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## "To Turn The Hearts Of The Fathers"

- Lk 1:17

Mal 4:4-6 foretells of God's family plan for Israel (and later the church). It shows what God expected of Israeli families-hearts turned toward each other. This turn of heart in family matters parallels the New Covenant change of heart in Jer 31 where God says He will put His law into our hearts. Four hundred years later, the angel who appeared to Zechariah and announced the birth of John the Baptist quoted Mal 4 to explain John's purpose and ministry. In Lk 1:13-17, the angel describes John as the one who will "turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God" and as the one who will "turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the attitude of the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous so as to make a people ready for the Lord." The angel's style and arrangement of these two descriptions make them corollaries. He arranged everything around v 17a so that the facts about John's ministry would be obvious. John, as the forerunner, preached the message of turning toward the Lord, which in turn would restore the hearts of fathers to the hearts of their children.

One of the good works accompanying salvation will be a change in family attitudes and actions. The father will practice godly headship of the family; the mother will be the submissive support her husband needs as he strains to obey the Lord. The children will obey their father and mother. The family will love each other, will be kind to one another, and will be best friends with each other. In short, the family will be the model of the Godhead and Christianity upon the earth. Children are not left out of this equation. We don't just "do our best and hope that they turn out all right." Look at Lk 1:17 again. The angel quoted only part of Mal 4:6. He substituted "the attitude of the disobedient to that of the righteous" for "the hearts of the children to the fathers." The angel thus tells us what it means to have the "hearts of the children turned toward their fathers." The turning of the children's hearts (as expressed in Malachi) means that they will obey their parents (as expressed in Luke). When salvation genuinely reaches the parents, the children will eventually change from being disobedient to being righteous. This change, however, is not without great effort on the part of the parents. They will strive for godliness in their children. Part of the "turning" is repenting of the worldly way of rearing children. Parents who do strive for godliness in their children will be rewarded with their children's hearts turned toward them in obedience.

### Church Leadership

All this has great impact upon church leadership. Both the elder and the deacon "must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect" (1 Ti 3:4; 5; 12) and have children who "believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient" (Tit 1:6). Marriage and children are requirements for being an elder. But that requirement does not

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hold true for the traveling apostle-neither Paul nor Timothy were married, and they are not called elders. The apostle Peter, on the other hand, was married and calls himself an elder in 1 Pe 5:1-3. The elder must have children whose hearts are turned toward their parents. The elder who is too busy with his own or church concerns (as "good" as they may be) fails to understand the absolute priority of rearing his children in a way pleasing to God. Indications are that he himself has not turned to the Lord if his own heart is not turned to his children (Lk 1:13-17). Who else sees him twenty-four hours a day at his best and his worst? If he does not live out his Christianity before his children, who is he to export it to others?

## Evangelism

You might think that with the above emphasis upon children, they ought to be the objects of the church's evangelistic efforts. But who were the objects of the apostles' evangelism? The book of Acts shows us that the apostles evangelized the heads of households, not children. Cornelius, Lydia, and the Philippian jailer all came to Christ because of the apostles' efforts. Amazingly, their whole households came with them. Is this only a cultural phenomena of that century? I don't think so. If we aim our evangelism at the fathers (or single mothers) we will, by the NT example, get the children. The man whose heart truly turns to the Lord will turn toward his children, and they too will likely come to Christ.

## Church Discipline

Family matters relate directly to church discipline. The man who follows God will discipline his children (Eph 6:4, NASB). He will hold his children accountable for their actions and train them to obey him and his wife (see Pr 1:8; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1; 5:1; etc.). Our churches do not discipline the disobedient members because we have forgotten the biblical reasons and methods for disciplining our own children. As we have raised generations of children without biblical discipline, we have also raised the same generations to expect that no one can hold them accountable for their actions, least of all a church whose only requirements of them are their money and a few hours a week of their time. Children who have been raised to expect those in authority over them to provide needed discipline will not run from the church which seeks to discipline them for their good. In fact, children who have been raised in the discipline and instruction of the Lord will need very little church discipline as adults. We would be amazed at the transformation of our churches (and our society) over a generation if we would discipline our children to respond to God-given authority and not reject their father's discipline (Pr 3:11,12; and Heb 12:5-6) and, subsequently, the church's discipline.

## Church Meetings

I am convinced that children of all ages should be with the parents in the house church meeting. If we take Eph 6:4 at face value, it is the father who is to train his children, not another adult teacher. The father who teaches his children the things of the Lord six days a week will not need someone else to do it on Sundays. A father who also disciplines his children will have them under control. His control will allow the children to be with the parents in the house church meeting. Remember that we are not training our children to remain children, but to be adults.

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They need to see how adults meet as a church and learn by participating as well. In our church, the families sit together. When necessary, the parents correct their children in our meetings or remove them for discipline, which some Sundays is often! But that is part of maturing as a church and as families. It is something we have taught and expect from our parents and children. Children can do far more than we sometimes require. If they need to nap, they sleep in Dad's or Mom's lap, or in the chair or on one of our beds. Often the children play with quiet toys, read, or color (sometimes on paper, and then sometimes on the floor!). It's just like family. God's way of communicating truth to the next generation has not changed. God intends truth to be taught and learned by children in a family setting. Neither the church nor society has this direct responsibility; fathers and mothers do. The sooner we learn this lesson in the body of Christ, the sooner we will put aside all the worldly ways of teaching and training children and have generations of godly men and women in the church who can turn the world upside down once again.

## Christian Ministry

Paul's concept of ministry was derived partially from family life. Paul drew upon a godly family as he illustrates his own apostolic ministry to the Thessalonians in 1 Th 2:5-12. He used the nursing mother, and then the father, as examples. As an apostle, Paul could have been paid for his work among them as he preached the Gospel and taught them discipleship. However, he worked hard among them day and night so they would not think him greedy. A nursing mother who cares for her children day and night provided the perfect example of Paul's service. Her emotional ties to her children propel her in her ministry of love and devotion. She nurtures her children in contrast with the man's primary role. Women are to be the nurturers in the home, and their emphasis on relationships gives impetus to Paul's ministry. Paul's tender care, and his willingness to sacrifice his time and energy for their welfare, imitated the godly mother caring for her children.

On the other hand, Paul also looked to the godly father who was very concerned with the righteousness of his children and apparently, their reputation. Paul convincingly wrote that the father directing the moral development of the children proved to be the perfect example for the apostle exhorting, encouraging, and imploring the new Christians at Thessalonica to walk worthy of God. This goes back again to the father's responsibility to his children; teaching them righteousness and training them to that standard. However, the father who loves his children and wants God's blessing upon them does not impose legalism upon the household. That breeds rebellion. Christians do not earn a right standing before God, nor keep it, by what they do. It means that through the relationship we have with our children, we fathers urge as strongly as possible our children's obedient walk with God. Paul capitalized on his observations of godly men who concern themselves with their children's conduct.

The passive father will raise sons who are themselves passive and liable to be dominated by women. His daughters will tend to be domineering in all areas of family, church, and society. The emotionless mother will produce children who cannot relate to people. All this can be prevented by involved fathers and mothers who see to the well-being of their children and teach them the proper roles of men and women in the family, church, and society. It seems to me that Paul took the outstanding characteristics of the mother and father and applied them to his ministry: the emotional ties which caused sacrifice by the mother and the desire for children

worthy of the family name which caused much involvement by the father. We must do the same.

## Conclusion

A church is a family. Paul names it the "household of God," calls salvation "adoption as sons," describes us as "heirs," tells Timothy to "entreat an elder as a father," calls Christians "brother" and "sister," and uses a childhood name for father (*abba*) to address the heavenly Father. All of these descriptions point to the relationships we have to God and to one another.

A family is people relating to one another. Church relationships, good and bad, overwhelm the NT reader if he looks for them. The good church nurtures and builds those relationships and does not substitute an endless parade of activities for them. People desire healthy relationships more than anything else. However, house church members must be prepared to get close, very close. Think of it as porcupines snuggling up to get warm in the winter. The closer they get, the more quills they feel. When they draw back, they get cold. It is better to feel the quills!

The house church model best resembles a family because it meets where people live. The family who hosts a church meeting and the members who go there draw themselves together as a unit. The atmosphere is real, not surreal. The conversation does not compete with the organ prelude, the relationships with the clothes and cars, or the truth with hypocrisy.

The church which meets in a home also best contributes to a family's spirituality and best enables a father as the head of the family to encourage their well-being. A house church allows the free time to teach one's family what it means to be a Christian in the kingdom of Christ and God.

Indeed, it does not just allow; it places upon a father that responsibility because there is no one else designated to do it. One cannot delegate this duty to a Sunday School teacher, Bible study leader, youth minister, or minister-there are none of those in a house church. The weekly teaching does not substitute for the father's teaching, but complements it.

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