

“Faith - Growth in the Family”

Rev. Ian K. Johnston

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God created Adam and Eve and said, *A man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife and they shall be one flesh.* The family is part of God’s created order and it is the way that God meant it to be. He knew what he was about when he created the family. Family was the vehicle to transmit the God - Man relationship. Although we have corrupted it, the possibility still exists that the family can be the vehicle to carry the faith.

Family is the way that God meant faith to be transmitted from generation to generation. Family is where faith is taught, caught, and lived. There is a sense in which faith is an individual journey, but from the beginning the Bible placed faith within the context of family. The strength of Israel was family faith. The strength of Judaism is still family faith. We have moved into the kind of attitude which seems to place faith within the realm of the orphan and maverick. A very private experience is the one most often emphasized. Of course, faith is for the orphan – the spiritually unparented person, but we rejoice that faith is essentially a family affair.

I admit that family faith is not always an easy way. Perhaps it is difficult because we have so individualized the process of finding faith.

***How do I help my children to find faith? Can you recommend a book we can use for our family devotions? I feel lost when I try to think of ways to teach my children faith. Can you help me?* These are examples of questions I have been asked by a parent or parents who have expressed a desire and concern as they seek to bring their children up in faith and fulfill their baptismal vows. The surprising thing is that sometimes we don’t seem to have the kind of influence we would like to have on our children. But the influence is there even if we are not always aware of it, or it doesn’t seem to turn out the way wish.**

If family is one of God’s ways of passing on our faith to our children, our task as parents and adults is to learn how faith is passed on to our children and the next generation.

Today I am going to create a mythical family, parents and children. There is 4 year old, John. He is always discovering and always asking, *why, why why?* He is a private child, lives in his own space, not too outgoing and enjoys his own company. John can understand what it means to have a baby in the family because he knows what it means to be part of a family. He has watched a robin looking after her babies in the nest outside the back door and has compared those babies to babies in the home. The Jesus he hears his parents talking about grew up in a family, much like his own. As John finds his place in the family, loving parents bring him a sense of God’s love. Sharing his life experiences helps him to sense that he can share his life experiences with God. John likes stories which show God’s consistency as a nurturing parent. Stories about danger and threats are difficult for a youngster to understand, such as Moses being abandoned on the riverbank. But he will learn about faith from Jacob at Bethel (Gen 28: 10-22); The Still Small Voice (I Kings 19: 1-10); Ruth from the Book of Ruth; The Birth of Jesus from Luke 2; and he will like the stories of David as a boy and a King. Bible stories will help John

connect the Bible as a special Book of faith and that it is important to both the family and the church.

The next child is Billy who is 6 years old. He is in grade one. He is becoming aware of his part in groups. When there are family pictures shown, he is happy to claim his place in the family. He is now able to take his part in the family and do some things that are unique such as his responsibility with some chores.

Billy understands how Jesus was a part of his family, but more than that, he can understand how Jesus related to his Heavenly Father. Billy's relation with his dad becomes a model of how Billy relates to God. Billy looks up to his Dad. Daddy can do no wrong, he can do everything and he knows everything. The love and acceptance he has for his Dad becomes an understanding of the same kind of love and acceptance he looks for in the Heavenly Father. He understands that God can help his family as his Dad helps him. Family is molding Billy, and faith becomes a thing of joy and growth. Helping Billy to come to faith is mainly by example.

Next we have 9-year-old Susan. One day she came home from school filled with excitement. She found a ring on the road and nobody at school claimed it. She wanted to know if she could keep it. She looks for rules to follow and has concern enough that she needs to know what is right. She has learned and accepted that the family has set a standard for her. Her strengths and weaknesses will be laid alongside the family values and used to establish life patterns.

God becomes a standard of right and wrong. She looks for guidance from her elders and the Bible to discover those things which fall into right and wrong categories. Mother will talk about the ring and help her sense what is right. Decisions like this set values and standards.

The family for Susan works as a unit. Each family member has a share in the projects, and this helps Susan to develop a sense of responsibility. Through this she is beginning to find her own sense of worth and life. As the family works at being faithful to Jesus Christ, Susan will identify her place in God's will and plan. Being 9 she is able to read her children's Bible and she can now participate in the family sharing and devotion times. At 9, she can connect Bible incidents to life experiences and when encouraged to do so, can sense God's purpose and direction.

Finally we come to George who is 11. What a proud day it was when mum brought the cute little George home from the hospital. He surely was a wonderful gift from God – he was perfect! But now he is a boisterous 11 year old. He rushes in full of words. He is busy and has to have his answer before the question is completed. One day he rushed into the house exclaiming he saw a dog hit by a car. The dog is OK, a little hurt but didn't die. *Do you think God meant for him to get run over?*

God and Christ have a very direct connection to life. George is learning about loyalty and is now able to give himself to causes and groups. He likes Scouts and thinks green – sometimes too green for the rest of the family. He sees things as black and white, good and bad, right and wrong. Jesus Christ may now become leader and Lord. God is in the midst of his life. He has a strong sense of justice and uses the Bible to understand life issues. But he is young enough that he still needs help to interpret symbolic and abstract thoughts. God is now involved in his total life experience.

The family for George is a relationship where faith and loyalty are lived out. The family can create the special atmosphere where he can choose to commit himself to Jesus Christ as Lord.

Family is a group of people who love each other and live together. The pressure of daily living can often rob the family of the rich experiences of love and faith. The challenge is to keep the art of enjoying each other alive. Times when the family can be together will depend on their interests and their desire to make the family relationship one where faith is practiced.

The family can and may create it's own unique way of celebrating its faith. For example, a weekly family meeting might include time for story telling, life sharing, discovering the Bible and prayer, sharing family traditions and making traditions. Monthly family times can be planned so they can carry faith and family meanings. Birthdays and Christmas are already there, but with a little effort other events can be planned more frequently. These family gatherings and conversation will have deep lasting meanings for children.

Our faith belongs to our children. Let us use the family as God meant it to be – a vehicle of faith, for faith. We can convey the Christian faith to our children and to the coming generations. That is the way I believe God meant it to be. Amen.