

The Neglected Qualification

by Jim Wilson

Many years ago my wife and I heard a message that we took very much to heart. It was preached at our wedding. The message had been given first more than 3,000 years earlier to a people who did not take it to heart. It was part of Moses' final talk to the new generation.

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth. (Deuteronomy 11:18-21)

There was very little application of this teaching by the people of Israel in the Old Testament. I have also observed hundreds of Christians, senior to me, contemporary to me, and junior to me. My observation is that evangelical Christians seem to be able to rear children who are nominal Christians or not Christians at all. Or if some of the children are clear Christians, some of them are not. I realize that such a statement may bring many letters from people whose children are walking in close fellowship with the Lord. It's worth making such a statement just to get such a barrage of good news.

When I was a child, I heard a saying that the preacher's kids were the worst kids in town. From my limited experience at that time with preachers' kids, the saying seemed to be validated. I remember one such kid. He was not a roughneck, but he sure was obsequious and unctuous to all his acquaintances. From my self-righteous view, I looked down on him.

When I became a Christian years later, I looked back on my earlier years and came to the conclusion that the preachers I had known were ultra-liberal in their theology and that's why their kids were not godly. It was a simple explanation and may have kept me from being disillusioned with the power of the Gospel. However, it was not a true explanation.

Over the years, I have spent many hours with many Christian workers about the waywardness of their children. These are mostly missionaries and pastors. I have also spent many hours loving the children of other missionaries and pastors.

In addition, the Christian gossip circuit brings to our ears stories of children of famous Christians who have gone astray. The empathy is great among the Christians for other Christians who have rebellious children. The empathy is there because they either have such children themselves or perhaps expect to have such children.

There are many explanations, and they may be right, at least in part. “The Jones’ children did not turn out because they sent them to the public schools. We will send ours to a Christian school or to a Christian boarding school.” Still they do not turn out right. In all of the empathy and sympathy there seems to be a lack of hard scrutiny concerning the cause of the problem and a lack of action taken to solve the problem.

In the Deuteronomy passage quoted earlier, two things are very evident:

1. The continuous presence of Scripture in time and place—really all the time and in all places.
2. The continual presence of the father with the children.

I think there is a lack in the Christian home on both counts, but the greater lack is on the latter. There is very little difference in the time spent with the children by a full-time Christian worker and by a father in the world system. In both cases it is very little time. If there is a difference, it is that the Christian father has a “spiritual” justification for spending so little time. He is busy serving the Lord.

It may sound simplistic, but the basic causes of rebellious and unbelieving children of Christian parents are

1. Not enough time spent with the children, or, if there is time with the children, it is not loving time
2. Not enough time spent with the Scriptures alone and with the children

Christian workers will give their time in counsel, in love, in the Scriptures to anyone in need outside of the family. Children must compete for time with their father. In most cases they cannot compete effectively. In order to get attention they have to act as evil as the people to whom their father gives his time. Even then it does not work because the children have now disgraced the Lord, their father, and the ministry.

From my perspective there seem to be many Christian pastors who know that what they are doing is wrong for the family, yet they keep on doing it. Or they have already lost one or more children to the enemy, and they keep on doing what caused the children to defect.

In Titus 1 and in 1 Timothy 3, the Scripture gives the qualifications for being an elder. Among the qualifications are these:

An elder must be...a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. (Titus 1:6)¹

¹ Note: The word “wild” is the word “asotia” in Greek which means unsaved.

He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) (1 Timothy 3:4-5)

Among elders who hold to the inspiration and the authority of Scripture, I have encountered ignorance of these texts, hedging and defensiveness; they thought their call to preach had a higher authority than the text. There were too many explanations why the situation in their home was not covered by these verses:

1. "Yes, the children are not believers, but they are not yet adult. The text does not apply."
2. "Yes, the children are not believers, but they are adult and no longer under our authority. The text does not apply."
3. "The texts apply only to people who are to be appointed elders. They do not apply to those already ordained." (If so, is this true also for drunk, violent and quarrelsome elders?)
4. "Yes, I believed that it applied to me, so I submitted my resignation to the church. The church would not accept it and begged me to continue as their pastor." Normally there is much sympathy from the congregation because of the apparent godliness of the pastor and his wife.
5. "I was in much confusion about my position as an elder, so I sought counsel from older men of God whom I respected. They assured me that they had children who had been far away from the Lord for many years and that they had recently come to the Lord. They encouraged me to stay in the ministry, and they would pray for my children."
6. "This is my profession. I do not know how to do anything else."

With very few exceptions, in evangelical churches we do not find discipline of elders based upon the belief and character of the elders' children. The church members or hierarchy would not take action because of a false view of, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7) and "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (Matthew 7:1). I do not think it is realistic to expect churches to suddenly reverse an attitude that has been operating a long time. If they suddenly began to make judgment on such issues, it could happen without love and with bad attitudes. However, it is realistic and right for elders to judge themselves. As it stands, we have very clear teaching in the Scripture that is universally ignored and disobeyed.

While you are rereading and praying over 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, look at all of the requirements, not just those concerning children. Are you still as qualified as when you were called to the ministry? If not, then confess and forsake your sins and begin to obey.

If the results of your unelderly-like behavior include such things as unbelieving and disobedient children, then leave the ministry.

These are the reasons you should leave:

1. If you have succeeded in justifying yourself, you will not confess the sin, and, consequently, you are not walking in the light. You are not qualified to be an elder.
2. For the church's good: you are not qualified, even though you have been forgiven.
3. For your children's good: they will not have to compete with God (or what they think is God) for your attention.
4. For your own conformity to the likeness of Jesus Christ.

It is likely that your children will turn to the Lord when they find that their father is godlier, less busy, and more loving.

One of the results is that you may be back in the ministry with power that you never had before.

In Ezekiel 18, we are told that we will not be judged for our parents' sins or our children's sins. We will be judged for our own sins. It is our own sins I am writing about.

Early in our ministry, when our children were very young, my wife and I made a decision, a covenant or a very strong vow: if any of our children ever fit the description of 1 Timothy 3 or Titus 1 and were wild, disobedient, unmanageable, disrespectful, and unbelieving, we would leave the ministry that same day. We have not had to do that.

We do not seem to have many good examples of fathers in the Bible. Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Eli, Samuel, David, Solomon, Jehosaphat, and even Josiah were godly in certain ways, but poor fathers. We do not have the examples, but we do have the teaching and the promises.