to regard his runaway slave, Onesimus, in a different light. He was no longer to be considered a slave but a beloved brother (Philem. 16; see also Matt. 23:8). This basic premise is the reason why Christians identified themselves not as Christians but as brothers (1 Cor. 8:11). They extended kinship beyond racial lines, tribal loyalties, national boundaries, and the biological family. When we celebrate family in the church, we first need to celebrate the family of faith.

Third, the function of the family household is distinctive for the Christian. In our culture, most consider the home a place of retreat where one can shut the doors against the needs and demands of others; this retreat is secure and enriched. The New Testament presents a different perception of the home, for family is not regarded as a retreat from the world but as a place where service can be rendered to the world. Indeed, hospitality is one of the chief virtues found in the New Testament (Rom. 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9-11; 3 John 5). Church family ministry must not focus inwardly on the enrichment of the nuclear family, but instead needs to challenge Christians to expand the boundaries of the nuclear family, extending hospitality that enfolds others in expanded family systems.

Finally, Jesus' redefinition also provides a significant perspective for evangelism. In order to incorporate persons into the community of faith and help them grow spiritually, we have to deal with their relationship with and sustenance by families. The church has the task of developing family relationships—relationships beyond the bounds of kinship—which can germinate and grow Christians. God calls persons into a special relationship with God and others. Newbigin writes:

God is not solitary—but relationship between Father, Son and Spirit. Interpersonal

relatedness belongs to the being of God. Therefore, there can be no salvation for persons except in relatedness. No one can be made whole except by being restored to the wholeness of that being-in-relatedness for which God made persons and the world and which is the image of that being-in-relatedness which is the being of God (Newbigin 1978, 76).

The role of the church, then, is not simply to nurture and support the families that already are members. The church must be about the task of nurturing and supporting new families and enabling all to be a part of a special family of God, including homeless, mentally ill persons, teenage parents, children with special needs, the divorced father whose children live in another state.

The church is to provide a home for the homeless, love for the unloved, and grace for the disgraced. . . . The church is to be the seedbed for relationships in which we can parent and be parented, and in which we can give and receive brothering and sistering, regardless of biological kinship (Garland and Garland, n.d.).

Family services which serve as catalysts for the formation and development of ecological families thus stand on a firm biblical foundation. The definitive characteristics of the family can no longer be considered to be legal marriage and biological parenting; instead, they are summed up in *mutual commitment*. Neither can family ministry be touted as the centerpiece of the church's mission. As important as family ministry is, churches are not simply family service agencies. The church's mission includes also a prophetic role in larger social systems as well as attention to individuals, who have value and significance to God, and to the faith community beyond their role in a family system.

In its rightful place as one of several central functions of the church, family ministry needs to attend to the difficult task of bringing to fruition

the ideals of a *family of faith*. The ecological family is a family born of mutual commitment to one another and to a common purpose: It is a “family of faith.” The ecological family needs structures and supports that will enable it to develop and become functional and productive just as those exist to aid the nuclear family. The church, then, has the responsibility of providing this nurturing, sheltered environment for the formation and development of the ecological family. In doing so, the church goes a long way toward Jesus’ ideal that all persons will have brothers, sisters, and parents in God’s family.

1. *The 2 Apocalypse of Baruch* is the title of a late first or early second century A.D. Jewish writing that attempted to explain the catastrophe of the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. *Jubilees* is a retelling of the story of Israel’s history found in Genesis and Exodus and was written in the second century B.C. 1 *Enoch* is an apocalyptic vision attributed to Enoch and written in the second century B.C. with revisions from the first century A.D. The *Mishnah* is the rabbinic compilation of oral law. Tractate *Sotah* has to do with the laws concerning the suspected adulteress in Numbers 5.

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Capon, R. F. (1988). *The parables of grace*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Treating each of the parables between the feeding of the five thousand and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem individually, Capon sets them all within the overall context of the Gospel and the good news of God's grace. The reader will revel in a myriad of evidences that God has indeed wiped away the handwriting that was against us and nailed it to the cross of Christ. At the same time, he or she will be confronted squarely with the all-or-nothing decision to identify with the least, the little, the lost, and the last. For that is what it means to follow Him.

Capon, R. F. (1996). *The astonished heart*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Through the ages, says Capon, the church has largely lost its God-given mission to proclaim the universal nature of salvation by grace through faith in Christ. Rather, the church has mainly become a religious institution with rites, ceremonies and requirements of obedience which are presented as meritorious, necessary for salvation. If the church of the future is to be authentic, it must recapture the pure gospel message and be concerned about persons. It must keep astonishment at the Good News alive and well.

Gillespie, V. B. (1996). *The sounds of grace in our churches*. Lincoln, NE: AdventSource.

A practical, yet innovative, approach to worship and praise. 100 innovative ideas to enrich the worship in your congregation and learn how to see Christ in the midst of it all.

Habenicht, D. J. (1994). *How to help your child really love Jesus*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Assn.

Based on her insights from the fields of child development and religious education, the author explains how children develop spiritually and offers practical suggestions on how you can help your child establish a lasting friendship with God.

May, G. (1991). *Addiction and grace*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins.

Addictions are defined in the broad sense of attachments that become more important to us than God. However, is that when we feel the most powerless we have then the greatest power to deal with our addictions, because that is the moment we are most likely to relax our hands and receive God's grace and turn to Him for help.

Rice, G. (1996). *The textures of grace in our schools*. Lincoln, NE: AdventSource.

Challenges Christians to touch and sense more deeply the Holy Spirit's promptings, to look for Christ in both the ordinary and extraordinary things of life. Over 100 creative ways to establish a grace orientation, discover the joy of worship, create a faith community and encourage a life of service.

Seamands, D. A. (1988). *Healing grace*. Wheaton, IL; Victor Books.

Grace is the most therapeutic factor in emotional and spiritual healing. The fallen human tendency to default to *doing* rather than *being* combines with parental influence and life experience to form the root of

our bent toward performance as a means of making ourselves respectable in our own eyes, God's eyes, and in the eyes of others. The only cure for the malignant virus of performance is the gospel, pure and simple. Without it, we are bound to take even the very channels of grace—prayer, Bible reading, witnessing, service—and turn them into Christian works of performance. The work has also been republished as *Freedom from the Performance Trap*.

Sequeira, J. (1993). *Beyond belief*. Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association.

The church today desperately needs revival (a renewed appreciation of truth) and a reformation (a change of behavior). The starting point must be a clear understanding of Jesus and His gospel. This alone will bring sincere repentance and in turn open the way for the Holy Spirit to be poured out as at Pentecost. This book presents the plan of salvation in a new light and shows that the implications of the gospel are almost beyond belief, both in the measure of God's love and in His ability to change us.

Smedes, L. B. (1993). *Shame and grace*. San Francisco: Zondervan Publishing House.

The author helps the reader to understand how undeserved shame is not a good shame, not a shame that leads to health, but a shame that only kills joy. He looks at several faces of shame, some that have preserved, and some that have poisoned, the human spirit. He identifies the symptoms and the sources of unhealthy shame that makes life heavier than it is meant to be. He then explores the special sort of grace that heals the shame we never deserved in the first place.

Tyner, S. (1996). *The colors of grace in our homes*. Lincoln, NE: AdventSource.

The book celebrates what can work in Christian families as they struggle to provide exciting and growing spiritual support for their homes. Explores one hundred new, innovative ways that families can become Christ-centered and grace-oriented. This volume can be a valuable aid for all who want to engage their children and teens in the process of faith development.

Van Leeuwen, M.S. (1990). *Gender and grace*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

As a Christian psychologist, the author probes the impact of grace on male-female relationships, marriage and parenting. She offers unusual insights on the part genes, culture and faith play in making us the men and women we are—and ought to become.