

Family-Centered Training After High School

If men and women of antiquity could somehow be transported through time to our present era and culture, they would probably be dumbfounded by the number and kinds of choices that are granted to individuals in our society. As we have already noted, during Bible times parents exercised a decisive control in the arrangement of marriages. For the most part, a man's choice of vocation was similarly determined. Sons usually took up the occupations of their fathers, working the land or using the tools that were passed along from one generation to another. Daughters became wives. Asking a young Israelite if he had discovered God's will for his life's work would probably elicit a blank stare.

*Not so today. For young people of our time and culture, the "Big Three" among the decisions of life are marriage, vocation, and education – though not necessarily in that order. The choices are personal and the options are almost limitless (at least in theory). Given the multitude of possibilities and the importance of the decisions, the urgent search by many Christians for definitive guidance in these areas is certainly understandable... — Garry Friesen – *Decision Making & the Will of God*, p. 335*

Indeed, times have changed. The question is whether they have changed for the better or for the worse. Mr. Friesen is correct in his basic assessment of the differences between the options available to a young person in "Bible times" and those available to young people today. In the Bible we see parents guiding their children all the way through their upbringing until they reach the point of marriage and vocation. Today parents take an essentially hands-off approach once the child finishes high school. His (or her) choices educationally, vocationally, and when it comes to selecting a mate are essentially up to the young person alone.

Notice right off one of the key issues in this matter of how our post-high-school children go about determining the direction of their lives. Mr. Friesen wrote of how a young person in Bible times would be "dumbfounded by the number and kinds of choices that are granted to individuals in our society" (emphasis added). Here is the essence of the matter. Today we view life direction as a matter of individual choice, whereas in the Bible it was a matter of family and even community concern. Again, our author observed, "The choices are personal and the options are almost limitless" (emphasis added). Precisely. The choices open to a young person today are regarded as choices he can and must make himself. His life direction is personal decision.

In contrast, in Bible times the decision would have been his, but it would have been heavily guided by his father and mother. The focus would not be his personal desires alone or even primarily. His choices would be substantially shaped by the will of his father, the good of his family, and how he fit into the

local community. For a young woman, her life direction would have been even more thoroughly dictated by family considerations.

Those of us who homeschool our children have come to understand the substantial measure of responsibility we have for their total upbringing and the great degree to which we can and must be involved in their lives. As we saw in our last issue ("Home Education Is Biblical Education") parents are at the center of the process of training; they are the God-appointed teachers of their children. And the process of training is not some merely cognitive, classroom-oriented process. It is a process of discipleship: an intimate, constant relationship in which the parent shapes the child's heart as well as his mind.

The question is: When does this responsibility end? It seems that most parents would consider the process complete once the child has completed "high school" level academic work. It is at that point that even homeschooling parents tend to regard the young person as ready to go out and make his own decision about education, vocation, and marriage, with a minimum of input from the parents. We have argued elsewhere, however, that the process of training is not complete just because the child has passed an artificial academic/cultural milestone (cf. our article, "A Father's Job Description," in issue 16, and John Thompson's article, "College at Home to the Glory of God," in issue 14). Parents are responsible to train their children to be competent husbands/fathers or wives/mothers and to be competent in a vocation; and parents have the responsibility to guide their older children into a life's work and into a godly marriage.

One of the tragedies we see in the homeschooling subculture is that the fruit of many years of devoted training is being squandered as parents essentially abandon their children to make their "personal" decisions as "individuals" when it comes to the most important choices in life: further education and training, vocation, and marriage. It is precisely at this point that parental involvement and direction is most crucial and that the years of intimate parent/child discipleship could bear the most enduring fruit. Instead, children are sent off to find their own way in life.

What is the problem here? It boils down to this: Even homeschooling parents fail to grasp the larger vision of a properly family-centered approach to life. We have bought into the worldview that accentuates the individual and minimizes family ties (or any other communal ties). And so once we are finished training through "high school" we think our work is done: we have prepared another individual to take his or her place in society, on terms they are free to consider without respect to family, community, local church, or any other ties that might hinder the liberty of the individual to create his or her own destiny.

So we send our children off to college, assuming that academic preparation is most important, and ignoring the moral and spiritual dangers of this approach. We urge our children to move out of the house, get their own

apartments and a job to support themselves, and we forget their need for continued guidance and preparation for their life work and for marriage.

What exactly is wrong with the standard send-them-away approach to our post-high-school children? And what would be a better approach? Let us consider several issues.

LIFE VISION

The most important role our children will fill in life is that of a godly husband and father or wife and mother. It is through this calling that they will do more to advance the kingdom of God in this world than in any other calling. It is in carrying out this calling that they will spend more time and energy than in any other facet of their lives, be they male or female. We must raise our children with the expectation that their preparation for their future family responsibilities is the most important dimension of their life preparation. In short, above all else we must communicate the vision that creating their own godly households will be life's greatest adventure.

The present-day approach communicates none of this vision. Instead young people are given the impression that home and family are for kids and that as newly-arrived adults they must set out on an adventure away from the confines of the home.

Consider the pervasive mission trip craze. (How many appeals for funding have you received this past year?) Though obviously not wrong as such, they tend to feed the notion that the serious work for God is somehow far way and exotic. Helping haul bricks to build an orphanage in India, or "witnessing" on the streets of Mexico City for two weeks is seen as the purest form of the spiritual quest. What an adventure! Pity the poor kid who has to stay home and merely can applesauce or help run the family business. But in fact, the latter are engaging in preparation far better suited to the real life God has called them to live for the rest of their lives.

We hesitate to mention in this connection the popular "apprenticeship" programs offered by a popular, national ministry that also offers a homeschooling program through high school. Here children leave home for months at a time to work with other children their age in training and missions programs. Even while the ministry itself emphasizes family renewal, their method undermines that very emphasis. Young people are subtly taught that real life preparation (at least after high school) cannot occur in the confines of the home and family, nor under the tutelage of parents. To receive the very best training possible, it seems, you have to leave parents, home, and local church and be part of a giant ministry effort. While no doubt fulfilling and useful to the young person in many ways, the effect is to train children away from their home-centered calling.

Needless to say, sending children off to college assures that their hearts will be turned away from home and family and reoriented toward the pursuit of

the all-important “career.” What college student has foremost in his (or her) mind that he is preparing to be a family leader, a godly spouse, a parent to children, and that from this base will spring his greatest effectiveness in every other area of life? None that I know.

Why can't we give young people a vision that fits more closely with a biblical view of what their primary life calling is to be? We can, but it will involve re-thinking the standard cultural models for training after high school. Our greatest challenge today is to learn how to help our children see a family-centered life as the real adventure.

EXPECTATIONS

Closely related to the issue of the vision we give our children as they near adulthood is that of the expectations that we create through the methods we use in their preparation. We have already alluded to the subtle expectations created by college, mission trips, and distant, institutional apprenticeships. These experiences tend to communicate this way: Where will you find fulfillment and purpose in life? Not in the mundane callings of husband and wife, not in the mere drudgery of fatherhood and motherhood. Not within the confines of the home. No, your real fulfillment will be in something “bigger,” a mission, a career that is by definition related to the world beyond the home.

These expectations bode ill for the future of the young people who have them. They come to view family life as confining and unfulfilling. They are set up to be dissatisfied with the ordinary responsibilities of fatherhood and motherhood. Or if they maintain a positive view of these callings, they are tempted to believe that being a father or mother is a snap. After all, it doesn't require any special preparation. Career is what is demanding. Parenthood (and spousehood) just happens, somehow. This too will lead to problems once the reality of family life is encountered.

It is the young women who are especially injured by the method of being sent away from the home for their life preparation. While their God-given calling is a home-centered one (Titus 2; Proverbs 31) and their life mission is to be the helper of a man as he pursues his dominion calling (Genesis 2), the experience of being trained outside the home tempts them to dissatisfaction with their role. What college offers a degree in motherhood? No, the young women are invited to prepare for careers just like the men, and they develop the expectation that fulfillment will be found not in home-centered work, but in finding a niche in the marketplace. This sets up inevitable tensions once these women are married.

The issues here are serious. In Titus 2:5 Paul urges young women to be workers at home “that the word of God may not be blasphemed.” Yet our whole method of training our daughters is one that tempts them to blaspheme the word of God by becoming discontent with the calling God has given them as they prepare for their own careers outside the home.

Even if we keep the priority of being a wife and mother before the girls and don't allow them to prepare for a career outside the home, we may lead them astray. The very act of sending a daughter away on a mission trip for a couple weeks or on an apprenticeship for several months teaches her to have a spirit of independence that will not suit her for her calling as a helper to her husband. Nowhere in Scripture do you see a model that allows for daughters to leave their fathers' authority and protection prior to marriage, yet that is the norm even in Christian circles today. By training our daughters to be independent we may be training them to blaspheme the word of God.

After spending some time in Russia as part of a mission team, a girl wrote others of her experience. One statement caught the attention of my oldest daughter (who does a lot of home-centered work and has never been to Russia). The girl wrote: "When I left Russia, I left part of my heart there." What struck both my daughter and me was this: Why is this young lady being put in a position where she is developing affections for a work that is neither her father's nor her husband's? How is she being trained for the life that God is actually calling her to as a woman? In fact, despite the worthy nature of the work itself, she is nevertheless subtly being trained to be independent, to develop her own sense of direction and priorities in life. We're not saying her life is ruined. We're just trying to call attention to the ways we thoughtlessly disregard biblical priorities as we fit in with the culture's methods of training our children. We create expectations that cannot be fulfilled within the bounds of a biblical life calling.

FAMILY BONDS

A father's job is not done until he has led his children into a God-honoring vocation and a godly marriage. Parents were given this task, the total life-preparation of their children, yet the task is more often than not abandoned short of the goal. This is the tragedy of the modern method of handling older children: it short-circuits the parental role in the training of children and thereby hinders the continuity of the parent-child bond that is essential to the progress of the gospel in the world.

In Malachi 4:6 and Luke 1:17 we have a double witness given as to the importance of the fathers' hearts being turned to their children and the children's hearts being turned toward their fathers. We have previously discussed the meaning of this "turning of the hearts" ("The Father's Heart: God's #1 Priority," issue 22). In short, it refers to the necessity of godly training in the context of a loving relationship. If we may quote a relevant portion from that article:

... Each generation may not have the opportunity to witness the crossing of the Red Sea or the Jordan River on dry ground, but each generation has the opportunity to experience the living God in a way that will preserve their faith. As fathers open their hearts, love and train their children, walk with God openly before their families, urge their children to follow the Lord with them – then the children come to experience the God of their fathers, not as memory

and story only, but as living reality in their own lives. The parent-child heart channel becomes the means for each generation to have an encounter with God that assures their continuance in the faith.

As children come to walk with God as they walk with their parents, they will create their own history of divine encounters. Sin confessed, God's discipline received, forgiveness experienced, prayers answered, guidance gained from Scripture - all these create a personal history of God's dealing with the child that assure the genuineness, depth, and perseverance of his faith. The faith of the fathers becomes the faith of the next generation... and so on.

What a shame when this process is cut short just at the most crucial time in the child's life: the time in which he is making the most important decisions in life, those related to vocation and marriage. Here is where all previous training can come to fruition. Here is where the parent-child bond can be cemented for life, in a way that will assure strong family ties for generations to come and thus create the most productive channels available for the progress of God's kingdom.

The family in the West is in the weakest state that institution has been in since perhaps declining Rome. This is due to the sense of the increasing irrelevance of the family in our individualistic society in which so many family functions have been swallowed up by government or eliminated through technology. But it is also due to the simultaneous and related deterioration of family bonds, the relationships between family members within and between the generations.

One way to begin to restore these bonds is for parents to reclaim the total process of child-raising, including that of establishing them in vocation and family, and in that process to win the hearts of their children to a family-centered vision of life.

Let's not just teach our children that preparing for starting their own families is their most important calling, let's also teach them to view that new family in the context of the extended family. Psalm 112: 1,2 says, "Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, Who delights greatly in His commandments. His descendents will be mighty on earth...". How many men can say that his descendants are mighty in the earth? Perhaps part of the reason is that his descendants are scattered over the earth with no sense of connection or obligation to the rest of their extended family. Like coals scattered in the fire, they lose their effectiveness. If families would regain a sense of common purpose, shared commitments, ties of love that bind, then perhaps we would see more men who are mighty in the land, and the flame of family strength would be rekindled. Perhaps then a vision of ministry and dominion could be passed on from generation to generation. Perhaps then extended family would choose to remain close together to increase their strength and enhance their mutual support. Perhaps then the local church would be strengthened with a continuity of membership rather than being decimated by the nomadic lifestyle of modern families.

We need to consider returning to methods of training our children that will bring a restoration of the extended family living within a community and within a local church. We must, that is, if we care about maximizing our effectiveness for the gospel in the world. Our current methods ignore the essential heart bonds between the generations and the ties God intended to bind members of the larger family to one another. Homeschooling is a start to reversing that trend, but we must carry its implications further. We must communicate a total family-centered vision of life. (See "Is It Right to Be Family-Centered?" in issue 24 for a discussion of how being properly family-centered is the most effective way to be outward-oriented and pursue our task of dominion in the world.)

DAVID AND JESUS

The scriptures everywhere presuppose the model of family life we are portraying here. But it may be useful to consider a couple of examples that display the wisdom of a family-centered approach to raising children into adulthood.

First is David, the one we remember as King of Israel, a military hero, a musician and poet. But let's remember how he got his start. He did not enroll in Saul's school for training future leaders (if he had such a school). He did not enlist in the military academy to learn the art of war. He did not attend the Jerusalem Conservatory of Music to acquire his skill on the harp. His training was all at home.

He learned the art of shepherding people by shepherding sheep. It was there that he also learned courage, strategy, and prowess as he defended the animals from the lion and the bear. And it was also in the home and in the field that he learned to play his instruments to the glory of God. This simple, home-trained boy was the man God chose to become the greatest king Israel ever had and the one who would be a type of Messiah the King.

He was known simply as "the son of Jesse" (1 Samuel 16:18). Notice the emphasis on this point after David had killed Goliath (17:55-58):

When Saul saw David going out against the Philistine, he said to Abner, the commander of the army, "Abner, whose son is this youth?"

And Abner said, "As your soul lives, O king, I do not know."

So the king said, "Inquire whose son this young man is."

Then, as David returned from the slaughter of the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul with the head of the Philistine in his hand. And Saul said to him, "Whose son are you, young man?"

So David answered, "I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite."

The definition of David was that he was his father's son. He received his training from his father, and it was his father who received the credit for his accomplishments. The home was a more than adequate training ground for

one of the greatest and most accomplished men of the Bible. And it was his relationship with his father that was stressed, not any credentials achieved outside the family.

This is an illustration of the fact that our usefulness to God is tied to how well we perform in the family setting. The home is the training ground for all of life, and a life centered on the home is one that God can use beyond the home. Effective families become effective far beyond their own narrow scope, but effectiveness in the family is the starting point for effectiveness in any other sphere of life.

How many of us, or of our children, would be identified by others as “the son of . . .” Yet this is the kind of intergenerational tie that marks real world-changers.

Jesus is the other example we have in mind in this connection. On the human level, of course, Jesus was known as “the carpenter’s son” (Matthew 13:55). His status in life was derived from his father whose occupation he took up. Even though He was the Messiah, with a much larger mission in life than being a carpenter, he still submitted to the convention of being trained by his father and carrying on his work. He was known as His father’s son because His father has trained Him.

Yet Jesus also showed the same regard for His heavenly Father. “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all thing that He Himself does....’” Jesus’ references to His Father are constant in the book of John. No less than 100 times He refers to His Father’s will, word, and works and the relationship that exists between them. Though He was Himself God the Son, He looked to His Father to receive His mission in life and deferred to Him constantly.

Fathers today need to learn from David and Jesus. They need to see it as their calling to carry the training of their children through to completion, to the very shaping of their life’s work. God may have a mission for your children that is greater than you can imagine, but it will be a mission that you prepare them for as you prepare them for a normal life of work and service. And the bonds that are created between you and your children as you do that will not only reflect honor back on you as they move out and accomplish things for God in this life, they will also help assure that the process will be repeated in the next generation and that your descendants will indeed become mighty in the land, to the glory of God.

HOW I’M APPLYING ALL THIS

Allow me to conclude by becoming personal and sharing how I am attempting to implement all these ideas in my own family. You can rest assured that I fall far short in many ways, and things always sound better on paper than they

look in reality. But here's a glimpse anyway.

I have six children (20, 18, 16, 14, 12, 6). All have been homeschooled from the beginning. We consider it sin to send children to public school, and we don't find most Christian schools much better. Our plan has always been to balance academic training with spiritual growth, equipping in life skills, and an emphasis on creativity in all things.

We have taught our children to expect our guidance beyond the high school level, extending to the time they are married. They expect my wife, Pam, and I to help them in the process of finding a mate. The girls know that I will take the initiative in investigating young men and presenting one to them who I consider a good candidate for marriage. The boys know that I will likewise take an active role in guiding them toward a wife, though in their case it is appropriate for them to take initiative and deal directly with the father of a prospective young woman.

I have sought to expose my sons to as much and various work as I could over the years, and living in a rural area the last five years has greatly enhanced my ability to do that, since it seems there is more work that a boy can do out here. While I want each son to pursue academic training as far as his ability and interest dictates, I am even more concerned that each one learn some trade skills which he can use to earn a living and care for his own family in the future. Part of my working assumption has been that we are entering a period of history in which self-sufficiency skills will be more valuable than very specialized skills that will only equip a man for a narrow niche in the division of labor. I want to shape well-rounded men who can do a lot well and take care of themselves and their families no matter what happens to our society.

My oldest son Drew (almost 19) works building houses and is setting up his own house so that he is ready to live on his own in anticipation of taking a wife when the Lord provides one. He takes charge of much of the work on the homestead, including care for the animals. I keep my younger son Seth (almost 14) busy with work around the homestead, the house we are remodeling, and helping other families in the church when they need an extra pair of hands.

The family-centered vision has been passed along to the boys. As early as 15 Drew was talking of his desire to finish his academic training so he could work, set up a home, get married, and have many godly children and grandchildren. (I don't think I had that vision at 15!)

The girls are busy at home, practicing the life skills they will need in the future as they bless my family now with their labors. My oldest daughter Sarah (with a little help) has canned nearly 1,000 jars of food this year. The girls planted most of the vegetable garden and provided most of the care. They help me out in my ministry work, entering data, sending out mail orders, making tapes. Later they will help their husbands in similar ways.

All the girls have “hope chests” (whether or not it is a chest) in which they are setting aside things they can use when they are married and have a family. This is a constant focus for them all, even now for six-year-old Alice. It is a form of dowry that I can offer a prospective husband along with my daughter. And it will be substantial. When we moved last December Sarah alone had nearly 60 boxes of her own things that we had to move, most of it hope chest things! It has grown since, and she has virtually everything she would need to set up house, from dishes and kitchenware, to linens, to home decorations. (I don’t know what people could give as wedding gifts.)

None of my children has been to college or, at this point, expects to go. If they were to require college-level training, I would arrange a college-at-home program to spare them the unwholesome influence of campus life, and to keep them in touch with the real world of family, church, work, and community.

I would not send a daughter away for any kind of academic training since her training is supposed to be home-centered in any case, and since I could not exercise my duty of oversight and protection if she were out of the home. When my oldest daughter was 17 I did send her to another state to serve a Christian family who had health needs and a lot of children. I saw that experience as consistent with the calling she was being trained for, and I made sure she was under the authority of a godly man and part of a good church during the six weeks away; plus I kept regular contact with her by phone. I could imagine doing something similar for a brief time of training in something like midwifery or another skill related to her calling.

Sending a daughter to college, in my view, would be to tempt her to abandon the calling God has given her and to invite her to develop a spirit of independence. It would also weaken the influence that my wife and I could exert and would likely lead to the fracturing of our family as she would likely marry someone of her own choosing and move somewhere else.

All my children are being trained to expect to remain close to the rest of the family, unless God somehow clearly calls them to another location (and finding a godly man for the daughters could well require that). The norm is to remain with family, to build ties between siblings, cousins, etc., and between the generations of the extended family. We will seek to invite the prospective husbands for my daughters to become part of our community here.

They are being taught to expect to be part of the local church through the years and to raise their children and grandchildren in the same church. We also teach that Christian community (Christians being neighbors) is not just a neat idea but essential to the survival of Christian faith over the generations. (Steve Schlissel suggested that one practical thing that can move us in the direction of creating Christian communities is for each family to simply decide that they will never move again unless they can move next door to another Christian family.)

They are being taught to expect to care for their elderly parents if that need

should arise (another reason to remain in the same general location). If a daughter's husband should die, she would have her father and brothers close by to help out (not to mention the men of the church).

Back to our original issue: we reject the notion that it is normal to send children away just at the time that they are ready to make the most important decisions in life. We believe it is a lie that they need distance from their parents or the training of some distant "experts" to be adequately prepared for life. Their best training is in the context of the home, church, and community. This is real life. This is the basis for real strength over the years.

We will not see our family scattered and its strength dissipated by following the idolatry of individual self-determination. We will make our decisions based on what is good for the whole family, for the local church, and for the Christian community. We will plan to maintain our place in each one unless God clearly calls us elsewhere.

We think the home is more than a place you grow up in and family is more than the people you see each Christmas. We intend to see the family resurrected, by God's grace, so that we can once again have families of whom it could be said that they are mighty in the land. If that's ever going to happen it means we have to make choices that will make it possible.

No matter where you are in this process yourself, you can begin where you are. Just make each new choice in light of the standard of values you want for your family. That's how new directions are set. Your little choices today can change the world tomorrow.
