

Building a Love House is *still* Hard Work



Lee Bee Teik

Special print-on-demand eBook 2020

Reviews

"A comprehensive book, not only on parenting, but on building a home according to God's love. It is easy to read and provides practical guidance. As a first generation Christian mother, I benefit much from the chapter on Spiritual Formation."

Pek Wooi Ling, Pastor's Wife

"This book is a result of the author's journey with her God. Here is where the imperfect can meet with the Perfect, the impossible can become the possible and the failure can see Victory!"

Gladys Tan, Mother of Active Boys

"On three occasions, my husband and I have had the privilege of speaking to Christian groups in Malaysia on the subject of marriage and the family. On each occasion, I lamented the fact that we were so western in our own thinking and upbringing that it was difficult to assess whether or not our teaching was relevant to family life in Malaysia. I therefore rejoiced when I discovered that Lee Bee Teik was contemplating writing a book on these vitally important subjects.

I first met Lee Bee Teik in Port Dickson, Malaysia, in 1994. She was attending a retreat my husband and I were leading at the time. I found her to be a person of great integrity, a sister in Christ whose love for God was deep, real and transparent. She is also someone with a lively sense of humour, a questioning mind and a passion for God's family.

It was therefore a joy for me to read her thought-provoking manuscript. As I read, I admired her courage. Here is a Malaysian writing for Malaysians. Here is a Malaysian asking the kind of pertinent questions which may nudge many of her readers out of their comfort zone. At this stage of the nation's history, these questions need to be addressed. I pray that, as readers think through the implications of the subjects the author addresses and find their own answers to the questions she poses, marriage and the family may be given a higher profile than ever before – that as adults and children become busier and more stressed, the home may become the oasis into which they retreat."

Joyce Hugget

BUILDING A LOVE HOUSE Is Still Hard Work

An Invitation to Think, Pray Through
and Act on the Implications of
Being God's Family

Lee Bee Teik

Revised (ebook) Edition 2016

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Building a Love House Is Still Hard Work

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Changes in this edition:

The 1st Edition (1996) was published by Malaysian CARE and I have made the following updates and changes in this revised, 2nd edition.

1. Chapter 10 of 1st edition has been omitted as it is found in a later publication called “Behold, Your Pastor!”
2. Chapter 5, 8 & 10 of the 1st edition have also been published in various forms in the BSSF series and Adult & Youth series in English and Bahasa Malaysia by Reconre and Wawasan Penabur respectively.
3. The rest of the book is revised to suit the times while maintaining its overall meaning and purpose.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DR. LEE BEE TEIK, a graduate in Medicine from Monash University, Australia (1977), is the Director and Chaplain of Reconre Ministries, which is founded on Christ's ministry of reconciliation. She is married to Dr. (Rev.) Hwa Yung and they have three adult children. Having been called to write instead of practice medicine in 1992, she has since published several titles including 'The Heart of Pastoral Counselling', 'Deepening Joy, 'Listen to God's Whispers' and 'The Byte Size Solid Food Series'. She enjoys guiding quiet retreats for lay and full-time Christian workers and rejoices when they understand that God cares them as their loving heavenly Father and is not against them. (She can be reached at: lbt_reconre@hotmail.com)

Acknowledgement

My deep appreciation to KLLam for helping the author publish the 2016 2nd Edition of *Building a Love House is Still Hard Work* as an ebook (& print-on-demand only) to save space, cost and as a print-on-demand edition.

All who helped in the 1st edition are not forgotten.

Lee Bee Teik,
Author, 2016

Building a Love House

Psalm 127

Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain.

Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.

In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat -

for He grants sleep to those He loves.

Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from Him.

Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth.

Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.

They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate.

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PREAMBLE

1996...2016

1994 compared with 2016 – The Malaysian society

Twenty years have passed by. By God's grace I survived a silent heart attack, a stroke and cancer plus a few other shocking experiences. I was prepared to be called home to rest with no regrets. However, God placed me back on duty in His field on earth. So I got up to carry on at a somewhat different pace as His scribe. I hope you will ponder with me once more...

Since 1996, when *Building a Love House* was first published by Malaysian CARE, many things mentioned in it has changed inside and outside the Malaysian society and church. So has the global scenario. There was no September 9/11 nor the terrorists' threat then. Immorality was not so open and rampant. Families still feel terribly embarrassed if a child goes astray. We were reasonably intact. Not so much now. I continue as a fellow apprentice in the school of life after receiving a number of blows.

Nevertheless I write again in the hope that we may recapture God's vision of a love house still. No matter how difficult building a loving home is, let us not give

up. On the contrary to popular notion, we, as the people of the God who made families, will seek His grace to fulfil this task on earth while there is time. Granted, many young couples do not see much point in bringing up children in a troubled world. Who can disagree? But as long as this world exists and unless another mandate is given by our Creator, ours is still the privilege of nurturing His children for Him.

We want to still ask ourselves questions such as:

** "Why do we need to parent our children as best as we can? What is the reason for perpetuating responsible and accountable parenting generation after generation?"*

** "What will our society be like if families continue to break down at the present rate? Do we just throw up our hands and say, 'Well, let us just take care of our kids ... and let others worry about theirs. Anyway, we won't be around to see the impending mess in society! Who cares?'" (See GRID, Autumn 1994)*

** "Does Scripture provide us with a model for bringing up children in the atmosphere of God's covenant love? What does His covenant love mean?"*

** "What is the meaning of spiritual formation for my children and me? Is it a subject taught only at retreats and seminaries and through Sunday schools and mission schools, or is it for all God's children - young and old - in the new family in Christ Jesus?"*

** "Since I am not married, this topic on raising children is irrelevant to me; so, why bother about discussions on families? What I need to ask is: Who will I be accountable to and who will be responsible for my welfare if my parents and siblings die before me? If you can provide an answer for that, maybe I'll read on ... "*

** "Isn't marriage basically for the fulfilment of the man and woman? Much of the current Christian literature seems to teach that the marriage relationship (not parent-child relationship) is the basis for family. Husband and wife fulfilment seems to be the 'in' thing nowadays. I want to know whether this trend of thinking is from the Scriptures or from human philosophies even if they come from research experts in psychology, sociology, anthropology or theology."*

As we move on, more questions maybe raised than answered.

This book will not answer all these questions, or even most of them. It will, however, bring us together to read

His word again, to think with Him and to hear Him for ourselves - to the end that our minds will be renewed, our hearts warmed, and our limbs strengthened, so that we may rise to live as His children and to be used by Him to parent the next generation for Him. When this happens, we will be gradually ushering into completion His growing new family bought with the costly price of the blood of His Son, Jesus. We will learn to live with one another as brothers and sisters in the huge family of God our Father and Jesus Christ our Brother!

Detailed discussions on the methods of family life are deliberately left out as there are more than enough books online and on shelves. They are written by professionals in the various fields of education and psychology. I can only write from the study of the Bible, lessons learnt through being a member of my natural family and God's wider family, through attending medical school and the practice of medicine in the East and the West, and personal experiences with people in church and society in general. In other words, I write as a lay person and not as a professional in this area. Most of the material were gathered during preparations for talks to various church groups in the Klang Valley in the last few decades. Over this period, a pattern seems to have emerged in my personal encounters with Christians in our country.

Parents with young children are often tired as they seek to cope with their various roles. They are sons and daughters to aging parents in the family, employees or employers at places of work, parents to children at home and church members in a local community.

Some singles used to be uncertain and embarrassed about their single state. Family members and friends encourage them to settle down as age catch up. However, this scenario has changed. With more abuse and neglect mushrooming, many singles are just glad they are not married! Sexual infidelity is generally common today. At a recent Christian wedding, the guests found it amusing that the newly marrieds do not know how to kiss and are shy to start doing so in public as a married couple. It is so refreshing!

The aged long to be useful and desire to be wanted by their children and grandchildren or any family members. Most simply want to be part of a caring family again, especially if many of their contemporaries have passed away or emigrated.

Children become the usual victims of wrong adult choices. They will also be tomorrow's adults in churches and society. Parents arrange activities for them to improve themselves when all they want is *"a room somewhere"* to spend time with their beloved parents

and siblings. They want a place where they may be themselves and feel totally accepted by busy parents. They yearn to be able to reach out any time of the day or night, and find Mum or Dad there to hold their small waiting hands.

Therefore, the main aim of this book is to encourage growth in family relationships and to prevent personal, family and social problems as best we can. We can do this through reminding ourselves of the Creator's purpose for families. Without His sense of direction, mankind will continue to search in vain for Utopia either on this planet or after death. Solutions rooted in mere human wisdom may seem to work for a while, but they will soon be superseded by failures or newer and better methodologies.

Without God's enabling, we can neither prevent problems nor effect permanent growth in people and hence, society. Ultimately, *"the slum has to be taken out of man"*; we cannot merely take the man out of the slum and leave him elsewhere but still in the same spiritual state as when we found him.

If this book acts as a stimulant for discussion and humble study of God's word in search of His answers towards the building of love houses, I would be more than thankful for this small opportunity to participate in

this gigantic task. We will fail again and again; but by God's enabling, we shall help one another get up. Towards this end, I am indeed grateful for your reading.

INTRODUCTION

I usually feel inadequate when invited to talk about Christian families. I see myself unfit to speak on such an important area of life in Christ. Until our children arrived, I had hardly any firsthand experience of taking responsibility for children. Although I was the youngest of seven children whose birthdays spread over a 19-year span, I did not have the opportunity of playing with my nieces and nephews as my siblings' families mainly live in another state or overseas.

Further, the rather unkind comment by a female clinical paediatrician in medical school, that I was nervous while trying to undo the diaper of a baby, haunted me with a sense of utter inadequacy in mothering. Healing of such memories of a sensitive introvert takes time and this recall was no exception.

It was the desire to identify with parents who may also be fumbling and stumbling through their early years of parenthood that urged me to agree to speak on such topics and then to put my thoughts down on paper. Yet, in my attempt to serve you through this book, the Lord has impressed upon me two lessons:

1. It is useless to share out of one's research and experience only as such conclusions will inevitably,

sooner or later, reveal the poverty of mere human endeavour. Nevertheless, if one shares with the hope that God will see us through our family lives, come what may, then the certainty of His enabling will energise me to keep going.

2. God's ways are beyond us. He may seem to be leading us into one vocation now and then 10-20 years later, He may give the word to move into another vocation. That new ministry may be through the usual so-called secular vocations, in full-time Christian work or just through simple homemaking. I stand amazed at His creativity and wisdom!

The Issues At Hand

We are now into the second decade of the 21st century. Many adults fear that the breakdown of families may be pushed into the background when issues like advanced information technology transfer and industrialisation take centre stage in our nation and the rest of the Asia-Pacific region. Children and adults are exposed to a voluminous amount of information everyday. Those in the countryside are no longer excluded. Films portray lifestyles that twenty years ago were foreign to most people in Malaysia. Christian homes possess no immunity from such an onslaught. Some of our own Sunday School children ignorantly read, with keen

interest, game books that promote principles of occultism and the New Age philosophies (see *"The Seduction of Our Children"* by Neil T. Anderson and Steve Russo).

Christians have to learn not to get engulfed by the surrounding negative influences. Some external influences can be neutral (e.g. films, documentaries and comedies that help create a healthy family atmosphere). However, when anything (e.g. excessive playing with video games, online pictures, too many visitors or entertainment) takes away the time family members can spend together in meaningful communication, it poses a serious threat to the building of loving homes.

As children of the Creator and Saviour God, we need to search for His guidelines and answers for our generation. *We need to learn to differentiate between God's voice and the other voices in the world.* We may hear His voice through the study of Scriptures. At times, we may hear Him speak through what is good and right in our Asian traditions about family life. Sometimes He may guide us through what is right and good in Western traditions. At all times we need His wisdom to discern and to select what is from Him.

To be salt and light, we need to draw our insights from Him who is the Light of the world, not merely from experience and expedience. We need to know why He makes families to be the basic structure of the church and society, and hence find meaning for the existence and continuation of families. We need to know whether the husband-wife relationship or the parent-child relationship or both should be central to a given family.

Once we are convinced that God wants His people to exist as family units in this world, then, all concerned must do whatever we can to see that we adhere to His guidelines in order that our children will develop as healthily as possible, even if we are still imperfect in our own parenting. Sometimes even non-Christian families are better in keeping families together.

But if, in our hearts, we choose to believe that godly parenting is not essential for the healthy development of children in this world, then mothers and fathers might as well do what they like regardless of their children's needs. However, we would then have to admit that we are following the human theory of evolution which propounds that only the fittest will survive. Thankfully, we do have some lessons to learn from the developed nations. Let us choose their good and put aside their bad. Someday, God may yet use

people from this part of the world to reach out to other nations.

For example, one Malaysian extended family are so united that her two young grandchildren are kept emotionally loved as they are taken care of by paternal and maternal grandparents who take turns to be with them all the time, while their parents provide for them by working hard in London as waitresses. As the children grow more independent their grandmothers, with little education, take turns to accompany them in London with their parents nearby in the same house. It is tedious but oneness is maintained and the children are safe.

Personally, I must admit to some anxiety as to whether my children will grow up and be pleasing to the Lord when they were in primary school. I had to leave the matter in the Lord's hands. Now, after two decades and with hindsight, I have to hand them to Him repeatedly in the midst of rough experiences and allow God to lead them on. I am glad to have written with conviction the earlier edition so that the principles and values stay the same. I have to painfully learn to trust and obey though it was like going through a maze. In the meantime, I detect a growing need for parents to encourage parents. We want to do our best in this God-given task

of parenting. We need to come together to discuss, laugh, learn, cry and pray together. We have an awesome task for, in our homes, we are nurturing the future generations of Malaysia which is part of the global village. If this book opens doors of fellowship and sharing among those involved with parenting, then it has achieved its purpose.

Could the Lord Himself be asking parents,

"Do you love Me more than these ... your other activities ... good though they may appear?"

If so, then is He saying...

"Feed my lambs ... My little children in your care ... "?

(adapted from John 21:9-17)

Part I

Perspective for Families

CHAPTER 1: WHY BUILD A LOVE HOUSE? Reason For Families

“He was into the world, and the world came into being through Him; yet the world did not know Him. He came to what was His own, and His own people did not accept Him. But to all who received Him, who believed in His Name, He gave power to become children of God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.” John 1:10-14

Let me tell you three real stories [Names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of people]:

David was a former colleague in Australia. One day, an insurance agent visited the hospital where we worked to persuade some of the doctors to buy an insurance policy. At first, David showed great interest by asking several questions. He also promised the agent that he would seriously consider taking up a policy. Later, when he changed his mind, I was curious and asked him why. He replied that it was because he could not really trust his girlfriend whom he had been living with since student days. He did not know who should inherit his assets to in the event of his death.

On further conversation, he related this painful experience to me...

During his third year in medical school, his parents divorced. His older sister took care of herself and, as both parents had left the house, he stayed on his own. Finally, he could not pay the utility bills and so ended up living in his car while still continuing the medical course. It was then that he met the present girlfriend (a divorcee with a son). She was already working as a nurse. She took him into her home and supported him all the way through the course. He was grateful to her but had no certainty of the permanency of their relationship. Both of them had suffered the pain of broken marital relationships.

As I tried to share God's love with him, David rubbished it all as it was his mother who had brought him through Sunday school. To David, God did not seem to have helped in his parents' or his own life.

A few months ago, an elder of a church in Petaling Jaya preached at a morning service. He shared about a student's pain, which had greatly affected him. One Form 3 boy, at the school where he taught, came up to him one day.

"Saya nak berhenti sekolah, Guru Besar, (I'm not coming to school any more, Headmaster... in Malay)" he told the Headmaster.

"Mengapa nak berhenti sekolah? (Why aren't you attending school?)" the principal asked in surprise. The boy replied,

"Sangat susah hati. (I'm very sad)"

"Mengapa susah hati? (Why are you sad?)" the principal enquired with deep concern. He answered,

"Ibu bapa nak cerai! Ku ta'tahu siapa nak ikut...(My parents are going to be divorced! I don't know who to follow...)"

As the elder shared, he wept. All he could do was to comfort and advise the frightened, sad and confused boy.

In another scenario, a 10 year old boy, Kheng Hock, was caught for stealing in school. It was then discovered that he ran around the school each day after he arrived for classes. He was quite normal otherwise. When teachers could not reason with him nor punish him into stopping such behaviour, a counsellor finally asked him why he had to run around whenever he was out of the class. After much waiting and coaxing, the boy replied,

"Everyday I have to pass through many doors. To go home, I get into the car. The door is then locked so that I can't get out. At my house, my servant unlocks the gate to let me in and locks it back after I am inside the compound. Then I pass through the front door of the house, the lounge door and the dining room door. The servant locks up each door after me. After lunch, I pass through my study door and it is locked too. I don't like to be in one place all the time. So, when I get a chance, I feel really good to just run around!"

On further discussion, the counsellor discovered that Kheng Hock was an only child. His father was a busy physician in town who worked from 9:00 a.m. till 9:00 p.m. on weekdays and Saturdays. His mother was a bored rich housewife who spent most of her time gambling with friends outside her home. The counsellor wept quietly on hearing this boy's case as he felt with him in his lack of daily attentive parental love and time.

In the face of the increasing number of severely broken homes and those where children are not receiving tender loving care from those responsible for them, it may be necessary to ask ourselves how we can help strengthen husband-wife and parent-child relationships. We must find a way to stay true to the Creator's calling for us so that we will not give up doing what is pleasing

to Him. We must not merely do what others do or what feels good only. This is especially important in a fast paced society in the 21st century where the excuse of not thinking enough where there is no tangible profit to earn is rampant. We have worked ourselves up to having little time to think. If one gets a promotion in our work place, for example, that kind of automatic excuse disappears. Christians are not spared such temptations in the world.

We need to spare our children the pain of parental separations, divorces and negligence. Then, in the security of parental oneness, we will try our best to grant our children the blessing to grow as God desires them to without having to carry too much of the burden of parental failures. But I have also discovered, through my own struggles as a human being- made in God's image, that if I know why I am doing something, there is more joy and gusto in doing it than if I do it blindly. For this reason, let us ask the first question concerning the human family...

WHY DO WE NEED TO BUILD A LOVE HOUSE OR A LOVING HOME?

Since so many younger and even older couples are finding it more convenient to live together and then split up when relationships go sour, why should we persist in teaching our church members to build loving homes and stable relationships? The answer, I believe, may be discovered in rediscovering the Creator's purpose in making families the primary unit structure in His church and in society.

When God first created the heavens and the earth, He parented a male person, Adam, and a female person, Eve. He loved them, nurtured them and provided them with all that was necessary for their perfect communion with Him, their Creator Father, with each other and with all His other creation. Genesis 1:28 records that God then gave the man and the woman the mandate to reproduce fill the earth and take care of it. He fathered them lovingly so that they might father and mother their children lovingly too. But since sin (rebellion against God as Creator Father) entered the world, as recorded in Genesis 3, at the stage when there were only two people (a potential father and mother), all subsequent human relationships with God, each other and the rest of creation have been tainted. Adam and

Eve spoilt their own childhood and consequently, their own future parenthood. The human parent-child relationship was one of those relationships that was badly damaged. Parents could no longer fully reflect the image of God the Father to their children even though children still first taste some of the likeness of God through them. Thus, all of us grow up with a distorted view of God. I believe that ***GOD has not changed*** His means of calling men and women, old and young, to be redeemed so that they will become His children again. God the Father and the Son function as One in the Trinity Family and He has made us in His image. Parents that believe and obey God are His first channel for calling His created people back to know, fear and worship Him. Many would agree that the parental missionary role to children needs to be reinforced. ***Parents are God's ordained channels for the transmission of His grace and truth to each succeeding generation*** [Deuteronomy 6].

In Malaysia, we have some difficulty in accepting this reality. Perhaps it is due to our mostly coming from non-Christian homes or from first or second generation Christian families. At times, we look at our parents and ourselves, and then realize how inadequate we are in the task of evangelizing our own family members or in building up the body of Christ in our natural homes. We

watch loving Christian homes from a distance and say to ourselves,

"I don't think we as a family can make it like them...maybe God makes some families better than others. We might as well settle for more realistic half-broken homes... or, let the younger generation try out new ways of living together without getting married and just don't bear children."

It is at this very point in our nation's history, however, that I believe God's people need to take a long hard look at Scriptures again. Maybe it is proper to begin with the creation account in Genesis in our attempt to understand God's purpose when He places every person in a family so that they may be brought up through parental care. In the following paragraphs, I would like to try to establish the following:

1. Firstly, that God has a reason for making families in the wider community of the extended family. *The Trinity is community*. Therefore, to be restored to His image is to learn to live as a community within our families and society to express the feminine and masculine aspects of our personalities. We do this gradually and imperfectly but we will be in His direction. No wonder we naturally feel awful when we read about or

experience disharmony in face of society injustice, violent behaviour and corruption!

2. Secondly, that the man (a potential husband and father) and the woman (a potential wife and mother) are equal in status in the eyes of the Creator who are equal in the Trinity. This does not mean, however, that God wants us to use the feminine pronoun to refer to Him in the Bible (as those active in the secular feminist movement would propose). Far from it; for not only does He have His sovereign purposes for referring to Himself as the Father of His people and Jesus as His Son, He is also over and above the mere use of words. God has both feminine and masculine qualities e.g. Isaiah 66:12-13 compared to the prayer He taught His disciples.
3. Thirdly, that God also makes a male human being and a female human being basically different although they may share certain qualities. They have essentially different basic gifts and roles in the world just as we see in the Trinity. Submission to His chosen roles is difficult to accept in a modern marriage relationship today because we have equated status and role in our social relationships, including the family. It is not a matter of taste, where we may do as we like according to our damaged feelings and thinking; it is a matter of God's purpose for mankind and His mandate to do His will,

fallen as we are . In other relationships e.g. in occupational roles, male and female may do the same things according to the talents required of him/her. It is only marriage sexual roles that are defined as mankind is made in the image of God with both genders representing Him. Man or woman alone cannot represent the totality of Him. Oneness in sexual relationship can only be between a male and female human physically and confined to commitment in marriage. All other pairing is an aberration in the Creation mandate. Fallen human beings are wise to submit to this given order, much as we would like to do otherwise. Our damaged instincts are strong and they urge us to do otherwise. When we are too weak to obey Him, we ask for strength and we sorrow over our inability to obey Him; we don't rejoice over it. Staying virgins, whether male or female, both or neither, is an option which many take. This is a practical suggestion, not meant to be judgmental.

DETAILED DISCUSSION

1. God lives as community in the Trinity and has both feminine and masculine qualities

Jesus prayed in John 17:20-23,

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in Us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as We are one: I in them and You in Me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me."

In Isaiah 66:12-13, God said about His people,

"I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream; you will nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem."

Jesus taught His disciples in Matthew 6:9,

"This, then, is how you should pray:

'Our Father in heaven...'

In the passage quoted from John 17 above, while Jesus Himself implies that the Father and the Son are intimately one in their thinking, feeling, speaking and doing, He taught in John 14, 15 and 16 that the Holy Spirit is the One who enables us to move into this oneness with the other two Persons in the Trinity. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit live as family members in love and harmony. We do not fully grasp the whole truth yet.

Therefore, those created in His image are made to live in the community of a family. The saying that *"no man is an island"* is in fact biblically valid.

Further, the Isaiah and Matthew passages above point out to us that this personal God does have feminine and masculine qualities in His personality. Of course, He is more than just those qualities. We do not fully know God yet although some aspects of His nature and character have been revealed to us through the general revelation of created things around us, through the written word and specifically through His Son who has come to us in human form. Our vision and understanding of Him are still blurred because we are still so broken though we are in the process of being made whole. God has shown Himself to us through His

Son's life on earth. He is perfect in character and personality. He also wants us, ultimately, to become like Him. In His wisdom, He has given men and women the privilege of being made in His likeness. Together, they also have the privilege of showing that likeness to their offspring so that the younger generations will know their God. The children will then want to return to this good, everlasting and almighty God who has a marvellous plan for all repentant sinful human beings in the new heaven and the new earth.

God intended His grace to be passed on from generation to generation through parents to children. The fact that we sin does not negate this intention. However, our sin has caused us to pass on to our children 'DYSgrace' instead. Dr. D.A. Seamands, in his book "Healing Grace", used this term 'DYSgrace' to mean distorted grace. When we give our children a wrong view of God - that He is like a cruel monarch instead of like a good father or mother, that Jesus was so "meek and mild" as a man that He obeyed God as a weakling, not as a loving Son who willingly submitted to Him - we are passing distorted grace to them. Godly parenting, therefore, seeks, by His enabling, to pass on more of the reality of the true God.

2. Man and Woman Equal in Status

In the beginning, when God created the first man and woman, He initiated the parenting of human beings made in His likeness (Genesis 1:26-31). The mandate was then given to the first man and woman to be parents through the call to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and, together, care for it (Genesis 1:28). *Both* received the commission; *both* were to take care of the fish, birds, livestock, the earth and later, their children. *Each person, regardless of gender, is of equal value to Him, equally loved and nurtured to grow in His likeness.*

Since there is no mention of gender roles up to Genesis 2, it seems to me that, before the fall, the man and the woman lived and worked happily and harmoniously in the various tasks that God had assigned to them with exception of sexual roles (sex is to bring enjoyment to both, to implement reproduction and to be used in marriage only). It was only after the fall in Genesis 3 that the different roles, in relation to the painful consequences of sin, were spelt out for fallen man and woman. It appears to me that, since then, men and women have been struggling to be free from the unnatural confines of such gender roles, normal though the roles may be enjoyed by both if used with mutual acceptance of their equality. However, man wishes to

dominate woman; and woman wishes to prove her equality by performing the same roles as man. However, God has begun to restore that joy in us through His redemption in Jesus Christ. Some men and women do enjoy their equality in Christ within their differing roles in their families and society. At the Lausanne Conference in Cape Town in 2010, a missionary couple shared that when the wife shared the gospel with others, more listeners accepted Christ than when the husband shared. They showed that the ministry is a matter of God's use of the harvesting gift, not a matter of gender ability!

Further, it seems to me also that the oneness described in Genesis 2:24-25 between a husband and a wife does not mean that each loses his or her personality. Indeed, "all they lose is their individuality but only in exchange for his or her identity as a human being" (David Hugget) for, to be human is to be in community. It will then be an experience of deepening joy to be able to have oneness with another human at the deepest level, as God meant them to be so.

However, we must recall that this order of events, without the mention of singlehood, was ordained before the fall. God later showed us how He redeemed broken human relationships through the coming of His

Son as a single man and through the "second" birth of repentant sinners. The Lord Jesus stated clearly that those who do God's will are His brothers and sisters and mother (Mark 3:31-35). The love of God transcends gender. All men and women can communicate intimately as brothers and sisters in Christ and share in His image.

3. Man and Woman Differ Basically in Giftedness and Roles

If equality of status and mutual submission are so important for human beings, why did God create them male and female? Is the basic difference between a man and a woman in their bodies only or in their gifts of personalities and talents as well? After all, if they are alike as basic human beings, *why do children seem to need both father and mother to bring them up healthily* in normal circumstances?

I believe that at least one major purpose for the differentiation of gender is for man and woman to fulfil basic different roles in this world. In this life (since at the resurrection of the dead, when His children will have new bodies, there would be no male or female (Mark 12:25), man and woman are to be in charge of and to take care of God's creation. This includes their offspring. Though they may have different roles to fulfill

within the wider duty of caring for the earth, *parenting, especially, needs both types of persons for the task to be fulfilled according to the Creator's ways, because He has both masculine and feminine qualities.* I have discussed this basic difference in the giftedness of man in thinking and that of woman in feeling in my first book "*Deepening Joy*" (available from website: www.reconre.org).

(Since our heavenly Father is so creatively and wisely humorous, I have a reasonably strong feeling that another reason why God differentiated the gifts of the human race into male and female is so that no one may say that he or she does not need the other to obey God and to live lives fully pleasing to Him. Every person is created a social being to depend on each other within God's overall Fatherhood.)

If children need both father and mother to nurture them towards wholeness (or Christ-likeness as Christians understand wholeness), let us consider why many families of today, whether Christian or otherwise, increasingly place the self- fulfilment of the husband or wife high above the day by day and moment by moment care of their children. One clue to a reasonable answer is to look at some of the influences that have reached our society and our homes.

A large proportion of the Christian literature on marriage and family found in our local bookshops, for example, have been written from a Western mind-set that has been influenced by the humanistic philosophies of the enlightenment though that period has given us much good too (through scientific research). In chapter 5, I shall attempt to trace the trends that have led to our present predicament. We are swallowing much of the current teaching that stems more from the influences of secular psychology, popular culture and social norms than the Bible. Much of these are clothed in Christian terminology. A little wrong thinking is enough to overshadow the good produced. Suffice it to mention here that, generally, humanistic thought patterns have influenced many modern young people to see marriage as a fulfilment for the needs of the husband and wife and not so much for the nurture of children, if God so gives them. Therefore, when either or both spouses do not feel fulfilled, the pressure is on them to separation or divorce. Since the children's welfare is not as important to the family, the sacrifice of self-fulfilment for their sakes does not appear reasonable or attractive.

CONCLUSION

How does understanding that God ordained parenting and not just a husband-wife relationship help us in our family life? What is it that holds us broken wives, husbands and children together?

It is the covenant love of God our Father.

The covenant that God made with His people in the Old Testament times, before His Son came as Jesus the Man, was a unilateral agreement between the Creator and the creature. God initiated this care for them irrespective of their inability or ability to obey Him. This covenant love is "particular, intentional and unconditional" (See "On Being Family"). This is still the good news of His grace to us. The agreement is not a contract which is a bilateral agreement between two equal parties. God has ordained marriages and families. He upholds them with His covenant love. These institutions will not be shaken by changing world theories and ideas or by broken human marriage vows. Sometimes, Christians absorb the culture of instant, transient and impermanent relationships and rewards around us as if they are God-given. When things do not turn out our way, we try either to please God in order to get what we want or we blame Him. However, we need

to remember that when we fail in our marriage or parenting, when the walls of our idealism come tumbling down, there is hope for us because the good news has come to us in the coming of Jesus, the Son of God (John 3:16-21).

On this side of the cross, we have the privilege of understanding that the redemption of a person to become Christ-like is a process that started in the mind of God even before He created us and it will continue till we see Him face to face (Jeremiah 1:4-5; Psalm 139:16). Though this process may be through marriage or singleness, through childlessness or parenthood, it is God's covenant love that keeps us faithful to Him. Families are safe when they fear God and honour the Creator's intention to keep them intact on their passage through a broken world.

REFLECTION

1. Ponder on what you have read and take down notes on what you reflect.
2. Pray as you decide on what changes you need to make in your family life.

CHAPTER 2: WHERE IS THE MODEL? Love House Parenting Principles

"Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to Your word ...' " Luke 1:38

*"When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife..."
Matthew 1:24*

DIFFERENT PEOPLE HAVE DIFFERENT IDEAS ABOUT PARENTING.

Some adults believe that parenting is educating their children to the highest possible level of tertiary education. Hence, proponents of such a belief spare no effort to provide the best intellectual training, with or without other areas of education, for their offspring. Many do not hesitate to take on overtime work in order to save enough to pay the bills for their children to obtain paper qualifications. The common consequence is that even after the children are financially independent, the aging parents continue to earn as much as they can instead of using their talents to lay treasures in heaven, as Jesus had proposed. An Asian doctor working in England once told me that in his

country, the more degrees a man has after his name, the greater the gifts he receives from his future bride's family. This happens to the extent that, sadly, some simply attach the names of diplomas to their list of qualifications without passing the necessary examinations. They seek to impress their in-laws who may not know the facts of the situation.

Others, especially those of traditional cultures, consider parenting as ensuring that the children are well fed and clothed. It does not matter if they are obese. As long as they look chubby and well dressed, they are symbols of good parenting. No wonder that obesity among children in Malaysia has reached an alarming stage. Still others see parenting as effective psychotherapy with a view to helping the child follow their footsteps or at least do what they plan for them. If they choose to disobey, the children may lose out in their inheritance. I have met the father of a rich boy who wanted his only son to become a doctor. He enrolled the son in medical schools locally and abroad, one after another, when he faked failure at each university. Finally the young man suffered a nervous breakdown as his ambition was to be a fashion designer. I hope that the situation has been rectified and the son saved from further trauma against his desire and God given creative giftedness.

What really is good or effective parenting then? All the above views may be proper in themselves but if taken to the extreme, the child may grow up with a narrow view of who he is and who others are i.e. his personality, self-image, self-worth, socializing skills and moral and spiritual development may be seriously retarded. In our search for Biblical principles and models for parents to learn from, we need to ask the Father of all mankind what parenting is all about. However, we want to know when parenting is effectually completed.

IS THERE A SIGN FOR THE COMPLETION OF PARENTING?

In chapter 1, we established the point that the purpose of parenting is to help the child become increasingly conformed to the image of Christ. But how will parents know when this goal has been achieved to a significant and safe extent? How do we know that the child is now ready to pass on some of this grace to the next generation, be they their own offspring or other younger ones in their care?

Psychologists will tell us that an adolescent's greatest need as he enters adult life is to establish an identity that will enable him to enter into the adult world without getting engulfed by the new experiences that

await him. For the moment, I wish to affirm, through the more specific revelation of Scriptures, what some psychologists, using scientific methods, have discovered from the general revelation of God's creation.

Remember that Moses asked God for His Name so that he could tell his fellow Israelites that the God of that Name had sent him to take them out of Egypt. God answered,

"I AM WHO I AM Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" Exodus 3:13-15

If we believe that human beings are made in the image of God, then **a person's self-identity** (the answer to the question **"Who am I?"** and related questions e.g. *"What is the meaning of life?"* and *"What is my purpose in life?"*) may only be found in **knowing that "I" belong to the unchanging Father God. "I" need to know "Him"** personally and be known by Him as **His** beloved child. The guidelines for parenting may be discovered only by looking to this same God for instructions. Where in the Scriptures is there a role model for us to follow even if it is just to look for principles and not methods of parenting? Certain things are **permanent** in life, like **principles**, but certain things are **flexible**, like **methods**. Here, we wish to concentrate on some of the unchanging principles of parenting. Let us see what

Scripture has to say about God's parenthood in relation to us, His children:

Let us study a few of the attributes of God:

1. *Deuteronomy 32:1-18*

God is the *faithful* Father who *gently cares* for His children like an eagle training its young to be independent.

2. *Deuteronomy 8:5; Hebrews 12:5-13*

God is the Father who disciplines His children.

3. *Deuteronomy 1:29-31*

God is *the One who will carry* us like when He carried the Israelites in the wilderness even when His people, in their weakness, could not take care of themselves.

4. *Jeremiah 3:19-23*

God is the *forgiving Father* who waits for our return when we stray from Him through disobedience.

5. *Hosea 11:1-4*

God is the Father who proclaims His *compassion* for His children who continue to be ungrateful to Him.

Question:

"Is there a Biblical model of parenting that is comprehensive enough for us who live in the 21st century?"

The examples of people like Hannah (Samuel's mother), Ruth, Mordecai, Timothy's mother and grandmother, do not really provide us with the detailed principles of caring for our children. We only see the parents or guardian's fruits as those they nurtured live as mature adults. It is with such a question in mind that I asked God for His answers. He astonished and almost embarrassed me with the suggestion that I watch Joseph and Mary, Jesus' earthly parents. It sounded a good and obvious idea though my Protestant mind subconsciously tried to push it aside. It was then that the Holy Spirit helped me discard my out dated prejudices and ignorance of my devout Catholic brethren!

Hence, since I started studying the example of Joseph and Mary, I have been encouraged in my pilgrimage of parenting. I hope that you will also feel His enabling as we watch them, and their Son Jesus, live their lives together on earth.

When we celebrate Christmas each year, the resounding theme is:

'...God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...' John 3:16

However, we often scheme over the details to do with the manner in which He sent His Son to fulfill that task of salvation. It was through a miraculous conception in a young virgin's womb and the nurture by God-fearing parents. Probably, Mary was only a teenager as it was common in the olden days for maidens to be match-made at an early age. The Almighty God of the heavens and the earth placed His Son in the care of a teenage girl and a God-fearing man who were about to be married. Both, however, had a relationship and fellowship with God which many of us do not have. They took God at His word, simple though they were.

Nevertheless, they were both terribly anxious when they separately first heard of the coming of Jesus, the baby, into Mary's womb. However, each also heard God's reassuring word that Jesus was God's purpose for the redemption of world. Hence, their fears were removed. We can learn helpful truths as we watch how Joseph and Mary (earthly foster parents) and Jesus (foster Son) related with each other. At this point, let us pick out some descriptions about the relationships

between Joseph, Mary and Jesus in order to draw out some basic principles for the building of a love house according to God's plans for our children and us. We shall discuss six principles: the first three deals with our relationship with God; the last three deals with our relationship with our children and their relationship with us.

Our Relationship with God

Since God has made us in His image, He wants us to receive from Him our life purpose, direction and the power to love, trust and obey Him. For this reason, we shall watch how Joseph and Mary did just that.

Matthew 1:18-2:23

"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife,

because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a Son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins...

*When **Joseph** woke up, **he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.** But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a Son. And he **gave Him the name Jesus.***

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him...

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find Him, report to me, so that I may go and worship Him. "

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child

was... On coming to the house, they saw the child with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped Him ... And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

When they had gone, **an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and His mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill Him."**

So he got up, took the child and His mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod...

After Herod died, **an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and His mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."**

So he got up, took the child and His mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been **warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee,** and went and lived in a town called Nazareth..."

Joseph and Mary were separately told, by an angel, of God's purpose for the child to be born of Mary (Compare the above passage with Luke 1:26-38). He was to be the Saviour of all of us. At first, both were hesitant to follow God's plan not because they did not honour God, but because the event of the conception was so extraordinary. However, once they were convinced that the conception was in God's will, they committed themselves to working together to ensure that the child was protected in Mary's womb so that He would be born safely. Mary could well have been stoned for premarital sin if Joseph had not taken her home as his wife. They guarded the child with their lives as they heeded God's warning to take refuge in Egypt. Joseph had to leave his occupation as a carpenter for an unknown period; not many husbands would do that for a child not conceived by his genes. Therefore, their whole concern in those days was that Jesus would be safe because God had an important and unique purpose for Him on earth. The first principle to draw from this passage of Scriptures:

**PARENTS NEED TO BE COMMITTED TO THE
CARE OF THEIR CHILDREN BECAUSE GOD
HAS A PURPOSE FOR THEM ON EARTH!**

We have been assigned the same parental missionary role as Joseph and Mary had. Further, for us, this nurturing does not end at the second birth of a child into the kingdom of God but continues as part of the means of helping the child to be more Christ-like. This brings us to the second principle.

Luke 2:21-28

"On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise Him, He was named Jesus, the name the angel had given Him before He had been conceived.

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout...Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for Him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took Him in his arms and praised God... "

From these verses, we draw a second principle for parenting a love house for the Lord:

**PARENTS NEED TO CARRY OUT WHAT IS
CUSTOMARY FOR THE BABY AND THE
PARENTS AS ORDAINED BY GOD FOR HIS
PEOPLE.**

They did not contradict the normal rules laid down for the people of God in the Scriptures i.e. to circumcise the baby boy and present him to God in the temple. They also followed the purification process according to the Law given to Moses. This, I believe, is an important example for us to imitate. We need to bring and give our children to God in the presence of His people in our church community, to confess their sins on their behalf, and to acknowledge that they too need the Saviour's grace to be born into God's family. We need to entrust them to God and to the body of Christ for the corporate nurture of these dear children. Therefore, infant baptism is essentially biblical. It is like receiving the citizenship certificate as a citizen of God's kingdom and one does not need it twice. Even if deemed born again consciously later, it is a valid sign of citizenship and the man or woman does not have to be baptized again. But

if the child grows up and shows no fruit of his/her citizenship or if he/she rejects Christ, then the infant baptism will not save him/her. Their parents may not have known Him personally though they are members of the organization church. My confusion was removed after reading *Baptism-Its Purpose, Practice and Power* by Michael Green (Hodder & Stoughton 1987).

This act is all the more important today, when several voices are yelling out to our children to follow their ways. We do not need to be reminded of the strong influences that peer group pressure, the media and literature have on the minds, hearts, and even bodies, of our younger generation. We need to bring our children to God as early as possible. Can we ever imagine Jesus saying to us,

"Bring them back to Me later...they are too young for Me to save and purify them!"?

Did He not actually persuade the disciples to let the children come to Him? How can we reconcile such a tender compassion with our disbelief that all Christian children's faith in Him is real and accepted by their Saviour and Friend? If children can sin, why can't they have faith in Jesus the Good Shepherd? Do we have to wait for their minds to mature to think "for themselves" indeed? Even if we have not grasped the significance of

infant baptism or household baptism, it is right to follow what was done for Jesus, the Son of God and son of Joseph and Mary who were believing parents.

Sadly, in today's Asian churches, and not only in Western churches, many of those from Christian homes have a tendency to assume that they are born into a spiritually neutral world where they can choose to trust or not trust God (if there is one, they say) when they are smarter, more intelligent, more witty and discerning. Well, the devil, God's enemy, who still has some limited power to act in this world, will not wait until they are older. He wants them as young as possible in order to do his will, which is to veto God's will. Those who have been trapped by Satan's lies know this well. It is nothing but human pride for today's young people from Christian homes to state that their Christian upbringing is due to mere environmental influence. If ever we have to err, it will be wiser to err on being God's children, if there is such a situation.

Indeed, to leave our children alone till they can make their own choices to obey or disobey God is risky and unwise. This does not mean, however, that the child bears no responsibility for his own actions with regard to his eternal destiny and growth in the Lord. Let us recall that Adam and Eve had perfect parenting by their

heavenly Father but still chose to sin against Him. Remember too, that the sinless boy, Jesus, was brought up by imperfect parents. It does, nevertheless, mean that our children have their part and we have our part in the process of building a love house for God. Exactly when they enter into God's kingdom is not our responsibility but God's. The very faith that any person has in Christ is a gift from Him; a gift He would readily give to anyone who asks from Him.

Luke 2:28-33

"Simeon took Him in his arms and praised God, saying:

'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'"

The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about Him."

We marvel only at happenings that we do not expect. Therefore, from this marvelling of Joseph and Mary, we draw a third principle for godly parenting in the process of building a love house:

**PARENTS NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR
LIMITATIONS AND INABILITY TO PRODUCE
GOOD AND USEFUL GOD-FEARING
CHILDREN ON THEIR OWN.**

Our children, whether they are biological or not, are gifts from God for us to nurture in co-operation with Him. With this attitude of humble dependence on Him, we shall be able to marvel much as we accept our children as they are and give thanks to God for every little joy and sorrow they may bring to our daily life. Every child and every adult can be saved only by God's grace, through faith in Him.

Our Relationship with Our Children

As we learn to receive our heavenly Father's blue-print for our lives in our relationship with Him as His children, He will enable us to better relate to our children according to His ways.

Luke 2:34-35

"Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, His mother: 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be

spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'"

Simeon told Mary the truth about how she would feel when Jesus obeyed the God they served and worshipped: *she would be emotionally hurt in motherhood*. Mary sounded as if she was about to lose her temper when she found her lost 12 year old son, Jesus, in the temple of Jerusalem (Luke 2:48-49). But more significantly, we realize how agonizingly painful it must have been for Mary, as she watched the Son she had brought up suffer at the hands of those He came to love and to forgive.

Hence, even though each pair of parents may undergo different experiences with their children, ***GOD BY NO MEANS PROMISES THAT PARENTING WOULD BE A BED OF ROSES***. This, then, constitutes the fourth parenting principle in building a love house for the Lord. We simply need to accept the thorns together with the roses. If our children should stray away from God one day, we have to watch and wait for their return to Him. (See "Parents in Pain" by Dr. John White).

Luke 2:41-44

*"Every year His parents went to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. When **He was twelve years old**, they*

*went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the feast was over, while **His parents** were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. **Thinking He was in their company**, they travelled on for a day. Then they began to look for Him among their relatives and friends. "*

From these verses, we learn that at twelve years old, Jesus freely moved around among relatives and friends. This type of community forms a natural context in which our children also grow up. With increasing individualism in urban life, we find that such healthy relationships, outside of the nuclear family, is becoming rare. By the year 2020, 80%-90% of Malaysians would be living in cities. Are we prepared for this major social change? We cannot and must not isolate our children from normal human relationships for fear of contamination. If we do, we may become overanxious and overprotective of them. We may hinder their understanding of the world they live in, and therefore, stunt their growth in Christ as real people in a real world.

We need to grow with our children, who, in their teenage years, may try us to the limit in their endeavour to spread their wings. As long as they are heading in the general direction towards our Lord Jesus, **WE NEED TO GRANT THEM THE FREEDOM TO DISCOVER THEIR GOD**

AND THE CREATION THAT HE HAS MADE for everyone to enjoy.

Luke 2:51

*"Then He went down to Jerusalem with them and was obedient to them. But **His mother treasured all these things in her heart.**"*

Mary treasured all those peculiar things about Jesus, her Son, in her heart. How then did the Gospel writers know about those things? Most probably, Jesus' close disciples sat down with her after the resurrection of Jesus as she poured out her secrets to them. They wanted to know more about the childhood of their beloved Saviour and Lord. How many of us parents can **KEEP SECRETS** for so long? We may have to do so in order that God's plans for our children will not be revealed before their time. I too have to admit my mistake of unintentionally revealing my children's secrets sometimes. (*"Lord, help me, I pray!"*)

These then are the six principles that we may draw from God's sending of His only begotten and beloved Son into this world. He was nurtured by human parents just like ours. He became man so that not only would He be one with us, but that we may also learn, from watching His earthly parents' relationships with Him. By imitating the

parent – child relationship, we will learn how God wants us to build love houses for Him.

REFLECTION

1. Ponder on the above as regards your parental family.
2. Ask God to show you how and what to pray.
3. Ponder on the above as regards to your own family if you are married.
4. Ask God to be with you as you pray.

CHAPTER 3:

HOW DO YOU BUILD A LOVE HOUSE?

Dynamics Of Family Life

"But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into Him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." Ephesians 4:15-16

Parenthood is a lifestyle of beliefs, values, behaviour and sacrifice. It is an ordinary job given to ordinary fathers and mothers, whether they are Christians or not, by the Creator God. He calls them, provides for them and then shows them how to fulfil the roles of fathering and mothering. Consequently, children of every generation will know that their heavenly Father always loves them, no matter what happens. He authenticated this call with His divine commitment through the covenant of grace. He is our Father from the beginning of creation. No matter how we fumble, He continues with His plan to save and bring home those who would trust in His fatherly goodness. He has not left us to have children and to nurture them on our own. Neither has He left children to neglect their parents when they grow up.

His original divine calling to "Adam" (homo sapiens), the man and the woman, is to *"Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it..."* (Genesis 1:28). His example in parenting through intimate communication with them implies that man and woman need to learn from Him how to provide family love and security for every child. We dare not and must not treat our children as mere economic or political partners or subordinates. If we do, then our children may grow up wrongly feeling and believing that God is good to them in order to get something out of them. Wrong beliefs about God include fearing that He may reject them if they were to make some serious mistakes.

A psychiatrist once took about four years to help a young bride. She was referred to him after her marriage to a fine young man was not consummated. She just could not give herself to her husband because of a strong subconscious fear of being rejected. He discovered, after two years of psychotherapy that her mother, a top executive at an international firm, treated her only daughter very well but on the condition that she strictly obeyed her orders. The poor girl grew up fearful of making mistakes in adult relationships. Although her husband finally divorced her, the good news is that she was eventually freed from this

destructive pattern of thinking and is living her life in a new found freedom.

The truth is that God is not like some parents. He loves us with a deep and secure covenant love that will not let us go (Romans 8). Though we may fail, He still waits for us to return to Him. He loves us, waits for us, forgives us and lifts us up repeatedly because of what His Son, Jesus, has done for us on the cross at Calvary. To love like God - how are we going to manage this gigantic task?

According to Ken Medema, a Christian musician and social activist in America, the "hows" may be aptly described in one of his songs called *"How Do You Build A Love House?"* (from which the title of this book is derived).

"How do you build a love house?

How do you make it strong?

How do you build a love house

So it will last you long?

Well, you cannot build a love house

With wood and bricks and glass;

It takes talking, and working, and playing and praying,

To make a love house last...

*Talking ... in the good times and the bad times,
it takes a life time to talk it through;*

*Working ... to build our nation(s) for tomorrow,
it binds us all together when there shall be
work to do.*

*Playing ... in the winter times and the summer times,
with children then we need some time to play;*

*Praying ... lovely days and lonely nights,
in the living and the dying we will pray."*

With this song at the back of our minds, let us explore some of the "hows" of building loving relationships in our homes.

1. Parents need to ***take time to be with the Lord Jesus alone, day by day.*** If it is indeed God who created persons, spouses and children to live as a family, then we need to constantly refer to Him for guidance, strength and grace to be family for Him and in Him. I wonder what life in Malaysia will be like in the year 2020 (written in 1994). By then the population would have increased even more. We will find ourselves being slowly swallowed up by traffic jams and entertainment outlets, golf courses and shopping complexes. It has been happening too fast in Malaysia too!

Jesus Himself lived much of His ministry life in Galilean towns and in the city of Jerusalem and its suburbs. He too needed regular and frequent retreats to some quiet places to be alone with His Father. He needed to listen to Him and to discuss the day's work with Him. How much more do we need God's guidance in a harsh world. Only in the constant knowing and feeling of God's embrace may we be refreshed to meet the demands of each new day. These times with the Lord Jesus may be different for different persons...but seek Him we must. Bringing up children in His ways is one of the most trying vocations. Their needs and problems change so fast that we may soon find ourselves out of touch with them if we do not receive patience and wisdom from God. Indeed, we need to pray and listen to Him in order to build our homes for Him.

2. Out of this love relationship with the Father and the Son (empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit) in us will flow the love relationship with our respective spouses. Whether we have children or not, ***husbands and wives need to spend time talking, working, playing and praying together.*** Then the household will be bathed in an atmosphere of sincere compassion, truth and grace in spite of our tendencies to fail. It is now known, through research done by psychologists, that the one factor that most affects the emotional health of children

is the depth of the relationship between their Mums and Dads. Even if the parents have jarring differences, for the children's sake, it is far better for them to live together under one roof than for them to live apart. Children inevitably feel torn apart when they see their parents living separately. Material compensation cannot make up for the loss of this sense of togetherness. Traditional families knew this long ago.

Fathers and mothers **must be seen** by their children to be communicating, even if they are arguing sometimes. It is much better than no communication at all. Violence is another matter, of course. Children usually intuitively sense who is generally right and who is wrong, even though they may not see the grey areas. God has made us in such a way that our emotional security lies largely in the hands of those who bring us up. If we desire to build a loving home but, for some reason, are unable to communicate intimately with our spouses, then let us encourage one another to solve or decrease this problem in our lives. Some couples leave this problem unresolved and then separate after the children have left home. Even adult children can feel extremely hurt when their parents live apart. God will be with us to counsel and to lead, if parents sincerely desire reconciliation. Often, we need trained personnel to help us.

3. Finally, **parents and children need to communicate with each other.** We shall examine the types of communication in greater detail in my booklet under the Adult and Youth Series: *Mind Your Language* produced by Reconre Ministries.

LET US NOW CONSIDER THE TWIN NEEDS OF BONDING AND RELINQUISHMENT.

A. Bonding

Traditional mothers know by intuition what many modern mothers know from reading books - like the one written by Dr. Spock in America - that babies need their Mums to hold, cuddle and rock them. In many cultures women instinctively realise this. The humming of homemade lullabies will make it all the sweeter. Infants need to feel accepted, wanted and loved even while growing in their mothers' wombs. If they sense this acceptance early in their lives, they will more easily forgive their parents for the many mistakes that their parents will inevitably make as they bring them up. This basic bonding of a child to his or her parents tells him/her that this world is a safe place to live in; that it is indeed their Father's world! The father's part is not only to bond with the child, but more significantly, to be the primary support for the mother as she fulfils her role.

This is so especially in the first few years of childhood before the baby is weaned. Again, traditional fathers, as the main breadwinners, have been doing this for a long while. Some modern couples, however, are trying out new ways e.g. full-time fathers with mothers as breadwinners, especially when the father has prolonged illness. Hopefully, the father will remain as the functional head of the household as best he can, as established by God to reflect the absolute headship of Christ over His church.

Bonding also means telling our children about their history. Whether it is important or not to others, it is important that children know something of their ancestors' background so that they will begin to appreciate their own significance in making history themselves. History lets our children sense the reality of their lives on earth as God has made them. They need to accept the fact of their original sin and seek God's forgiveness. The children will then gradually understand that they are significantly made to be influenced and to influence others in this world. It seems to me, for example, that in Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus is implying that what we practise and what we teach others to do go together. Hence, if we obey Him, others around us will be more likely to obey Him. If we disobey Him, the converse will more likely be true too. If children

recognise this, they will learn to be responsible for their own words and actions. By God's grace, we hope they will choose to be a godly and gracious influence on others for Him also.

However, ***bonding*** between parents and children ***takes time, effort, and planned sacrifices for men and women*** today. Otherwise, hindrances may swamp us before we know their powerful control.

Hindrances to Bonding

1. Many women have been influenced by priorities that were passed on to us through *the negative aspects of the women's liberation movement*, which was particularly strong in the 60's and 70's. Much good also came out of the movement and I have been blessed by its positive aspects. For example, my mother was denied any opportunity to attend school while she was growing up in Singapore in the 1920's. But she made sure that her four daughters could pursue their studies as much as they could.

However, I am also saddened by some of the negative influences of the women's liberation movement, such as the burning of brassieres, an action supposedly symbolic of the abolition of the differences between males and females. Another negative influence is the

direct or indirect urging of women to believe that their worth as human beings lies in what they do. The choice by women to believe this has produced the *superwoman syndrome* which has left so many mothers confused and extremely tired mentally, emotionally and physically. Many are caught in "*no win*" situations. Most cannot cope well with responsibilities inside and outside the home.

While at home, some who chose to be full-time homemakers feel that their other gifts cultivated through higher education are wasted. They are afraid that one day their children may accuse them of not working so that they could give them more sophisticated education, holidays and other luxuries. They are often made to feel inferior to other women who, because of their ability to earn and be useful to more people outside the home, are often more highly regarded as friends, acquaintances or even church leaders, by those who require their services. Working mothers, on the other hand, also feel as if they are born losers. At work, they have to please their bosses; at home, they feel that they have to please their husband-bosses too. Too much voluntary work may also cause such feelings. The primary day-to-day caring of children still lands on their shoulders, especially where their husbands choose to leave the running of the home to

them instead of sharing the financial and domestic responsibilities.

2. Since the fall, male chauvinistic ideas and practices have taken root in human history, often aided by *wrong interpretations of Scriptures*, even among the people of God. The *status and roles* of man and woman have often been taught to be identical when they are not. ***Men and women are equal in status before God.*** They are of the same worth and value in all aspects of their having been created in God's image as a community, whether single or married. **But their roles may be different or may overlap**, as explained in chapter 1.

In the course of listening to women casually or during counselling sessions, I have come to understand that many Christian wives want their husbands to lead them in the making of major decisions in their personal and family life. One such decision is whether mothers should take care of their small children full-time. Many women are unsure of their spouse's respect for them, appreciation of them as equals and their willingness to share their income freely with them if they should stay home for the sake of their children.

On the other hand, some modern Christian fathers, upon facing the impact of their wives' increasing independence, have become afraid of exercising

spiritual and overall leadership in the home for fear of being accused of hindering their wives' self-development. I have husbands coming to request me to talk to their wives about taking more care of their children at home. Some are afraid their wives may accuse them of curbing their freedom if they reveal their real desire that their wives become full-time homemakers. Misunderstanding and uncertainty of the roles of husbands at home, especially in the spiritual realm, appear to prevail especially among the more liberal minded parents. The observation of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the former Soviet dissident, seems to coincide with this finding. He concluded:

"If I were called upon to identify the principle traits of the entire twentieth century, hereto I would be unable to find anything more precise and pithy than to repeat once again: Men have forgotten God."

(Counselling and Children, by Walter Byrd, M.D. and Paul Warren, M.D. page 47)

It seems to me, therefore, that husbands and fathers need to fulfil their leadership roles at home more courageously and lovingly, believing it is God's will for them. At the same time, wives and mothers need to fulfil their God-given roles at home as well. But both need to do this in harmony and not in competition with

the respective spouse. *“Easier said than done,”* you may say!

I personally wish that husbands and wives would honestly and lovingly communicate to each other their hearts' desire to love their children. Someone has to sacrifice something if we are to nurture the next generation for God. Many modern mothers know that early mother-child bonding is essential for their growing children and for themselves, but they find it extremely difficult to provide their infants with tenderness and patient loving care. Please do not conclude that I am against mothers of small children working outside the home. By no means, if it is necessary to feed and clothe their children, for example. But I believe that as people of God, we need to sort out whether our children come first in our vocations and, therefore, arrange our other duties around them, especially before secondary school; or that our other interests come first and so arrange our children around those interests. There is a significant difference.

Ultimately, it is relationships that last, not ideas, things or even self-fulfilment. God's people have never been given a mandate to be self-fulfilled, but to be CHRIST-fulfilled. Therefore, as ***parents are bonded to God*** for their ultimate reality and security, they are better able

to ***bond themselves to each other*** and ***then to their children***. Malachi described the task of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus Christ, as one that calls parents to turn to their children and children to turn to their parents. This would be a sign of their repentance and of the depth of God's redemption in human hearts and lives (Malachi 4:5-6). Nevertheless, lest what I have just said hints of overprotection of our children, let us now touch on the need for parents to relinquish their children to the Lord.

B. Relinquishment: Godward-Direction and Purposeful Independence from Parents

When Jesus was 12 years old, we catch a glimpse of what it meant for Joseph and Mary to learn to relinquish Him so that He could obey His Father in heaven. Eventually, after Jesus commenced His public ministry around His thirtieth birthday, Mary really had to let go of Him completely so that He could do God's will in God's way.

One day, someone told Jesus that His mother and brothers were at the place where He was ministering; they were looking for Him. What did Jesus do? He did not rush out to them but replied,

"Who are My mother and brothers? ... whoever does God's will is My brother and sister and mother."

Mark 3:31-35

Mary knew and loved her Son enough to let Him go, even though painfully and gradually. Her motherhood was only a delegated authority entrusted to her by her Creator God who is the true Father of all mankind. She did not coerce Him to stay home to support the family even though He was the eldest son in a traditional Jewish household.

In a similar manner, we need to train ourselves to relinquish our children to God's care and will - from an early stage in their lives - or it may get harder as both they and we grow older. We dare not overprotect, smother or possess them. Did Mary's relinquishment of Jesus lead to the diminishing of His sense of responsibility towards her? Not at all. We read in John 19:25-27 that Jesus cared for her by asking John to take His place as her son when He could not be with her any more.

Herein lies the tension between bonding to our children to provide them the security that they need, and relinquishing them to God who really owns them. This, I believe, will prevent us from impeding their freedom to find and obey God for themselves. It will also prepare

us from harbouring false guilt if and when they should stray away from God. We will continue to pray, watch and love them back into His fold. We, parents, have simply been entrusted with the care of His children for Him. It is indeed an awesome privilege; strewn with pains and failures and decorated with humour and joy!

Some may ask *when* parents need to “completely” let go of their adult children. Again, if we consider Mary's example, it will be *“as soon as the child has developed into a person capable of receiving and giving love”*. This means granting the child the freedom to express his own personality even if it is significantly changed at the end of childhood. The test of good parenting is not whether our children turn out good but whether we, parents, are willing to love them unconditionally when we do not agree wholeheartedly with their lifestyles and actions. Are we able to respect and accept them, not as our appendices, but as independent people with their own privileges and responsibilities in this world? Would we help them feel welcome whenever they need us again, as the weaned child mentioned in Psalm 131? (See page 70 of “On Being Family”)

Quote: “Rearing children is like holding a very wet bar of soap...too firm a grasp and it shoots from your hand,

too loose a grasp and it slides away. A gentle but firm grasp keeps it in control.” Elaine Hannigan

Parental labour of love will still be worth it all as we consider the wisdom and patience of God in allowing us to watch our children grow. With His enabling grace we can do it; we shall do it!

REFLECTION

1. What difficulties do I have in building a loving home?
2. Where do I look for help when required?

CHAPTER 4: THE SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF PERSONS Into The Beauty Of Christ

"And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." 2 Corinthians 3:18

A Panoramic View

The term "*Spiritual Formation*" has once again become popular especially among Christians in the Western Protestant world. It was only in the last 50 years, that it was taught as a subject in many of their seminaries. But the issue of spiritual formation itself is as old as Genesis.

As soon as God said, "*Let us make humankind in our image*", the spiritual formation of individuals had begun. The process will be completed when all God's people have been transformed into the likeness and maturity of Christ.

However, Malaysian Christians, who generally like to jump on the bandwagons of anything new, have caught on to this term without much personal reading and study of the Scriptures, and many regard spiritual

formation as an entity that may be absorbed through attending, for example, spiritual retreats and seminars. Many are spending energy, time and money running from one such training programme to another, and probably have little energy and time left to sit in our Lord Jesus' presence. Please allow me to quote from someone from the Western church about this issue.

"Therefore, we must not mistake the imposition upon humans of an arbitrary plan or standard of behaviour as spiritual formation-even if these standards of behaviour are of an ideological or religious nature. Spiritual formation can no more be understood as 'religious education' than it can as ideological indoctrination. Formation, rightly understood, is conformation...It is personal, historical, and spiritual."

(Ray Anderson, "On Being Family", in a chapter called "Spirituality is a Domestic Skill". This book is excellent for a study of the social theology of the family and has helped crystallise the thoughts for this discussion.)

WHAT THEN IS SPIRITUAL FORMATION?

I. It is Not Superhuman But Merely Human

Spiritual formation is a lifestyle and a life work of working out the salvation that has been worked in us

(Philippians 2:12-13) so that we will become more and more like God's Son, our Saviour and Brother Jesus (Philippians 2:5-11). God's desire is that one day we will enjoy His truly wholesome family life. We did not start the process, God did. Further, because it is part of His plan for our existence, no human being will be contented in life if not engaged in this process of spiritual formation according to His will for us. Often, we may not notice the process until someone sees some expects of its fruit.

It is also not a cloak that we may put on or off as we like; it is like our skin that is part and parcel of our humanness. The actual process includes the putting off of our old self (*through repentance of our sins, through processes such as healing of the emotions, mind and body, and through deliverance from specific oppressions by the evil one where necessary*). It also involves the putting on of the new self in Christ (*through the disciplines of silence before God, listening prayer, meditation and study of Scriptures, worship, obedience, frugality, prayer and fasting, good works, chastity, etc.*). Did this process commence at conception in our mother's womb by the creative grace of God or at our second birth into the new forgiven family of God by His redemptive grace?

If you were asked, would you like to believe that it could have started in the mind of God when He first planned to create us *through believing parents who give their children to Him*? My grounds for wanting to believe this is based on what God said and the understanding that He does not waste His words.

*God said, "...Let Us make humankind in Our image, according to Our likeness...**So God created humankind in His image**, in the image of God He created them."*
Genesis 1:26-27

It seems to me that before the fall, the first man and woman were good but not perfected through obedience yet as even Jesus the perfect man had to undergo such a process of discipline and maturity (Hebrews 2:10). We may infer from this verse, therefore, that when God made Adam, He started the process of spiritual formation. Before they sinned, it was just putting on the things of God, presumably, as there was no sinfulness to put off then.

Further, God told Jeremiah,

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you ... "
Jeremiah 1:5

Jeremiah's father, Hilkiah, was a priest in the temple of the Lord. It is more likely than not that Hilkiah committed his offspring to the Lord. It is also possible that he committed his children to Him even before they were conceived, as Samuel's mother did in 1 Samuel 1:11. Some Christian mothers today, aware of the significance of the intrauterine growth of a child, actually make this commitment even before they conceive. I believe that after the fall, by God's grace, the first and second births of a person may yet coincide in time.

In the case of John the Baptist, it was again God who took the initiative to inform Zechariah,

*"...Your wife will bear you a son, and you will name him John...**After those days, his wife Elizabeth conceived...**"*
Luke 1:13-24

Once more, this is in the context of God-fearing parents who would give their children back to the Lord even before they were formed.

Though personal repentance is unlikely to commence in the womb, God can certainly receive the child in utero through the shed blood of His Son, when the child's parents bring him or her to Him in prayer. What He did with regard to John's life and Jeremiah's life, He can do

for us. I think it is adults who find this difficult to accept, not children.

One day, a worried five-year-old girl, who has two older siblings, asked her mother,

"Mum, where was I when Ko-Ko (Big Brother in Chinese-Hokkien dialect) and Che-Che (Big Sister in Chinese-Hokkien dialect) were playing with you?"

She had felt left out of something great whenever the family talked about those days before she was born. Her mother answered in a matter of fact way,

"You were in God's mind."

Immediately, her anxious look disappeared and she turned back to her toys at hand.

**No wonder, Jesus persuades us to trust
God like children do.**

However, if we prefer to perceive the onset of spiritual formation as from the point in history when a person consciously accepts Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord, I personally do not see how it will affect our accountability to God. God holds us responsible only for

that which He has given us to do. One thing is for sure - God desires that we be born again as early in life as possible. If we trace the history of God's people in the Old Testament, we will observe that He gave specific rules for Jewish parents to bring their children up according to His statutes, including circumcision, which marked the sons, who represented the family line as His people. In the New Testament church, water baptism initiates a person into the visible family of God. Salvation by grace is the same for them as for us even though we live on different sides of the cross.

In this context, some of us may want to search further the written word of God concerning the extent to which our children may participate in our church life. Indeed, the grace of God could already have been received and effected in the children's lives even before they comprehend what we adults feel they should comprehend e.g. by intelligently saying "the sinner's prayer". One of the thieves on the cross simply asked Jesus to remember him and Jesus welcomes Him to be with Him in paradise. Jesus Himself assures us that a childlike (not childish) faith is what is required to enter His Kingdom (Matthew 18:2-4). Further, baptism, as such, is more a sign of our total dependence on God's grace for salvation than an act that guarantees salvation.

This becomes even more significant when we realise that it is we adults who, in our negligence to nurture children for God as His children, have hindered their understanding of who God is to them. It is so definitely more wonderful to grow secure as God's child.

Perhaps, if we recall our Lord Jesus' prayer after He denounced the cities which refused to repent of their sin of unbelief, we may better understand that God does give understanding and faith to little children. Jesus prayed:

*"At that time Jesus said, 'I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to **infants**; yes, Father, for such was Your gracious will.'"* Matthew 11:25-26

How then do we recognise whether a person is in the process of spiritual formation? Jesus asked us to recognise a tree by its fruit (Matthew 7:15-20). Hence, at least some aspects of the fruit of the Holy Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23 needs to be seen. This is not just in good times, but especially when times are bad. Or else, as Jesus quizzed, what difference does it make if we love only those who love us? Do we cause havoc in others or bring them peace?

The crux of the matter is that God has appointed the family as the vehicle for the development and growth of the total human being. This family does not only imply the nuclear family, but the community of the church family bought with the precious blood of Christ our Saviour and Brother. The task of the family and the Christian church, therefore, is not only to evangelise those yet to receive God's grace in Jesus Christ, but also to see that the people of God become increasingly conformed to the image of Christ. Children are more vulnerable than older people. Hence if we ignore the nurture of child believers at any stage, we may be causing them to be retarded, to stumble and to fall. In fact, it is good and wise for Christian couples and families to foster or adopt neglected, abused or orphaned children so that they too will be redirected into His fold. Much as we dislike to listen it, Jesus speaks strongly on this issue:

"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in Me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea."

Matthew 18:6

II. It is Not Accidental But Intentional

If the spiritual formation of a person is nothing more or less than enabling us to become more like the Son of God who is also the Son of Man, then we need to teach this to our children consciously and intentionally. Spiritual formation needs to be intentionally (even though imperfectly) encouraged through practice.

I am indeed grateful to my childhood Hokkien Methodist Church in Penang. It nurtured me through Sunday school teachers who faithfully fed us with regular Bible lessons, counsellors who cared for young people's needs and those few pastors who edified us with their biblical expositions. The good side of Chinese culture concerned with the nurture of children-elders relationships was integrated with Scriptures beautifully as part of God-given orders for all mankind in general and His church in particular. The church family worked in harmony with the Christian nuclear and extended families.

Even though many young people were not able to express themselves much in such churches then, over the years, I have seen that many of those young children who trusted the Lord when their parents were converted, still remain in Him. Some might have strayed

away for lack of spiritual exercise or guidance but in their heart of hearts, they know they belong to the true God alone. Those who were born into Christian homes would not have worshipped any other gods (idols) at all except for the idol of self, just like all of us did or still do now and then. If they disobey Him intentionally or unintentionally, the God of covenant love will bring repentance in their hearts to bring them back to Him again, all in His perfect timing.

We need to point out, nevertheless, that in much of the Western church, where events such as baptisms, marriages and funerals are the only occasions when many people turn to the church for help, expressions of household faith such as childhood baptisms are not encouraged in some churches. They fear that parents want their children baptised so that they may register their names in the particular church for the purpose of future ceremonies and rituals. This leads us to the next consideration.

III. It is Not Only the Function of a Person But of the Whole Family

In the book *"On Being Family"*, Ray Anderson argues that if the social nurturing of a child within his family is the primary means of bringing him up in his life of faith in church and in society, then, as he grows up, his ability

to function in his role in family life can be a sign of spiritual maturity for a given stage and growth. Paul also reminded Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 that, as a spiritual leader in God's church, he was to be able to lead his natural family in an orderly manner first. Admittedly, not many of us will become bishops or church leaders, but all believers are included in the repeated '*whosoever*' used by our Lord in His teaching on discipleship.

Therefore, it is with fear and trembling (as a fellow pilgrim and not as a leader) that I type this chapter. For who is competent enough to write about such things? Time and again, I have been guilty of wrong thoughts, words and actions at home. Yet, it is only the grace of God that can and will forgive and sustain me and all His children through our pilgrimage on earth. So, depending on grace to save us from our sins, still depending on grace to make us whole and take us to our permanent home, let us persevere.

If indeed spiritual formation is a God-given process and task, there are several implications.

1. Our contribution to the spiritual formation of another person, whether a child or adult, is not merely the passing on of moral principles. The letter of the law kills, as Paul taught, but the spirit of the law renews, refreshes and enhances life in Christ (Romans 8:1-4).

Because it is **a work of love**, we need to avoid forcing our convictions on others, especially our children. On the other hand, loving examples in the parents' lives are more likely to lead to a response of loving obedience, even if now and then children will show signs of rebellion in their attempts to become independent. Such love shown by the nurturer is committed to the good of the other. In fact, from the perspective of Christ's church, our believing children are also our brothers and sisters in the Christ who commands us to love one another as He has loved us.

2. The daily interactions between the members of a family inevitably influence spiritual formation positively or negatively. We either help one another to grow in the Lord or discourage them and cause them to be retarded (Matthew 5:19). Hence, the church community needs to function in such a way that it encourages spiritual formation **inside the home as well as outside the home**. This is especially when excessive church activities take the parents out of the home at the expense of family needs.

Do our church programmes reflect this order of priorities in helping our brethren? Or do we often sweep domestic needs and conflicts under the carpet as long as our members continue to show up at Sunday services, prayer meetings and seminars and contribute their pledges and tithes? If the latter, do we not then

need to repent and begin to offer practical aid and healing to those who struggle to be faithful to the Lord?

3. A life of love is ***a life of faith***. Abraham, for example, was secure enough in God's covenant love to trust Him with his only son Isaac. Did this security and trust develop overnight? I do not think so. God's love freed Abraham to be himself so much so that when he met with a threatening situation, he was allowed to make mistakes (like telling half truths about Sarah being his sister) and then learn from that experience. When God still accepted him, he knew that his God was forgiving, gracious and faithful. Hence, when commanded to sacrifice Isaac, though not fully understanding, he was sure that if God wanted Isaac to be the father of future generations, He would and could raise him up from the dead (Hebrews 11:8-19).

Do we love our children and brothers and sisters in church enough to encourage their trust in us and in God?

4. Enhancing the spiritual formation of another means helping that person express his love and faith in his daily life even when things seem to have gone wrong. This means that that person lives his life *according to God's purposes for him*. He no longer depends on personal success or failure to know and feel that he is a person of worth to God and man. *"Such a believer has turned over his earthly life to his faithful Creator for good"* (See "On

Being Family"). He no longer longs for present rewards. If he fails, as he will, in his old body, he knows that not only will the invisible God forgive him when he confesses his sins, but that his parents and church members will also receive him in love. In such a family and church community, the process of creation and redemption is replayed over and over again. Lost sheep are found, washed, healed, fed and returned to its rightful Owner and Shepherd.

In conclusion:

The Spiritual Formation of our children is the development of a lifestyle that grows in obedience to Jesus Christ.

It is not a matter of choice for His people. Those enrolled in the process *"can stand hardship and discipline because they have a purpose higher than just earthly existence"*. This perspective, therefore, enables them to "loosen ties" with this world more easily even if it means temporary suffering. They look forward to the joy of seeing their Saviour face to face one day! The discipline required is not a harsh punishment for sin but is a willing preparation in anticipation of meeting the One who first loved them!

Spiritual formation is also a household formation of the children of Abraham, not by natural genetics, but by faith (Romans 4:1-12). When God covenanted to bless Abraham's children of faith, He will keep His word, for...

*"God is not a human being that He should lie,
or a mortal, that He should change His mind.
Has He not promised, and will He not do it?
Has He spoken and will He not fulfil it?"*

Numbers 23:19

*"May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you
through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and
body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus
Christ. The One who calls you is faithful and He will do
it." 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 (NIV)*

REFLECTION

Ponder on what your position in Christ mean.

Part II

The Nitty Gritty of Family Life

CHAPTER 5: LOVE HOUSE DEBRIS The Inevitable Ugliness

Jesus prayed,

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one. As You, Father, are in Me and I am in You, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me." John 17:20-21

"Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to Christ." 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

One day, Brother A had to personally thrash out a number of disagreements with Elder B of his church. A few days before that, while spending time with the Lord, Brother A had cried and cried in fear.

"Lord," he prayed, "I value this brother's friendship. I do not want to take this risk of going to him. I'm afraid of negative repercussions that may spoil whatever good

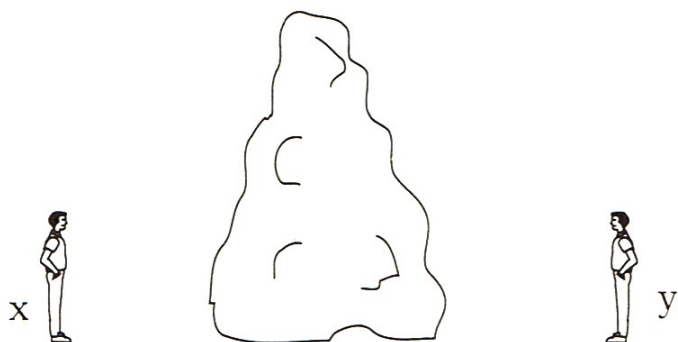
relationship that exists now. Could you please send someone else to him?"

Further, Brother A had been hurt by misunderstandings within the church and was afraid of deeper wounds.

Then, the Lord Jesus showed him this series of pictures:

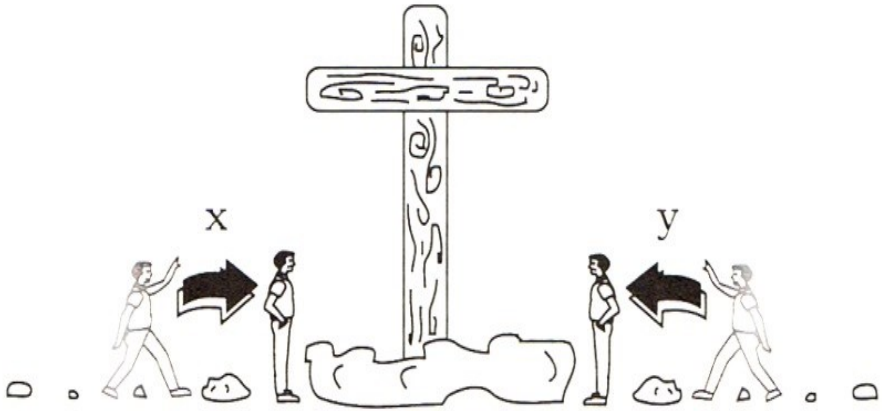
Scene 1

Two men, X and Y, were each on one side of a boulder that reached up so high and was so broad that they could not see nor reach each other.



Scene 2

A gigantic cross descended from the sky right on top of the boulder, crushing it by the impact. Now X and Y could see each other and quickened their footsteps to approach one another. But they stopped short when their feet stepped on debris from the broken rock. What could they do? Much as they desired to be friends, they were hindered by the debris that still separates them.



Scene 3

Then Brother A saw the Lord sitting on a small piece of rock. He lifted X onto one lap, and Y onto the other lap. X and Y were all smiles. Now they could talk with each other, touch each other, and converse in brotherly love without fear of being pricked by the debris on the ground.



Love House Debris

That day, Brother A's fears of speaking the truth in love were removed. He was able to have a fruitful discussion with the Elder concerned and their mutual trust in one another has deepened. Since then, whenever he has to go through similar communications with his brother or sister in Christ, he pictures both of them sitting on

Jesus' laps, and he is encouraged to proceed with his peace-making efforts. Yes, it is true that the only place to fellowship with one another is in the presence of the Lord of peace.

If the debris on the ground could be cleared through repentance and healing of minds and emotions, we will be able to do more; we will fear each other less and we will be able to come down and walk together side by side with Jesus and even delight in the joy of playing in His presence (Proverbs 8:30,31).

It is with this goal in mind that I now share about the debris of our family love houses, debris that form barriers to our communication in mutual love. Though we are primarily talking about relationships within each natural family, this may apply to our wider church family relationships as well. Sorting out our sins and weaknesses and thinking is a tedious process.

It is somewhat like picking out the dirt entangled in the mesh of jelly-like bird's nest before the latter could be boiled as a delicacy. Yet how nourishing is the food when it is ready for eating. Similarly, how nourished our family and church lives will be when we are able to trust and love one another openly.

BARRIERS TO FAMILY ONENESS

A. Internal Influences:

1. The **Cataract** in Our Eyes....Wrong Theology

I hope that you will not be put off by the term "theology". The word means beliefs about or understanding of who God is. Everyone has a certain idea of who God is. But what we are concerned with, as His children, *is to know Him as He is, NOT as what we or others think He is*. We want to know Him like we know our loved ones. At one time or another, we have all been guilty of wrong thoughts of who the true God really is. Our vision of Him is still blurred on this side of heaven (1 Corinthians 13:12-13).

It is important to have a right view of the one and only true and living God because:

Firstly, He desires that we know Him as He is, the *"I AM WHO I AM"*, **not** the *"I am who you think I am"* (Exodus 3:13-15).

Secondly, what and how we see God affects our whole life – our view of self, of others, and of our environment. For example, if I *view God as my heavenly Father* and that He is our Creator, then I will submit to

my parents because God has commanded me to obey them. In the same way, as a parent, I need to know that my love for my children is primarily for His sake, not for my own security or to sooth my own conscience,

If I see God as a harsh boss who cares little for my welfare, then obeying Him becomes drudgery.

From what may be gathered from various parts of the New and Old Testaments, to *know God* is:

to receive His righteousness and grace in our Lord Jesus Christ;

to think His thoughts by the ministry of the Holy Spirit;

to feel His heart cries and joys;

to know His will; and

to obey Him out of humble gratitude to Him.

This is also what holiness means - to become more like Jesus in our relationship with the Father.

Nevertheless, this is not an instantaneous event, a once for all happening. It is a life-long process on earth that needs the renewal of our minds by reading or hearing and meditating on God's word day by day, little by little. It is a long journey of putting off our old way of thinking so that God will enable us to put on His new way of thinking and feeling.

We may receive a distorted understanding of who God is through:

- * the *genetic traits* we inherit from our parents (and we are very likely to pass these on to our children).
- * our *upbringing*, especially during the tender years of childhood (e.g. parents, extended family, Sunday School teachers, pastors, the education system, the media).
- * our *personal* mistakes and sins.
- * the *natural environment* we know.
- * the *lies about God* that His enemy tries to impose upon us.

All these distorted ideas of God act like cataracts in the lens of our eyes of faith. We need the new lens of Scriptures to enable us to see Him as He is. Distorted understanding is one possible obstacle to our ability to receive and use the truth and grace that Christ desires so much to give to us. We forget or do not remind ourselves enough that God is our holy and yet gracious loving heavenly Father.

2. The **Boils** in OUR Lives...Bruises and Weaknesses

We have all been wronged by someone at one time or other in our lives. Some may have hurt us without deliberate intent to do so. But an injury is an injury, and we feel it in us though often subconsciously, if the event happened many years ago. The longer such hurts lie buried in our minds and feelings, the more difficult it may be to identify them. They are like the pus in the boils that I used to see in my patients. Unless the boils are drained, the strongest of antibiotics may not bring about complete healing (See Chapter 7).

However, hurts, like pus, can be removed. If left unattended, they often act as decaying centres in our lives that lead to the sin of resentment. This in turn causes weaknesses in our lives that may lead to sins such as harbouring a revengeful attitude, competitiveness, laziness, overindulgence in the flesh, overprotection of our children to the detriment of the welfare of their future families, love of money or neglect of our elderly relatives. Of course, once the pus has been drained, we would not need to open up the wounds again.

Dr. D.A. Seamands (author of several books on healing of the emotions and forgiveness) told the story about a surgeon with an unhealed cut on the palm of his right hand. Each time as he reached out for his instruments in

order to operate on his patient, his hand hurt badly. He was unable to treat his patient effectively. In a similar manner, Dr. Seamands explained, if we have unhealed wounds in our lives, try as we may to be compassionate and gentle with someone, we are unable to do so fruitfully because each time we reach out, we hurt because of the misconceptions in our minds about who He really is. We may be asking ourselves:

"Is He really forgiving, gracious, patient and accepting? Is He really a Giver of good gifts, loving, holy and all-powerful?"

"If He is not loving to me and is not able to get me out of my problem, how can I love my wife who irritates me so much? And if God cannot help me, how can He expect me to help myself?"

These misconceptions, he finds, are often due to hurts caused by those who were/are still significant to us. The key to the release of those hurts is forgiveness of the person who hurt us, even if he or she has died. Forgiveness is like the therapeutic prick to the boil of our damaged emotions so that the hurts may be released.

If we wish to be healed, the good news is that God is on our side. In Isaiah 53:1-6, God says that He sent His Son

not only to forgive us our sins but also to take away our infirmities or weaknesses caused in one way or another by the consequences of living in a broken world.

3. *The **Fat** in Our Arteries...Our Sins*

As I mentioned earlier, sometimes, certain weaknesses tend to make us sin in certain ways. For example, if I have a phobia (weakness expressed in irrational fear) about meeting with people continuously, but still have to entertain my company's clients several times a week, I may blow up on my boss publicly one day. If the precipitating factor for my flare up is trivial, I may not even realise that I have been rude to him. If I refuse to apologise, I may be blacklisted and may feel unfairly treated. These actions may be likened to the ignorant eating of excess fats.

However, there are also many sins that we deliberately commit. These sinful actions are like the intentional overeating of excessively rich food which may cause the arteries of our physical bodies to clog up, causing illnesses such as heart attacks, strokes or kidney failure. When the spiritual arteries in our life in Christ are blocked by sins, the power of Christ, like oxygen, is hindered from flowing to many parts of our lives. We are thus unable to bear His fruit.

We sin when we think, speak or act unrighteously in the eyes of the righteous and holy God. We all need to be forgiven and cleansed by the precious blood of Jesus shed on the cross for us. Once we are born into God's family, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is available to us all the time. One common obstacle to the receiving of God's grace and truth is unconfessed sin.

Therefore, there is a need for us to consider these barriers to oneness at home.

B. External Influences

1. Trends that Affect Our Families

Some of these trends have been evident in western countries for decades. Sadly, they have reached our Malaysian shores. Global industrialisation only speeds up this inevitable infection despite the good intentions of global leaders. The up and coming developing nations follow suit as they too cross cultural and social divides at an uncontrollable speed.

i. The Influence of the Western Enlightenment and New Age Thinking:

From the age of the enlightenment in the 17th century, the western mind has been geared to scientific

discovery in order to become more developed. This is actually what we are doing here in Malaysia right now, except that with hindsight, we are trying to avoid their tragic mistake of ignoring the spiritual nature of man and his total dependence on God.

There was a time when to be clear-thinking, to be seen to be fair and to be respected was to be able to function according to the principles of scientific discovery. Gradually, as man's discovery of the wonders of God's world widened, man felt that God's views also needed to be scrutinised under the microscope. Some sections of the western church bought into this thinking as the church swayed from the practice of godliness to the practice of scientific pragmatism. God was deemed non-existent or irrelevant by the west in the 19th century till recently. Then the western world found that the values of society have been diluted or lost. Where is the Christian based foundation? Something had gone wrong! At a workshop of the 3rd Lausanne Conference in Cape Town, one Western leader humbly admitted that only an estimate 4% of Europe identify themselves with Christianity.

In the 60's, the hippy lifestyle in America was a reaction to adult phoniness (portrayed in the film *"Forrest Gump"*). The *'baby boom'* period after World War II also

coincided with the period when more women entered the market place. Many children were thus left to babysitters. There was little or no parental love. The "*Jesus' People*" movement rose out of that day and age to meet the need to call young people back to God.

Today, another group, mainly professionals in various fields, is seriously concerned for the well-being of their society. They claim to have found the answer to man's need for peace. Some have looked East for meaning in life. I had a colleague at work in Melbourne who spent his time in meditation in Nepal. Yoga became an acceptable method to some for attaining peace of mind in their daily life. *The spiritually hungry West absorbed Eastern mysticism.* (Refer to "*No Other God*" by Lynda Rose, Spire, an imprint of Hodder & Stoughton 1990)

Therefore, from the age of the enlightenment until as recent as the 1930's, many leaders of Western societies paid little attention to the existence of God or His views of man. By the late 70's, the goal of Selfism (which is ME-FIRST-ism) deified the individual. (Refer to "*The Shattered Mirror*" by John White.)

By the 80's, Monism had raised its head. This is the world view of the New Age Movement which is not so new to Easterners like us because it combines various

religious philosophies. (See *"The New Age Movement"* by Douglas R. Groothuis.)

Some of the central beliefs of monism are:

- All is One
- God is Everything and Everything is God
- We are All One God
- All Religions are One

In these beliefs, the ALL is deified (becomes a god). How did the proponents of Monism help their followers?

Some are encouraged to use mind-expanding drugs. Others use meditation techniques for concentration. This has also reached the shores of Malaysia, sometimes in the form of expensive professional Self-Development Seminars in the 80's and 90's. Recently, a Malaysian clinical psychologist talked about the dangers of seminars for teenage self-development in Malaysia. Some of the teenagers sowed extreme negative behaviour towards their own parents after the course. These were even introduced in Chinese medium primary schools in Kuala Lumpur in the 90's.

One of my relatives, then a nominal Christian, was sent by his businessman brother to attend one such course for self-development in the early 80's in Penang. Normally a reserved man, he returned from the two-day seminar happy, feeling very confident and singing songs that expressed his appreciation of others and himself. *Christians need to exercise caution and discernment* here because in many instances, the pendulum has swung to the extreme: man is regarded as god and god as man. You only have to try your best to improve yourself, and you will get happiness. This belief buys up the goal of self-fulfilment.

I have an uneasy feeling that this type of influence might have subtly crept into our Malaysian churches in the form of seminars for self-improvement, for increasing spirituality, etc. though the organisers may not be aware of it. Seminars are good, but they will not make us more spiritual. Only the constant sitting at the feet of Jesus of Nazareth will.

Personal development so as to be good or religious is not our focus. Jesus never tells us to improve ourselves these ways but to deny ourselves. This means that when we do not feel like doing something He has clearly commanded us to do in Scriptures, we will still do it.

Principles expounded by groups such as those involved in the New Age (disguised as western or eastern since China has opened up and admired) are likely to destroy many homes as mutual submission is unthinkable when one spouse feels that the other party is undermining his or her self-development. Christian husbands may dominate wives to boost their own ego while even Christian wives, in wanting to feel equal with men, behave as if they know better than their husbands. Only when both parties are willing to count the other better than themselves and submit to each other will this vicious cycle of intra-marital competition and conflict be broken.

ii. Peer Group Pressures on the Young

As Malaysia develops, there will be an increasing number of people who are under various types of stresses. They appear normal in their daily life and are not mentally ill but they need much help in their personal and social lives. Examples include victims of circumstances like poverty, children of broken families, adult children of alcoholics who become alcoholics themselves, those with sexual problems, drug addicts, those with AIDS and related needs, etc. The church in the West has been doing *repair work* for decades and yet appear not to be able to slow down the rate of such

incidents. To be effective, we need to actively look at ways of *prevention* that lead to *God's transformation* in lives. We need to remember that God's grace is not for only one group of people; His grace is for every human being on earth, including all Malaysians.

In 1975, when initially confronted with the field of psychiatry in medical school, I was perturbed by the deep and seemingly unresolvable personal problems of adult men and women. In seeking the Lord for an answer, I applied to fulfil a six-week elective stint at a hospital-based child psychiatry clinic. There I got to observe the beginnings of a person's life. I thought I might find some answers there. Over a few weeks, I observed a number of Australian children with psychological needs. I also observed how the kind child psychiatrist tried his best to understand and help them and their families. Subsequent reading of relevant books gave me a few clues to the patients' problems. I was by then convinced that the long-term answer to human brokenness does not lie in mere psychological and social therapy (helpful though they are for the emotionally and/or mentally ill person) but in the prevention of such deep unfulfilled emotional needs emerging in the early stages of a person's life. Direct divine intervention is also definitely needed in some

cases. Even though we will make mistakes, we must try to give our best to our children.

In this endeavour, we cannot limit our desire to help only those in our families or church, though we must start there. We need to be the means of God's truth and grace to those in contact with us. The way to overcome negative influences is to flood them out with positive ones, not by ignoring them (Romans 12:21)

iii. Changing Family Commitment

When a society becomes urban in face of industrial or technological development, family patterns and lifestyles may also change.

In a rural setting, traditional families are committed to playing several roles towards their offspring. The family members are their educationists, recreationists, religious models, protectors, financiers and the source of affection and pride. When the same people urbanise, the above roles are taken over by “outsiders”. Schools educate and protect them to some extent, together with the social welfare department and the police. Clubs provide recreation; restaurants and fast food outlets compete to provide for the children with food-which used to be cooked at home by mothers or relatives. If you check the list of provisions, only

constant affection cannot be provided for in the urban environment.

This often leads urbanites to seek affection in casual relationships if not in marriage. But because the general atmosphere in the modern world is that of instant gratification, parents and children alike are overexposed to selfish friendships at the expense of loyalty, responsibility and genuine love. Marriage sometimes slips into a non-binding agreement like a business or work partnership. It is entered into more for emotional companionship rather than for committed relationship. *Rejection of children (sometimes subconscious) and fear of parenthood emerge.* Noticeably, the family eventually comes to be viewed as a husband-wife relationship rather than as a parent-children relationship in content and importance. Even the former is viewed as one of many non-binding commitments. Therefore, children take second place in such families.

In the West, many parents do not simply give away their assets to their families in their life time but tend to lend them things or money when needed. In Asian cultures, parents who can afford it will usually give them freely to their grown up children. I sometimes wonder if this is the reason why many children do not personally take care of their aging relatives in the West. Many even lend

to their parents what they need instead of freely giving it to them. Mutual respect and sacrificial love seem to have grown cold in the name of non-interference and individual rights. In the East, this type of relationship sometimes takes the form of family members becoming business partners. However, Malaysian parent-child relationships in Malaysia have also begun to be negative, partly due to global mobility, social and cultural exchange. Childhood depressions, violence, neglect and abuse of the young and old is common now compared to a few decades ago. Of course human fallenness is the same everywhere, just dressed in different costumes! The speed of change for the worse in human behaviour is shocking to all citizens who care.

In other instances, the dissolution of the extended family lifestyle has brought much freedom as well as pain to many of our Asian families. The more individualistic, non-interference-by-outsiders concept when problems arise within families is becoming common in our urban areas too. Increasingly, professional counsellors are admitting that personal psychotherapy needs to be replaced by family therapy once more. Their roles would probably parallel that of village headmen in the years to come. Within the church, trained lay pastoral counsellors would be in a position to share the caring work. The needs are too

great to be handled by pastors, professional counsellors and religious leaders only.

iv. Changing Age, Education Level, Wealth and Health of Our Population

1. Money neurosis, the excessive admiration of high intellect, beauty and comfort, excessive pursuit of perfect health, craving for pleasure and the problems of aging will become more prominent in the coming years.

We may not assume any more that elderly Asians have less to worry about being cared for by their children. Many young people today do not understand their elderly parents. Some even look down on them, especially if the elders use different ways of getting what they want. The young sometimes label them as manipulative without realising that they are too, but in more sophisticated and educated ways. If the adult children realise that they have also failed their parents in many ways, they may be more patient with their aging parents or take the trouble to understand them.

2. The Malaysian Church in the 90's:
 - i. Many Christians are first or second generation believers with a large proportion in the young adult age group. Therefore, many are at a vulnerable stage of

growth as persons or as younger children of God. They do not find it easy to assess the various doctrinal and behavioural movements that arise in the churches from time to time, whether based in Malaysia or not.

ii. Many converts come from backgrounds steeped in other religious beliefs, doctrines or superstitions. They bring into their new life many *traditions, beliefs and behaviour patterns which are not from the Lord*. It takes time:

- * to *identify* the old;

- * to *desire* to discard the old;

- * to *actually bring* them to *the Lord* to be dealt with.

iii. Since the 1970's, there has been a surge of interest in spiritual matters, coinciding with the refreshing wind of church renewal through healing ministries. By itself, it is good. But learning from our western brethren, we need to be acutely aware of the emerging trends within the western church because whatever happens here is moving at a much faster rate than in the West. We are often getting the remnants of that which may already be harmful to them but which we tend to swallow ignorantly. (See "*Damaged*

Disciples" by Ron & Vicki Burks.) Some clear examples are:

* The prosperity gospel as opposed to Christ's persistent call to self-denial in order to be like Him. After His glorification, He is vindicated. It is so easy to choose to ignore some portions of the Gospel that are inconvenient to us. I am also guilty of such intentional blindness. We need to encourage one another to read and meditate on those passages in the Bible that we do not immediately like and act on them. Only the perfect Lamb of God is to be glorified.

* The desire for personal healing. We naturally want healing as it is indeed a blessing to be well. But do we only seek healing from:

- physical problems,
- mental and emotional hurts and
- oppression OR

do we seek for knowledge of our personal sins so that we may repent and be forgiven by the holy God? (Refer Chapter 1. of *"A Passion for Holiness"* by J.I. Packer)

Where is the emphasis? What is sin? If the emphasis is on the first three types of healing, without conviction of

sin, could not the motive be self-development and *not* so that His image will be formed in us? Where is our focus, on God or on the betterment of ourselves?

It is not easy to recognise the disguise when it looks modern and advanced. I have begun to ask whether we would not have made the same mistakes as our Western brethren have made if the Gospel had reached us first.

iv. Interdenominational spiritual retreats are also often grabbed by Malaysian Christians, sometimes in the hope of becoming more spiritual. However, if revelations given to us at such times do not stir us up to spend more time obeying the Lord Jesus after we return, then we will be back to square one. Sometimes, Christian leaders compare the quality of the various types of “spirituality” as if one may categorise spirituality as Catholic or Augustinian or Protestant. Let us help one another check our motives for attending retreats. If we attend seminars in order to become more developed as Christians, just like the professionals and teenagers attend self-development courses in hotels, then we have completely missed what Jesus expects of us, His disciples. But if we attend retreats so that we will love and obey Him more, then we will be affirming His words,

"My sheep hear My voice and I know them... and they follow Me not a stranger." John 10:1-18

RESULTS OF OUR DEBRIS

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has looked favourably on His people and redeemed them.... to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days." Luke 1:68,73-74

Zechariah's prophecy, when John was born, implies that God saved us so that we will serve Him according to His holiness and righteousness. However, try as we may, we sometime experience a pull us back, slowing us down in the path of ministry laid before us. Part of that pull is due to the *fears* in our lives. These fears surface as a result of the debris of the old person in us. As that debris decreases, our new person in Christ will increase.

1. Fear of People

If we stop and think hard, we may find that we are more fearful of others than we would admit. Take our local scenario as an example. Our whole nation is gearing up to achieve the status of a developed country. This is good by itself. Our people will have basic necessities like health, education and equal career opportunities for

men and women. However, unless we work hard on preventing selfish attitudes in the next few decades, we will feel pressurised into comparing our-selves with one another and with others. This has come true twenty short years down the line from the 1996 1st edition of this book to the 2nd edition in 2016. Few really want to lose out in their efforts to achieve status in the eyes of others. Women like to be like men; men like to be like their golf-playing mates; children like to be like adults before the time is ripe. The list goes on.

Right inside us, we are afraid that others may look down on us or may find out about our weaknesses and sins and make them public instead of lending us a helping hand with them. We are really more afraid of others than we would admit. If we have an uncontrollably bad temper, we will also be afraid in case we blow up at the wrong person at the wrong time, and everyone else knows about it! Yes, we are often more afraid of people than of God.

How do we express our fears? Sometimes we fret, other times we throw our anxiety on others, causing much misunderstanding and hurt especially to those closest and dearest to us. At other times, we may appear extremely uncooperative in team work because we fear certain situations or people. This problem, if present at

home, may cause much misunderstanding to married couples. If living with extended families, complications multiply, often getting out of control. As Christians, we all wish to have loving homes where issues are discussed, not screamed out. Yet, how many of our homes are plagued with disagreements and arguments that do not seem to end.

"Does the Lord not care for us?" we cry in silence and may even harbour anger and resentment against God, even though we feel terribly guilty for doing so.

The truth is that God cares. He cares very much. He is one Person to whom we may bring all our confusion and stress and He will not chase us away or be impatient with us. He is not like man. He will hear us out and gently lead us into His deeper freedom and joy (Habakkuk 2:1-3).

2. Fear of Death

Death is a closed topic to many people. Yet it is one event that all have to experience on earth. Probably it is due to the uncertainty that surrounds it. When will it come? What happens after death? What is it really? Even Christians can be afraid of death, often because we do not really know or trust that God will help us

when we are near death or that He will take us home. We do not understand how grace functions, especially if we feel we have led a selfish life on earth. Will God really forgive and receive me? I am so sinful.

We may have different ways of hiding our fear of death. Some earn all they can while alive and keep their possessions for themselves and their descendants. Others draw up their wills carefully and keep them secret so that at least their children will be filial to them till their death. Still others may avoid the thought of death altogether by keeping themselves busy, so much so that when a loved one suffers from terminal illness, they do not want to discuss the matter at all, making the sick person feel misunderstood and guilty if he should wish to talk about it in order to say farewell. Who wants to cause unnecessary pain to those they love and care for? Yes, death is an unhappy topic to talk about, and so ugly that it needed the Son of God to come from heaven to rescue us from its ugliness. Indeed, Jesus came so that we will be free from this fear of death once and for all.

Different people react or respond to death differently.

I recall one incident at a hospital in London in 1980. Some of the Christian nurses were witnessing to a 60-year old man about God's plan for man's salvation. He

understood the message but indicated that there was still time for him to make a decision as he was just admitted for investigation for a minor renal problem. Then suddenly, while lying on the table for the carrying out of the IVP (intravenous pyelogram), he panicked as the radiographer prepared him for the doctor to inject the dye into his arm vein. He really believed he was going to die. He clung on to the nurse's hands and pleaded for prayers.

Of course, the nurse prayed for him and there and then led him to the heavenly Father. He was born into God's family. Then he went through the investigation calmly. A day or two later, he suddenly died before his discharge.

There was another patient in his early forties who was suffering from terminal liver cirrhosis. Right until the time of his death, whenever anyone of us tried to share God's love with him, he stared at us in total resistance, yet with an intense look of fear in his eyes. As far as we knew, he did not know the Saviour at his death. Yes, the fear of death can grip a person like the tentacles of an octopus inducing a variety of behavioural reactions.

3. The Fear of Satan

This is a real thing because God's enemy comes in various forms to draw us away from God's will. Sometimes he is in the form of visible idols. At other times, he comes in invisible forms such as the love of money, especially when the economy is very good or very bad! This second form is less recognisable and therefore less rejected because it ties in with our old sinful nature of greed and self-centred ambition, pride and individualism (Matthew 7:15; 1 Peter 5:8). Some people are more prone to attacks from the evil one than others.

During a lecture, J.I. Parker (the British theologian and author of *"Knowing God"*) once said something to this effect:

The enemy is not primarily interested in getting at us, mere human creatures. His prime interest is to outdo and dishonour God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, Three in One. He knows that God loves His people so much and has such a wonderful plan for their lives here. He knows that God wants to use His people as holy instruments of His *reconciling grace* on earth. Therefore, the way to steal His glory is to disrupt His purposes even though he was been defeated once and for all when Jesus, the Lamb of God, died on the

cross and rose from the dead in victory over everything and everyone that is made.

It does not matter how he causes that disruption as long as it keeps us away from God's will for us. He does not want us to spend time to be with His Son, Jesus, to become like Him, to be prepared to be His purified bride, clothed in garments of good works (Rev. 19:6-8).

The enemy provides the distractions, be they in the form of excessive entertainment, immoral behaviour, self-ambition in our vocations (inside or outside the church) or broken homes. The aim is to use up the resources that God has given us for His purposes. Then we will have no more resources left or only the leftovers to be used for God's family and kingdom. He also seeks, at times, to take our lives or the lives of those whom we love and care for. But God in His mercy, tells us in Rev.12: 10-11, that the Lamb of God has conquered him already. By witnessing to His grace and not being afraid to die for the Lord, we will be enabled to conquer him too.

We need, therefore, to quieten our hearts and thoughts daily in order to ***listen to God, submit to Him*** and ***resist the evil one*** (James 4:7). If we concentrate too much on the evil one, we may actually be fearing him and not rejecting him. Only the Lord Jesus can confront him for

us because He has conquered his enemy once for all at Calvary on our behalf.

REFLECTION

1. Listen to the Good Shepherd's voice everyday, primarily through the meditation of Scriptures. Know what pleases or displeases Him.
2. Ask Him for wisdom and discernment in your desire to serve Him in His ministry of reconciliation in and through the home.
3. Read as widely and wisely as possible in the areas of family oneness:
 - a) Read the Bible book by book, looking at how God speaks to His people in their times of need in order that we may follow in His footsteps e.g. how He counselled Abraham, Moses, Esther, Ruth, Peter, Zacchaeus and the woman at the well.
 - b) Learn from others humbly when appropriate e.g. in the study of biblical evidence and good scientific psychology which is part of God's general revelation to us.

- c) Listen to the Holy Spirit's still small voice telling us which way to go e.g. to the right, to the left or straight on in daily life (Isaiah 30:19-22).
- 4. Go and minister God's presence, His grace and His will to others in the hope that individuals as well as families and the community will be nurtured for Him. Becoming more obedient to Christ, therefore, is becoming more sanctified and more holy. The focus is on Him, not on self.

CHAPTER 6: GOD'S WILL FOR MY LIFE Married Or Single?

*"... for I have learnt to be content with whatever I have
... I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."
Philippians 4:11,13*

Understanding God's will generally seems difficult enough. Understanding whether we are to stay single or get married is even harder because it is for life ... *"till death do us part for better or for worse"*!

We shall first look at God's views on marriage and singlehood as two ways of life through which we may carry out our vocations here in an imperfect world. Secondly, we shall try to clarify a number of common ideas about singlehood, marriage and falling in love. Then, thirdly, we will remind ourselves of three commonly known basic principles of knowing God's will, with guidance from Dr. John White's book, *"The Fight"*. Finally, I will present a few suggestions for the preparation for our future spouses.

GOD'S VIEWS

A. Marriage

- i. • Marriage is described as a high honour though an imperfect reflection of the perfect relationship between Jesus Christ, the only begotten beloved Son of God, and His church (e.g. Ephesians 5:21-33).
 - Marriage, we understand, is also a permanent and exclusive relationship between a man and a woman on this earth (Luke 20:27--36). There is no human marriage in the next age.
 - Monogamy is God's calling and order for married couples (Matthew 19:4-6) though there are exceptions in an imperfect world.
- ii. • Though marriage often starts, for modern couples, with an emotional attraction, the emotional element is to lead to the use of the will to coexist and to commit oneself sacrificially and unconditionally to the other.
 - It is not to be entered into primarily as a solution to personal unhappiness or loneliness.

Marriage, therefore, is to be differentiated from the wedding ceremony. The **wedding ceremony** is, in the

eyes of society, an occasion to regulate, confirm and legitimise the private and personal marriage covenant between the man and the woman. By itself, **the wedding vows**, without **the personal commitment to care for each other** “for better or for worse, till death do us part”, cannot make a marriage.

- iii. • Marriage between two individuals entails more than just the two persons involved. Each party to this matrimonial contract comes with his/her background that has helped form that particular person and made him/her into a unique personality and character. The relationships that one party has with the others are not severed but carry on in increasing complexity in interaction with the spouse's sets or relationships. If I do not God's marvellous plans for families (by His grace) and just look at human failures, I could have agreed with the following quotes:

"A wedding is two families sending forth a scapegoat each hoping to reproduce itself."

"Whoever human persons are, they are only 'fragments of families'"

(Carl Whitaker)

An Illustration

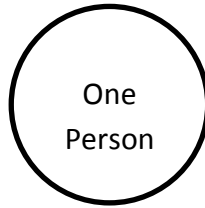
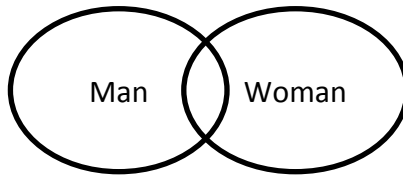


Diagram to Show the Interpersonal Relationships in a Marriage.

Two Persons in a Marriage

Influencing Factors on Both:



- Genetics •Social relationships •Childhood •Faiths
- Families •Cultures •Education formal / informal
- Politics •Natural Environment

This means that when a man and a woman are joined together in marriage, they bring with them all the people and events that have made them who they are (See diagram above.) These influences are not merely external, but internal as well. Central to our personal

internal influences, of course, is one's original sin for which we are held accountable by the holy and righteous Creator God.

When we experience marital conflicts, recalling this reality will stop us from blaming the other party and help us to acknowledge our own responsibility more.

Let us recall the fable about the two goats which met in the centre of a bridge. Both refused to give way. A fight started and ended with both goats falling into the river. Selfish pride says,

"To show that the other person is wrong, I mustn't budge, even if I am also wrong!"

Why?

"So that I can show that the other person has lost and I have won."

Even though there are other relationships with relatives and friends outside the nuclear family, the husband-wife relationship takes priority over the other relationships. As we know from Scriptures, God often uses this temporal priority and exclusivity to portray the absolute, unique and permanent relationship between Him and His people. No one else is to take the place between His people and Him; no other party is to come

between husband and wife (Ephesians 5:21-33). It is within this intimate relationship that parents are entrusted with children, whether they be natural, adopted or fostered children.

However, the oneness shared by members of the body of Christ on earth is a oneness of soul and spirit. Brothers and sisters in Christ do not share oneness in the physical body. However, when they marry within the body of Christ, the particular pair of man and woman share a physical oneness as well. Though it is an incomplete oneness tainted by sin, it is still an exclusive oneness. We often see the physical oneness in marital life rather than the soul and spirit oneness. In our moments of worldly thinking, we assess the compatibility of couples according to their physical more than their soul and spirit attributes. Many of us are guilty of this, no matter how careful we may try. What is visible is usually easier to assess.

What We Experience

Let us consider the couples and families that we tend to admire and seek to imitate.

What do we recall when we think of good marriage relationships? Often, what strikes us is the mutual respect that husbands and wives have for each other.

Even though they may have differences in personality and behaviour, they seem to be able to accept their spouses and seek to understand their needs rather than try to overpower their spouses with their own opinions. They also exude a oneness in life goals, be they Christian or not, and a willingness to forgive and rebuild trust when things go wrong for a while. Caring for the whole person appears to be the rule.

However, as our world is still imperfect, the interaction of two imperfect human beings in a loving relationship does not mean that there will be no disagreements or heated arguments. The two persons in a marriage covenant come with past influences. Marriage is altogether a complicated matter, often romanticized into unreal bliss. That could be one reason why, nowadays, so many disillusioned couples choose separation or divorce.

Nevertheless, there is hope. It will require persistent love, forgiveness and hard work. Jesus, the Son of God, changed water into wine at the start of His public ministry at a wedding celebration. Could not that be symbolic of His ability to change every marriage into one with renewed hope for celebration and mutual encouragement? But, lest you feel that such celebration of His goodness may only be experienced within

marriage, let us move on to His views on the vocation of singlehood. We need to remember that a married man or woman is no more whole than one who remains single. The Lord Jesus remained single as incarnate man and He was complete.

B. Singlehood

Each human being is made to live in co-humanity with the rest of humankind. The community in which we are placed comprises both single and married people. Christian communities such as certain student or professional Christian groups, for example, are not representative of a church because they consist of people of the same peer group and sometimes of one gender. They may meet a need in a certain phase of our Christian lives; but to experience wholesome community life, we need to be integrated into a local church fellowship that comprises singles and families of all ages and backgrounds.

In Matthew 19:10-12, the Lord Jesus gives us three basic reasons why some people remain single.

A group of Pharisees had just questioned Him about divorce. He explained that from the beginning, God meant marriage to be a permanent institution on earth.

There was no provision for a trial run in marriage. Due to man's hardness of heart, Moses granted divorce, presumably, to prevent abuse or neglect of spouses due to adultery. They could only divorce their spouses on the grounds of faithfulness within marriage.

The disciples, sensing that marriage could well lead to painful experiences instead of bliss, commented that it would be better not to be married. Jesus then took the opportunity to clarify the reasons why some men and women do not get married.

One group, He says, has been eunuchs from birth. I guess this could include those born with congenital abnormalities whereby the anatomical differentiation of sexuality may be vague or absent.

The next group may remain single because others have made them so. One possible example of such a reason for singlehood is the psychological victim of rape or any other sexual abuse whereby the person just becomes unable to relate to the other gender naturally. False guilt and confusion as to their eligibility for marriage sometimes plague them for the rest of their lives. Another example in this second group that is rather common in Asia is the obedient and filial daughter who, for the sake of taking care of the younger siblings in the family or aging dependent parents, grudgingly forsakes

marriage out of false guilt impressed upon her by possessive mothers or fathers who are afraid of being left alone. In this instance, there is often a love-hate relationship between the possessive parent and the daughter. Both are entangled in a mutual dependency state. Wars have also left many more women alive than men in the past, thus leaving a higher ratio of women to men, causing more women to remain single.

Finally, there are eunuchs who make them themselves eunuchs for the sake of heaven, Jesus explained to His disciples.

Peter C.Wagner, in his book *"Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow"*, encourages singlehood and marriage to be appreciated with thanksgiving. The single believer experiences fewer restrictions in the use of his time for the Lord but may feel lonely more often than the married colleague. However, the married man or woman, though enjoying family companionship, often wishes that he or she has more freedom to serve Him anywhere and at any time.

Jesus, in the above passage, closes this topic with these words:

"He who is able to receive this let him receive it..."

We may thus understand that He gives us the freedom of choice to ask for grace to remain single or to get married. However, we are not to choose to remain single for selfish reasons, which, in modern days, sometimes surface in the form of arguments like:

"We do not like the fuss of having children"

"We do not wish to have to relate with in-laws"

"We prefer a more luxurious and carefree lifestyle" or

"We will marry only someone of a certain socially acceptable standing".

As in the parent-child bond, the marital bond is also a relative one compared to the eternal bond between Christ and His church. In the New Testament, the call to marriage is a relative command, though in the Old Testament the men are actively encouraged to get married. It was a great blessing for the couple to bear a son to continue the lineage and responsibilities of a father. As the Father--children and Saviour-church relationships deepen, the other relationships (parent-child, husband-wife) will come second to them, and will soon fade with time as death will part us (See also *"Single and Human"* by Ada Lum).

CLARIFICATIONS

1. God made marriage to be an exclusive and permanent partnership on earth (Matthew 19:4-6). Today's lax era that allows several sexual partners is not anything new. Traditional cultures sometimes condoned the same type of behaviour. Intentionally arranged single parent-child families (whereby a woman has a sexual relationship with a man just to have a child of her own), cohabitation of two persons of the opposite gender and homosexual relationships are not ordained or approved by the Creator (Grid, Autumn 1994).
2. Falling in love is usually made out to be a surge of good emotions for someone of the opposite gender, with a view to experiencing physical closeness. This may happen at any age, commencing from about the stage of puberty. This feeling and desire may be one-sided or mutual. Hence, by itself, it is not a valid indication that you are really the right person to marry the one you adore. If this happens around the adolescent years, it is called "*puppy love*", implying that such feelings will change with time. As we grow older and have formed some basic inner values and goals in life, we may be better able to control these strong emotional surges. However, we may still make mistakes when we let our emotions run ahead of what we know is right in God's

sight. Some adults, however, seem to be stuck in the *"puppy love"* stage and are not able to move on to make a commitment in marriage. Even if married, they cause much anxiety to their respective spouses with their *frequent episodes of falling in love* with someone else! It may be advisable for such a person to see a professional counsellor for help.

3. Whether one finally gets married or remains single is irrelevant as far as God's acceptance of us is concerned. Each one of us is special and beautiful to Him. He loves us just as much either way, even if friends, relatives and society do not agree. Let me illustrate this point with a story:

In the mid-seventies, I met an Indian Christian nurse in Melbourne. She was in her thirties and endowed with a cheerful and pleasant personality. Being keen to understand others, I enquired of her as to whether she was worried over her singlehood; many of her contemporaries would have been married by then. In a matter-of-fact way, she replied:

"Bee, my sister once shared this with me..."

In the world, there are three types of people who consider marriage.

The first type says,

'I have to get married, I must get married...so, it does not matter who I get married to. I want to get married!' Consequently, this group will not be fussy or choosy about the type of spouses they have. As long as they are married, they can carry on in life reasonably happy.

The second type says,

'I want to get a certain type of spouse. However, if I really cannot find one of my preference, someone with similar qualities will do.'

"This group," my friend continued, "will be choosy but not fussy. They will also be contented in their marriage."

The third type says,

'I want to get married, but only to one type of person...If I cannot meet that particular type of person, I will prefer to stay single.' These are both fussy and choosy!"

My dear friend concluded, "I belong to this last group of people...and this is why I am still single and contented!"

THE PRINCIPLES OF KNOWING GOD'S WILL

Singles may have these questions in mind:

- i. Does God want me to get married?
- ii. If so, who will be my spouse?

At a practical level, the person we wish to marry must at least be attractive in our eyes. Beauty often truly lies in the beholder's eyes. External beauty or attractiveness is not an essential asset but inner maturity is. Some are out to exalt and use those external attributes to get what they selfishly desire e.g. money, fame or favour.

In such an important matter, where emotions are necessary in order to build a lasting relationship, it is easier to weigh the pros and cons of entering into marriage if we have sorted out our principles before getting emotionally involved. Most of us would probably already have certain principles. I will merely suggest some guidelines offered by the late Dr. John White (formerly a retired psychiatrist, Christian author and teacher of God's word) in his book, *"The Fight"*.

1. God will guide us if we humbly seek Him

The psalmist says in Psalm 25:8-9,

*"Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore He instructs sinners in the way.
He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble His ways."*

In order for us to know God's will in any area of our lives, our attitude needs to be one of humility. We have to acknowledge that we know less than God, and that He alone knows everything. We need to desire to share His outlook, to obey Him and to trust His fatherly goodness.

This kind of thinking goes contrary to what the world around us believes in. We are told in no uncertain terms that to improve ourselves in this age, we are to determine what we want, assert ourselves and go get it! Such achievers are often glorified in the media and they pass on to us a message of self-fulfilment, often at the expense of others' needs. Young adults are the primary target of such heavy propaganda. Recently, a local newspaper published a section on the lifestyle of the Malaysian 'Yuppies' – those between the age of 20 and 40 who earn high salaries. These are the prime spenders

and are encouraged to spend so that businessmen become richer. This creates a bottomless pit of wrong desires in the hearts of thousands of other young people who seek to imitate the yuppies' lifestyle even if they cannot afford to do so. Such selfish desires often affect the way we chose our spouses. But this is not what the Gospel of Jesus Christ teaches.

Jesus tells us in His word that God will speak and give us answers if our will is to do His Father's will (John 7:17). We have to be humble before the Almighty but compassionate God of the universe. If we are unsure of meeting the right spouse, let us face our fears of remaining single for the rest of our lives or fears of marrying the wrong person and bring these fears to Him. Let us ask Him to show us His values and priorities for us.

2. God is more interested in our overall moral choice than the exact details of choice

God wants us to be equally yoked with those that are His children. Therefore, we need to put this high up in our priority list when considering who to date. There is no need to ask for God's will when His will has been shown clearly in His written word. Whether the person is a Chinese, Indian or of any other race is not the main

issue; it is also not important whether the person in mind is rich or poor, educated or illiterate. These are factors that need careful and prayerful consideration, but they are not moral issues.

3. **When God leads His people, He goes with them but may not show them everything all at once**

When Moses asked God regarding their entering Canaan, God told him that He would go with him and will give him rest; but God did not tell Moses everything in advance. How then can we know which way to turn when we arrive at a T-junction with regard to marriage? I suggest that we talk to the Lord about the matter. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to us. Be ready to listen when He does speak and obey promptly. Otherwise, we may have to wait longer to hear His voice.

4. **God is more interested to guide us than we are willing to follow Him**

The Holy Spirit has been sent to teach us which way to turn (Isaiah 30:19-22). The Lord knows that we are often afraid to cast out our idols. But when He shows us His better way, we will be willing to set aside our own ways.

PREPARATION

How then, some may ask, do we prepare ourselves for our future spouse if and when we do get married?

I believe that the best we can give to our future husband or wife is not so much in the area of external refinement (e.g. in the use of cosmetics, the pursuit of a career or the acquisition of material possessions) but in the area of life preparation. Allow me to explain.

Paul writes in Romans 12:1 & 2,

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect."

and John writes in Revelations 19:6-8,

" .. .Hallelujah!

*For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and exult and give Him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and His bride has made herself ready;
to her it has been granted to be clothed*

*with fine linen, bright and pure'
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints."*

If we, as Christ's bride, realise that we are to prepare ourselves for Him, our Bridegroom, then we can be sure that as we have that overall perspective and live accordingly, we will definitely be easier to live with after we get married.

I once read in a devotional book that some people are like velvet: smooth, cool and a pleasure to live with. Others are like sand paper: rough, heated up when in close contact and hurtful to be near to. Just imagine what it would be like for a velvet type of person to marry a sand paper type, or for a sand paper type to marry another person of his kind.

*Let us begin now to ask God for grace and mercy to
make us easier to live with.*

We need to renew our minds by the reading and meditation of *Scriptures*. Our views of God, of man, of woman, of children, of relatives and friends, of life goals, of money, of things that last versus things that do not, will then come in line with His word.

REFLECTION

1. Look into the mirror and tell yourself that Jesus loves you as you are. Learn to love yourself too.
2. Allow Him to minister to you in your areas of weaknesses through whichever means He chooses (Isaiah 53:4-5).
3. Remember...

**Blossom where you are...single or married
because
GOD LOVES YOU**

CHAPTER 7: FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION The Necessary Process

“Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

Ephesians 4:31-32

The Good News of Jesus Christ our Saviour is this: He has forgiven us our sins and He loves us unconditionally. He has been merciful to us. He has the authority to bring us to His Father. Therefore, we need to forgive and encourage each other to forgive - God's way. When two or more imperfect human beings live together, they are bound to step on each other's toes. Without true forgiveness, there can be no real and growing fellowship. Christ has given us the ability to forgive others by His forgiving of our sins against God (Luke 5:24; Ephesians 4:32; Matthew 6:14-15).

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

(I am indebted to Dr. D.A. Seamands for his permission to reuse materials from his lecture notes on Forgiveness

and Reconciliation, and from his sermons on Biblical Motifs – repeated figures in a design – for Psychological Problems in Spiritual Issues (sections A, C to F). Some of the points have been mentioned in “Deepening Joy” and other books subsequently.)

Note: It is recommended that the reader meditates on the relevant Scripture passages as we progress.

- Forgiveness is a one-way street of grace extended by the person(s) wronged to the wrongdoer(s).
- Reconciliation is a two-way street of friendship between two persons or parties that were once at enmity.

Jesus Christ forgave those who murdered Him before they (including us) even knew that they had sinned against Him.

Reconciliation, however, is effected only when the sinner acknowledges his sins, receives God’s forgiveness and becomes His friend.

In the same manner, God expects us to take the initiative to forgive the wrongdoer even if the latter does not know that he has wronged us.

Forgiveness does not always lead to reconciliation e.g. an abused person may not be able to meet her abuser if the latter has not repented.

Nevertheless, we should always seek for reconciliation if the person is alive. However, wait for God's timing. Do not add false guilt to the forgiver by asking him to guarantee reconciliation. Consider what the Son of God did for us on the cross and consider the time lapse before we received Him as our Saviour and Friend.

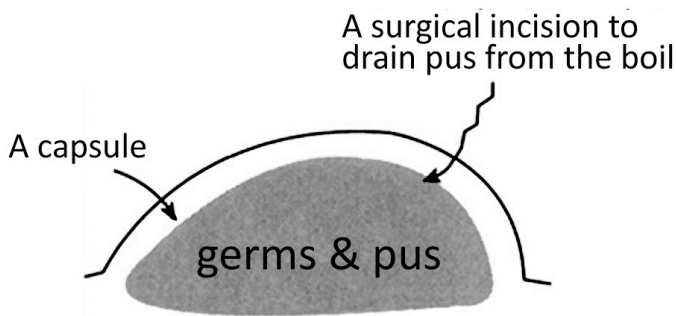
Please make brief notes as you read. This will help you put into practice what the Lord may be saying to you.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF UNFORGIVENESS

An unforgiving attitude is a sin and it causes damage to us one way or another. We are encouraged to get rid of the sin of unforgiveness so that we can increasingly live the abundant life that Christ has given to us (Hebrews 12:1-2). Let me illustrate this with a diagram.

Key:

- * Wrong done to us – germs
- * Hurts in us – pus
- * Unforgiveness - the capsule of a boil
- * Forgiveness - the therapeutic release of pus



A Boil (Abscess)

The wrong done to us and the effects of the wrong are like boils in us. Sometimes we are aware of them, like boils in our skin. Other times, we are not aware of them, like boils deep in our bodies.

The wrong done to us acts like the germs that cause the pus of hurts (damaged emotions) in our lives.

An unforgiving person holds in the wrong and the hurts in his life like the lining that surrounds the pus of a boil.

Therefore, forgiveness is *like the prick of a doctor's blade that releases the germs and pus of hurts* caused by the infection in the boil.

As a boil causes physical weakness and illness, so an unforgiving attitude causes painful feelings that may lead to sin. Further, just as at times an internal boil may be detected only by other sign, such as a fever, so a hidden or masked unforgiving attitude may show up now and then in ways beyond our expectations. Below are some means of diagnosing unforgiveness:

1. We cannot look the person in the eye when we meet him. In fact, we will try all we can so that we do not have to face him.
2. If we have to talk to the person, our voice and posture may betray us. We are tense, harsh, haughty or artificial. We build a fence around ourselves to keep him out.
3. We cannot rejoice with the person when he is blessed. We find it difficult or are unwilling to pray for his good.
4. We secretly wish that God will teach him a lesson e.g. by sending someone else to do something bad to him so that he will feel as hurt or more hurt than we felt

when he wronged us. In other words, we want to collect debts from him instead of set him free.

5. We control our anger and submerge it beyond recognition. Instead of being angry with the person and thrashing out the matter with him, one day, we suddenly throw a tantrum or get into a rage over some small disagreement with someone else whose appearance, behaviour or personality resembles that of the wrong doer. Usually, this hidden anger shows up against someone close to us e.g. a spouse, a child, a boss, an employee, or even a pastor who is a symbol of authority over us.

We may also become overzealous in seeking justice for ourselves or others in society, often without much real success because our motives are distorted. In Asian culture, we are discouraged from talking things over with those in authority over us, especially when they have wronged us. Thus, unforgiveness is one of the commonest sources of hidden and pent up anger leading to the sin of resentment and indirect revenge. Subconsciously, that resentment in us is released temporarily and we may exclaim, after we get into a rage,

“Well, it isn’t me to do such a thing in public!”

But it is us. If it occurs once, we may ignore it; but if it keeps repeating itself, it is advisable that we seek counsel from someone we trust. We need to pray and ask the Lord to reveal the cause(s).

"If we confess our sins, He who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

He will also heal our wounds (Isaiah 53:3-5).

PROPER UNDERSTANDING AND EXPERIENCE OF FORGIVENESS

The Lord Jesus does not give us, His followers, a choice when it comes to forgiving those who have hurt us because forgiveness is in the heart of the whole Gospel. He has commanded us to repent of our sins of unforgiveness so that we will be forgiven by Him and cleansed from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9 & Matthew 6:14-15). If we refuse to forgive others, it could be because we have not received or appreciated God's forgiveness of our sins in the first place (Matthew 18:21-35).

Forgiveness is NOT:

1. *Overlooking the wrong*, and covering it up.

2. *Excusing or whitewashing the wrong.* Joseph saw his brothers' misdeed as a misdeed (Genesis 50:20)
3. *Explaining away the wrong and excusing the wrongdoer because of his weakness.* The need to psychoanalyse is particularly strong in close relationships such as with parents, siblings, teachers, pastors or bosses.
4. *Taking the blame.* Many Christians think that they are being good by taking the blame, but it is a neurotic behaviour caused by false guilt.

We need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us identify the wrong done to us, really feel the pain, and then hand it all to the Lord. Otherwise, we may be praying for forgiveness and healing of something that does not exist and miss the real wrong that needs to be forgiven, and the real wound that needs to be healed.

Forgiveness is:

1. *Facing the specific wrong* - Realism

Advice: Write down the 'hit' and 'hurt' list. You may tear it up later, after you have forgiven. Start now if names come to your mind.

2. Facing your hurts and pains

One way to identify the depth of our hurts and pain is to ask ourselves this question:

“How did I feel about it at the time - rejected, humiliated and ashamed, unfairly compared, neglected or deprived, unjustly treated, put down, betrayed and/or abandoned?”

3. Facing your anger and resentment

Ephesians 4:25-31 states, “Be angry...but don’t sin.”

Do not deny your resentment with Christian clichés such as

“Of, course, as a Christian, I have forgiven him!”

because if you bury the hatred, you bury the possibility of healing.

4. Facing the CROSS

Herein lies true healing.

Ephesians 4:32 “...and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

Christ has taken upon Himself the guilt, punishment and shame of our sins. The question we need to ask ourselves is:

“Since God has written off the big debt I owe Him, how can I collect the small debt from others?”

In fact, if it is true that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, then He has also forgiven that person that particular sin against me. That means that there is no debt left to collect from him. Therefore, to forgive my enemy is to practise justice in the eyes of God.

Forgiveness - A Division of Labour

1. It is a **crisis**...the human part: the will

Q. “Are you WILLING to forgive that person?”

If not

Q. “Are you willing to be made willing by God?”

Mark 9:24

2. It is a **process**...God’s part: the feelings

This process of the healing of the feelings takes time. The healing of feelings creeps in like a cargo train.

The exercise of the will is a matter of a split second, like the launching of rocket!

Remember:

God does NOT put guilt on us when we are working on the process of changing feelings. While waiting for new positive feelings for the person whom we have forgiven, waves of old negative feelings may overwhelm us repeatedly, especially when we meet again.

Therefore, the 5 R's explained below may help us to resist the attacks of negative feelings. I have personally found them extremely useful when caught in moments of negative feelings in the path of receiving the completion of His healing grace.

THE FIVE R'S

1. **Recall** that the negative feelings are from Satan (Rev. 12:10). False guilt is a major cause of depression and tends to get one into vicious cycles, even after seeking God's forgiveness.
2. **Reiterate** that you have forgiven. That is why forgiving before witnesses (in privacy) is helpful. They affirm you and hold you accountable to your decision. Forgiveness works in the context of His community (James 5:13-20).

3. **Refuse the guilt of not having forgiven because Jesus has taken it away.**
4. **Remember that God is faithful in changing us.**
5. **Rejoice that God is pleased with your having forgiven those who hurt you and is with you at every step of the healing process.**

FORGIVENESS INCLUDES:

1. Abandoning the old and accepting the new way of thinking, relationships and lifestyles. For example, if someone who wronged me is very rich, I may want to be richer in order to get even with him. This type of desire is actually caused by Money Neurosis, where money is only a secondary gain to the primary gain of Revenge. Both are displeasing to God.
2. Assuming responsibility for our current behaviour. This implies that we cannot blame others for our present situations any longer. Listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit and not to the tape recorded in the past playing those negative words. For example, *"It's her fault...It's her fault...It's her fault!"* If we behave in such a way as to hurt others, we must stop such behaviour and be willing to behave in a more mature and responsible manner.

3. Receiving God's forgiveness (1 John 1:9). We need to forgive ourselves as God has forgiven us sin(s) of resentment and/or revenge. If we don't, we suggest that our standard is higher than God's.
4. Finding visual aids (e.g. burn or flush down the toilet the list of 'hits' and 'hurts' recorded) to help you face the reality of your forgiveness. Use sanctified imagination but don't go overboard!
5. Making restitution e.g. returning something; meeting the other person to sort out a misunderstanding (great need to be diplomatic); reconciliation i.e. renewing of friendship. Always seek reconciliation if the other person is alive but await God's time. We may have to continue to live with unfriendly relatives who have wronged us, for example.
6. Discovering God's purpose in all things (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28)
7. Facing Your Resentment Against God. This is particularly common in those brought up in Christian homes, and even more so in Christian leaders' homes, because God has often been misrepresented by those who are supposed to know and love Him. It is such an exhilarating joy to be forgiven of this sin by the merciful God. He understands that, often, we are not directly angry at Him but at our distorted image of Him.

HINDRANCES TO THE FIRST STEP OF FORGIVENESS (Which Is To Will To Forgive)

- i. Ignorance of the need to forgive and be forgiven. Read Acts 2:37-42. The people of Jerusalem had not heard the Gospel and how it related to their sinful state. However, when they understood God's truth, they obeyed immediately.
 - ii. Unwillingness to let go of the comfortable past, even if it was bad, for the unknown future, even if it is good. *It is often easier to live with the known but bad and hurting situation than to learn to live all over again with a new and good situation.* (e.g. in John 5:1-9, the man in the passage could have continued to live on the sympathy of others if he were not healed. As it turned out, he probably had to earn his own living soon after he was healed, a rather formidable task at near middle-age! No wonder Jesus had to ask him, "Do you want to be made well?")
 - iii. Unwillingness to trust God to take care of us.
- 1. Read sequentially:
Genesis 12:1 and 15:1-6; 2 Chronicles 20:7; James 2:23

Abraham was called God's friend because of his faith in Him, not because he was sinless.

Hence, the critical issue is to remember that:

- Faith in God's word as His command implies obedience and
- Faith in God's word as His promise implies trust

2. Read Genesis 12:7, 13:18 and 22:9

Abraham constantly built an altar in remembrance of God's call on his life. That altar had to be strong and stable. But Abraham moved his tents of daily shelter. He was willing to let go of temporal comfort and endure the uncertain changing circumstances of life BECAUSE GOD had promised to be faithful to him and his descendants.

He was willing to leave his old ways of thinking, feeling and living in order to receive God's blessings of new thinking, feeling and living. He was willing to let go of the past in order to reach out for God's good in the present and future. Ultimately, the question for the hurt person is, *"Am I willing to trust and obey Him to take care of me if I stop collecting debts from the one who hurt me?"* **Therefore, we may conclude that at the root of emotional wounds, there is a spiritual need.** This is the need to trust God for the uncomfortable unknown

future of freedom when I put on His new perspective of life, instead of dwelling in the comfortable known but painful past.

Quote:

*If the **Heart** of healing is **Forgiveness**,
then
the **Head** of healing is **Providence**.
D.A. Seamands*

REFLECTION

Ponder on the words of the hymn

He can turn the tides and calm the angry sea.
He alone decides who writes a symphony.
He lights every star that makes our darkness bright.
He keeps watch all through each long and lonely night.
He still finds the time to hear a child's first prayer.
Saint or sinner call and always find Him there.
*Though it makes Him sad to see the way we live,
He'll always say, "I forgive."*

He can grant a wish or make a dream come true.
He can paint the clouds and turn the grey to blue.
He alone knows where to find the rainbow's end.
He alone can see what lies beyond the bend.
He can touch a tree and turn the leaves to gold.
He knows every lie that you and I have told.
*Though it makes Him sad to see the way we live,
He'll always say, "I forgive... I... forgive."*

Richard Mullan

Part III

The Best is Yet to Come!

CHAPTER 8: GOD'S NEW ETERNAL FAMILY The Grand Finale

"When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ..." Romans 8:15-17

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband..." Revelations 21:1-2

Just one or two generations ago, nuclear and extended families were rarely differentiated in practice or thinking in Malaysian families. Both accepted the fact of their relationships and interdependence. The good and the bad that happened to anyone within a nuclear family affected the extended family. There was no such thing as *"It's not my business!"* What has happened in the last fifty years or so?

Millions of individuals and families are reaping the adverse consequences of urbanization in Asia. The nuclear family has become a norm through the gradual

and subtle spread of popular urban culture. The older generation has grown generally healthier and more independent as educational and health services improve. Many older people want to be with younger family members but do not feel free to ask to live with them. They would rather say that they do not wish to trouble or disturb the young who have families and careers to look after. Though there may be reason for some to live apart, I gather (from the feedback of patients, friends and relatives' experiences) that most would eventually benefit from an extended family lifestyle. I believe it would be best if one could live near family members.

Is the extended family lifestyle really on the way out? Some who tend to follow trends may like to think so. Yet, though such a trend is inevitable as cities develop and societies grow older, the need for the contribution of our extended family members has not decreased but has increased tremendously. Women now seek to work outside the homes. Maids, baby-sitters and childcare centres seem to have taken the place of intimate family sharing and the caring discipline of children by parents and/or relatives.

Relatives serve a vital function, I recognize, even if just as a stop gap measure as fathers and mothers bring up

the next generation. Natural families need one another for healthy living and learning even though such privileges come with added responsibilities, of course.

But I believe there is a better way that God has already prepared for us. Did He not foresee our needs in a technological age? Allow me to put in writing what churches often teach but seldom put into practice:

The body of Christ is the permanent extended family that God ordains for the nurture and growth of His people, whereas the natural extended family is but a temporal family structure for the nurture and growth of all human beings while on earth. For Christians, these two types of extended families overlap in this world.

If indeed it is true that the kingdom of God transcends genetic inheritance, culture, gender and status, then should we not take seriously this challenge to think of one another and treat one another as God's larger family in the truest and best sense of the word? Of course, this does not mean that we exclude our natural extended families as if they are non-existent or unnecessary. In fact, the reality of God's presence and love within the church family will definitely spill over to the love and care of our natural extended families. For example, if a nuclear family with very young children has great difficulty coping with the care of their aging

and dependent parents (a reality nowadays as other siblings could have emigrated), it would just be natural for God's extended family to chip in and help. This may be what Jesus means when He says,

"...by this shall all man know that you are My disciples if you have love one for another..."

If it were not for a first-hand experience of the possibility and reality of church family life that goes beyond polite communication, I would not have known what I have missed. In the 80's, my family was blessed with the warmth and richness of our local church "extended family" as we struggled to juggle ministry within and outside the church and care for the family. My family then consisted of my elderly mother who was almost totally dependent on others for her daily needs, our toddler son, my husband and me. If it were not for the acceptance by our brothers and sisters in Christ and their frequent and willing support in any way we needed, I would have succumbed to unavoidable severe depression. Koinonia (communion and oneness between individual Christians and between Christian communities because of our communion and oneness with God in Jesus Christ) took on real meaning and significance for us as never before. It is out of the

experience of this kind of friendship that I share this vision of the church-extended family.

In the first place, are you, the reader, convinced that extended families are needed in our daily lives or that nuclear families are self-sufficient?

Let us discuss these alternatives in the light of those who have experienced both types of family structures and in the light of what is revealed in Scripture. As we search the Scriptures, let us remind ourselves that God expects us to use our minds to pick up principles for current applications. As John the apostle said, not every one of Jesus' deeds could be recorded for us because it was just not logistically possible.

FROM THE NATURAL NUCLEAR - EXTENDED FAMILIES TO THE NEW FAMILY OF GOD

The nuclear family is usually defined as the parents and their young and dependent children, whether adopted or genetically theirs. However, in some Western societies today, the definition of the nuclear family has been extended, in some quarters, to the single-parent family concept, the girlfriend-boyfriend cohabitation cum children concept, and even to the homosexual family concept. Once the established authoritative voice of Scripture or biblically acceptable tradition is silenced,

men and women no longer have any reason for restricting the definition to just the parents and their children. It is a sad fact that this type of thinking has crept into our Malaysian scene.

Further, in Western and other large cities of the world, families usually live without grandparents or other members of the extended families, in the same house, for several reasons - insufficient space, financial constraints or the desire for privacy. May not this be due to an individualistic philosophy which encourages self-development to the exclusion of others? However, I would like to add that there are still many loving and caring families in the West, even though they are often overshadowed by the many less caring ones.

In the East, Singapore is one country where the government actively encourages the younger citizens to live near to their aging parents or relatives. This is an attempt to recapture the lifestyle of extended families. Of course, we may excuse ourselves and say that this is possible because of the relatively uniform society where, having enough to eat and live, they can think about arrangements like this, whereas we in Malaysia have so many other things to think about.

However, if we do not start thinking hard about what type of family pattern we want to build, we may lose

our children, our society or even our minds and souls in the near future as we engage in the pursuit of industrialisation.

In Old Testament times, living together in the natural extended families was the norm, such as in the case of Jacob and his 12 children. When one suffered from famine, all suffered; when food was brought home from Egypt, all ate. Major decisions were made as a family, though the head of the household, being the oldest, had the final say. (Note that Middle-Eastern culture is similar to Asian ones in traditions.)

In the New Testament, however, teaching on family relationships appears to centre on the marriage and parent-child relationships. If we read Ephesians chapter 5, for example, it looks as if Paul emphasised the strength of the nuclear family.

But if we take a closer look at other passages, we will realise that the intra-nuclear family relationships are to be strengthened for another purpose which can only mature out of the stable *husband-wife* and *parent-child relationships*. These relationships are a *launching pad* for all other relationships within *the new family of God* (1 Timothy 5:1-2). God, in His wisdom, must have foreseen the development of city family patterns and provided for us the greater family support which every

person needs, in addition to parental and spouse support! In fact, James, the 'natural' brother of Jesus, argues that not to meet the genuine needs of our Christian brothers and sisters is to be guilty of the sin of faithlessness (James 2:14-17). In addition, Luke, the physician, recorded for us the beautiful family life of the first believers of the Lord Jesus (Acts 2:43-47). Again, we do not need to be reminded of what Jesus Himself commanded us to do:

"...love one another as I have loved you..." John 13:34-35

However, this does not mean that such caring and worshipping churches are born overnight.

Some mega churches, for example, portray a corporate culture. Some leaders have been saying to their members,

"If you don't fit in, just leave and look for another church."

Well, would they say that to their own genetically related family members? Of course not. Because for better or for worse, they know that they are related and they would try to find some way of communication so that they may live together peaceably. So, if we ask someone one to leave the church that God has formed

as His family, we may be believing in something else - the god of the business world. There, if one is of no use to the boss or does not wish to toe his line, one quits. Therefore, we need to build such loving churches *intentionally*. We need to encourage one another to live as God's large family.

Inevitable Implications

Belonging to God's new family starts with the second birth of a person through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in his life. Apart from Jesus' sacrifice for sins on the cross, there is no way of becoming a child of God the Father. Blood ties do not count (John 1:12-13). Voluntary associations and the choice of becoming a member of the organised church do not make us part of God's new family in the sense that we cannot join the living body of Christ like joining a club. A club is an *organisation*; a church is an *organism*. The difference is crucial; one needs to know whether he is in one or the other or both (which is the commonest) entities.

The call to care for one another as family members did not come primarily from any government or human institution. The call to care comes from the eternal Creator and Father God. Our adoption into God's family comes from God's initiative and total enabling, through "*losses*" on our side in exchange for the exquisite "*gain*"

of becoming His beloved children in Jesus Christ. One day, when we see Him face to face, even our natural parent-child and husband-wife relationships must go. Jim Elliot, the late missionary to South America, summed up this gain like this:

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

God alone is our eternal Father, and Jesus Christ is not only our Brother but also our Bridegroom, something which we still do not fully comprehend. Therefore, all believers in this true God are long term siblings, whether we are also related as natural parents, children, husbands, wives or in-laws while in this world.

- We have become the blessed household of faith!
- We have a new reality of "belonging", as members of God's family, to the household of the living God because God has adopted us as His beloved children through Jesus Christ (Romans 8:14-17)!
- We have a new measure of "worth" because God chose us (Deuteronomy 7:7- 9); a new framework of "equality", whether single or married, with children or childless, because we are all assigned to be brothers and sisters of His Son.

(Read 1 Corinthians 12:26, Hebrews 2:11-12 and "On Being Family" by Ray S, Anderson & Dennis B. Guernsey).

CENTRAL TO THIS NEW SPIRITUAL FAMILY ARE TWO RELATIONSHIPS:

- i. ***The Father-Child Relationship*** between God and all believers (John 17:1; Hebrews 2:10-13).

This is a covenant relationship created and initiated by God the Father, and Jesus Christ His Son. God's grace reaches out to us through His plan of redemption in His beloved Son. We may enjoy fellowship and inheritance with Him who has become our Brother. Being His children brings a sense of security and worth for us. God is now our Father.

- ii. ***The Bridegroom-Bride Relationship*** between the Lord Jesus and His church (Revelations 19:6-8).

This calls for intimacy and oneness between two parties who choose to mutually love one another in deepening ways with Christ taking the initiative. Our human marital intimacy is only a temporal sign of this eternal intimacy between Christ and His church. A hymn writer once

exulted, *"How marvellous, how wonderful, is the Saviour's love for me!"*

The Holy Spirit is the One who enables God's children to enter into and to grow in these two relationships. Perhaps, by now, we are beginning to see the wisdom of God in ordaining the parent-child and husband-wife relationships in our natural families. These temporal relationships are to prepare us for the eternal ones with God.

If only we could get together to give this reality of God's new "extended" family on earth some thought and action. If we do not believe in the reality of God's family, then we cannot give a reason for our faith in His wisdom of making us social beings. We emerge first from within our natural families and then become His eternal family.

- If we do believe in its reality, then our actions must follow our belief.
- Are we willing and ready to take the first step of trusting one another?
- Are we also willing and ready to take the second step of sacrificial risk by getting closer to each other so that we may be really His people before a watching world.

Jesus said,

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

John 13:34-35

A FEW PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR LOCAL CHURCHES

1. Fostering and adopting:

Those who have the time, means and gifts, could consider this opportunity to bring children into the warmth and love of God's new extended family. Are we able to visualise the joy of our Father as He sees us loving children for Him? Perhaps this is one way whereby some of us may become missionaries in our homes. This could also reduce the empty-nest syndrome for some while effectively helping many believers to use their assets fruitfully for the sake of the Lord.

2. Aunties and Uncles:

In small towns, neighbours and relatives help keep an eye on your children; in cities, they may be accused of interfering in family affairs. Should not the sons and daughters of the loving Father keep an eye on one another?

We could thank those who correct our children or who let us know when they misbehave so that we may appropriately help our children learn discipline and good manners, and develop a helpful and grateful attitude. Community concern is an encouragement to children as they feel that they are noticed and cared for. Of course, children should not be over supervised to the detriment of their tender consciences.

3. Baby-sitters:

Baby-sitting, disciplining and teaching of our church children by the grandaunts and grand-uncles, aunts and uncles in church may be the best way of helping out where parents need extra help from outside their nuclear families. I do not think all modern women will stay home to nurture their little ones even though it could be the best for their children. So, if the latter are going to be babysat at all, why not be babysat by God's

extended family? Let the maids clean the homes, but let the church family nurture the children. Graduates could opt to babysit for others if they have a special love for children. Of course, babysitting too many children together would definitely defeat the purpose of providing tender nurture, especially to those under seven years old.

Some graduate mothers may love to do just this for their church children but dare not make the proposal for fear of being labelled "lovers of money"! Do we have a preconceived belief that child nurturing as a *vocation* is not as essential as other *vocations*? Perhaps parents could consider paying them fairly.

4. Needs of full-time Christian workers and mothers

Gone are the times, I believe, when children of missionaries or pastors need to suffer from long-term separation from their beloved and much needed parents. Children need at least one of their parents to be with them.

Some PKs and MKs (pastor's kids and missionary's kids) in some countries are known to suffer from some sort of maladjustment syndrome. I suppose some can take long separations from parents better than others but I

do not believe that any of those children, when young, would have chosen to be separated from their parents. Missionary biographies help us understand their trauma e.g. Overseas Missionary Fellowship now encourages their missionary kids to be with their parents as long as possible before they are sent to boarding schools.

Much as we may like to serve the Lord by serving others, I am being persuaded more and more that our families come first in our service for God. They too form part of that vineyard that belongs to Him (see chapter 4). When the needs of our children and the weak (aging dependent parents) surface, we will need to give them first preference in service unless God specifically leads otherwise (which is seldom). Maybe Asians may lead the way in such family life.

The extended church family can always lend a hand to give the exhausted carers a break. Many are unwilling to accept help not because they do not want to or do not need it, but because they are not really assured of generous, uncomplaining and non-patronising offers of care and loving provision from fellow church members. Further, if the pastoral family needs a maid, get one for them with your own funds! Their husband-father is often at your back and call any way!

5. Houses, projects, cars, etc.

I do not think I need to elaborate on the sharing of material goods. Acts 2:42-47 is clear enough. We are not to hoard when our brothers and sisters in Christ are in need of basic food, lodging, health care and education. Often, we would lend or give only when we are sure at least part of it would be returned. Is this what our Saviour and Master Jesus teaches or shows by example (Matthew 5:43-48)?

Even if we could afford a second car or a washing machine, for example, we may still decide to share with our neighbours so that the money saved may be released to help others do the Lord's work more effectively. We change our temporal assets into treasure in heaven when others are born again in Christ and grow into His likeness.

With regards to sending and caring for Malaysian sent missionaries, some local churches have obeyed. Is God blessing Malaysia economically for this purpose?

“Lord, please help us be good stewards of Your blessings.”

Is this vision of the church family impractical? I do not think so. In fact, it may just be a decision away for many

of us in the local churches. What better means of witness than this which has been laid down for us in Scriptures in the early church? Our Lord Jesus may be gently asking us right now:

*"Would you accept, highly regard and love
My brothers and sisters as your own from today?"*

A PRAYER

(From GRID, Autumn 1994)

Dear Lord and Father of all humankind, in this International Year of the Family, we acknowledge that You are both our Master and our Friend. You are our primary Nurturer in a heartless world; our Guide for responsible living; and our Security in times of danger.

We are glad to belong to an earthly family and to Your eternal family. We are nourished by the bonds of love shared by members of those families. Help us to honour every member of our families - the young and the old, the secure and the insecure, the strong and the weak, the clever and the not-so-clever, those who are easy to get along with, and the difficult ones. May we keep growing into spiritual and emotional maturity. May we delight in both our own specialness as unique individuals, and honour the uniqueness of others.

*Remind us that every person is very important to You,
and therefore should be important to us.*

*May we nourish relationships with both 'like' and unlike'
people in our home and church families. And as we love
our families - Your families - may You grow in us.*

*For this and all Your loving and good gifts
we give You thanks.*

In our Lord Jesus' Name, Amen

SUGGESTED READING

Chapter 1

1. *On Being Family - A Social Theology of the Family*, Ray S. Anderson & Dennis B. Guernsey (c. 1985 by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company)
2. *Lovers - Whatever Happened to Eden?*, Donald M. & Robbie B. Joy (c. 1987 D.M. Joy, Word Books Publisher)

Chapter 2

1. *Because of Love - Piecing Together Family Relationships*, Evelyn O. Shih (c. Evelyn O. Shih, 1983, distributed by China Alliance Press) This book gives an Asian Christian's perspective of Christian family life.)
2. *Two into One*, Joyce Hugget (c. Joyce Hugget 1981, IVP)

Chapter 3

1. *How to Raise Your Children for Christ*, Andrew Murray (c. 1975, Bethany Fellowship, Inc.)
2. *Counselling and Children*, Walter Byrd, M.D. & Paul Warren, M.D., Vo1.22 of series on "*Resources for Christian Counselling*", General Editor: Gary R. Collins (c. 1989 Word Incorporated)

Chapter 4

1. *Spiritual Formation for the Local Church*, Frank Bateman Stanger (c. 1989 Mardelle A. Stanger, Francis Asbury Press)
2. *A Passion for Holiness*, J.I. Packer (c. 1992 J.I. Packer, Crossway Books, Nottingham)
3. *The Spirit of the Disciplines - Understanding How God Changes Lives*, Dallas Willard (c. 1988 Dallas Willard, Harper Collins)
4. *Prayer*, Richard Foster (c. Richard Foster, 1992. Hodder & Stoughton)
5. *Please Do Not Despise Me*, Pastor Clarine Chun (Trinity Baptist Church, Alor Star, Kedah, Malaysia, 1994)
6. *What Return Can I Make? - Dimensions of the Christian Experience*, M. Scott Peck with Marilyn Von Waler and Patricia Kay (c. M. Scott Peck, M.D., P.C. 1985; Music and Lyrics c. 1979 by Monastery of Discalced Carmelites, Arrow Books, 1990)
7. *Deepening Joy*, Lee Bee Teik (c. Lee Bee Teik, Pustaka SUFES, 1994)
8. *Prayers of Life*, Michel Quoist (Logos Books 1963)
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10. *Baptism - It's Purpose, Practice and Power*, Michael Green (c. 1987 Michael Green, Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.)

Chapter 5

1. *Psychology and Christianity: the View Both Ways*, Malcolm A. Jeeves (c. 1976 IVP)
2. *The Shattered Mirror - Reflections on Being Human*, John White (c. 1987 IVP)
3. *The New Age Movement*, Douglas R. Groothuis (c. 1986 IVP)
4. *Freedom from the Performance Trap or Healing Grace*, D.A. Seamands (c. 1988 SP Publications Inc.)
5. *Guilt and Grace*, Paul Tournier (c. 1962 Hodder & Stoughton)
6. *Parents in Pain*, John White (c. IVP 1979). A great comfort to “needy” parents.
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8. *GRID* (A World Vision Australia Quarterly Publication) Autumn 1994, “*The Family: At Home in a Heartless World*” by Rowland Croucher
9. *Damaged Disciples - Casualties of Authoritarian Churches and the Shepherding Movement*, Ron & Vicki Burks (1992, Zondervan Publishing House)

Chapter 6

1. *Single and Human*, Ada Lum (c. IVP 1976)
2. *Single to Single - Daily Devotionals By and For Single Adults*, Douglas L. Fagerstrom, Editor (c. 1991 SP Publications Inc.)
3. *The Fight - A Practical Handbook of Christian Living*, John White (c.1977 IVP)

Chapter 7

1. *Three Steps forward Two Steps Back... Persevering Through Pressure*, Charles R. Swindoll (c. Charles R. Swindoll, Thomas Nelson Inc.)
2. *Living with Your Dreams - Let God Restore Your Shattered Dreams*, D.A. Seamands, (c. SP Publications Inc.) (An excellent clarification of forgiveness and reconciliation.)

Chapter 8

1. *One Being Family* (see Chapter 1)
2. *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Harper, New York 1954)

NOTE

From 1st Edition of *Building a Love House is Hard Work* published by MCARE in 1996. These chapters have been omitted in the 2nd Edition called *Building a Love House is Still Hard Work* because:

- Chapters 5 has been republished in the *Adult & Youth Series* (Reconre)
- Chapter 10 as parts in *Behold Your Pastor!*

(Both may be obtained from contacts at:
www.reconre.org.)

- Chapter 8 material may be easily available from Christian libraries in churches and seminaries in Malaysia.

Chapter 5

Eight Stages of Earthly Life – Understanding the Human Person

1. *Secrets of the Unborn Child*, Thomas Verny & John Kelly (c. 1981 Spere Books Ltd.)
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3. *How to Talk So Kids will Listen & Listen So Kids will Talk*, Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish (c. 1980 A. Faber & E. Mazlish, McClelland & Stewart, Ltd.)
4. *How to Really Know Your Child*, Ross Campbell (c. SP Publications, Inc. 1987)
5. *Let Me be a Woman - Notes to My Daughter and the Meaning of Womanhood*, Elisabeth Elliot (c. 1976 Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.)
6. *The Misunderstood Man*, Walter Trobisch (c. 1983 Editions Trobisch GmbH)
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9. *Healing for Damaged Emotions*, D.A. Seamands (c. 1981 SP Publications)

10. *Take Care of Your Elderly Relative*, Dr. Muir Gray and Heather Mckenzie (c. 1980 J.A. Muir Gray and Heather Louat, George Allen & Unwin [Publishers] Ltd., England)

Chapter 8

Love House Devotion – Getting to Know Father God

1. *Creative Family Worship*, Dorothy Martin (c. 1976 The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago)
2. *Leading Little Ones to God - A Child's Book of Bible Teachings*, Marion M. Schooland (c. 1962 Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.)
3. *Little Visits with God - Devotions for Families with Small Children*, Allan Hart Jahsmann & Martin P.Simon (c. 1957 Concordia Publishing House, U.S.A.)
4. *Prayer and Temperament - Different Prayer Forms for Differcnt Personality Types*, Chester P.Michael and Marie C. Norrisey (c. 1904 The C.P. Michael and M. C. Norrisey, The Open Door Inc.)
5. *Streams in the Desert, Vol. II - a Daily Devotional Book for Parents*, Mrs. E. Cowman (c. Cowman Publishing Company, Inc. 1966)

Chapter 10

Your Pastor May Have a Family – The People Called “Pastors”

1. *Issue on Life of the Pastor and the Family*, Leadership Journal, (Fall Quarter 1981)
2. *Pastors Under Pressure*, Paul Beasley-Murray (1989 P.B. Murray, Kingsway Publications Ltd.)
3. *A Guide to Pastoral Care*, Chapter 25: The Pastor’s Care of Himself, R.E.O. White (c. 1976 R.E.O. White, Pickering and Inglis Ltd.)
4. *Counselling Christian Workers*, Louis Mcbourney, Vol.2 of series on “*Resources for Christian Counselling*”, General Editor, Gary R. Collins (c. 1986 Word Inc.)

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can be obtained online from

<http://www.cornerstone.com.my/LeeBeeTeik>