

COVENANT DISCIPLESHIP IN THE FIRST TESTAMENT

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In the Beginning: the Family

The Bible teaches that there are three main spheres of authority in the world: the family, the church, and the state. While these divine institutions are separate jurisdictions, their interests often overlap in carrying out God's revealed will. Not surprisingly, the origins of these spheres are intertwined.

The family, of course, came first. God placed a man and wife in paradise where they would enjoy the highest spiritual felicity in the presence of their loving Maker. Even before the fall of Adam, he and his wife were promised children who should share in the same blessings. The first family constituted a religious commonwealth of which Adam was the head. The religious connotation is clear from the first family's regular fellowship with God and from God's provision of the two sacramental trees in the garden; the first family's Sabbath rest based on God's example implies the same. The magisterial connotation is clear from God's giving to Adam authority over the lower creation, and, of course, it is implied in Adam's bearing the image of his Maker. Adam was God's viceroy on earth, and as such he served as a prophet, priest, and king. These three offices subsume, and almost parallel, the three spheres over which God's crown of creation was given authority.

By design the family is the church,¹ a body of believers in covenant relation to God. While Adam did exercise magisterial duties, as would also the later patriarchs, the state appears to be a development after paradise. As the first family grew into clans and tribes it became the state. But the family originally was the church. The family was the source of the state, but it is the essence of the church.

Grace to Return to God

The fall of mankind alienated the race from the life that is in God. Mercifully God gave promises of restoration for those who would walk with Him. These promises always included the children of the faithful. Early evidences of this truth are found in the family of Noah and especially in the family of Abraham. The family more than ever became the vehicle for training future generations in the lost knowledge of the true God.

The family is God's ordained society for teaching hope in God's grace and subjection to His law. The fact that subjection itself must be taught implies that humans by nature are lawless. Biblical theology and history prove this. As an antidote to our inherent antinomianism, God intends the home to be the training ground for His moral government. Parents have the God-given duty of instilling a sense of personal accountability in their own children, to nurture them

in it, and to discipline them when their immature consciences lead them to think they are less than accountable.

What institution other than the family could be used of God to mold stubborn wills at odds with God's law of life? God gives children nigh 20 years of judicious parental oversight. In teaching subjection to God's law, a parent's duty is not to break his child's will, but to teach him to control his own will. A great Presbyterian pastor summarizes: "The great mystery of Grace is, how to recover that enslaved and depraved will, and to bring it again into harmony with the will of the Supreme, without contravening the spontaneity of their own determinations."²

The state cannot do what the family can. The state's response to infractions of the law is largely penal. The role of the family (and the church) is entirely different: the object is not punishment, but correction. God gave the home and the spiritual family of the church as gracious instruments of discipline for its members.

So important is the sphere of the family in laying the first stones of social structure, that all other society would be impossible without the first society of the family.

"The old theory of the social compact [promoted by humanists Locke and Rousseau] is historically untrue and intrinsically absurd. Apart from other difficulties, it is perfectly clear that no government could be framed strong enough to subdue and control a thousand imperious wills. Even now, with all their training under government and law, men could never be held in check if consolidated in masses. We should be compelled to fall back upon some device like that of the Family for the purposes of discipline. We must invent the Family, if we did not already have it."³

God's design in promoting His universal moral government begins with the "compact domestic empire" known as the family.

The government of the home enforces the concept of law, but God intends it to be a gracious government. The law calls for order and obedience in the home, while the natural affection of the parents tempers discipline, allowing for forgiveness and restoration. By God's design, law and grace work together in the family.

Discipleship in the Abrahamic Covenant

God's promises are to the faithful and their households. While this pattern of family deliverance flows through both testaments, the clearest early statement is in the Abrahamic covenant: "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you" (Gen. 17:7).

That's quite a promise, especially considering the waywardness of the heart of man. God, however, established the means as well as the end of this covenant relationship. God says that the future of the church hangs upon the covenant fidelity of believers in discipling their

children: “For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him” (Gen. 18:19).

Abraham’s training his children in the fear of God was essential to his receiving the promises in the previous verse: that he would become a great nation, and that all the nations of the earth would be blessed in him.⁴ In Abraham and his offspring, God uses the means of parental faithfulness to bring about the covenant of grace whereby Abraham’s Seed, the Messiah,⁵ brings God’s greatest blessing to all the children of the Abrahamic covenant.⁶ While God’s knowing/choosing Abraham (Gen. 18:19) is determinative,

“God establishes His covenant with parents not only for their assurance as to what He will do, but also for their strengthening for what they must do. God has clothed parents with a holy authority and responsibility. There are the years when the will of the child is to a great extent in the parents’ hands when loving exercise of parental authority will have a mighty influence. God expects this influence to serve the ends of the covenant, and He blesses the parent who faithfully exercises this influence in the interests of the covenant fulfillment.”⁷

Primitive Church Discipline

What if there was parental negligence in child rearing or outright rebellion against the terms of God’s covenant? Then action enforced by the spiritual community (the OT church) moved beyond discipling to discipline. The ultimate action was to “cut off” willful covenant breakers. Beginning with the Abrahamic covenant,⁸ copious instances follow in Exodus and Leviticus for which a covenant member could be excommunicated from the community. The language of excommunication, to “cut off” someone, is not unintentional. It is the fulfillment of the curse threatened in the covenant sign of circumcision.

Family Discipling After Abraham

The Mosaic covenant carried the same emphasis on parental fidelity propagating the fear of the Lord. Moses’ last will as he ascended the mountain to meet his Maker was “Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today, which you shall command your children to be careful to observe—all the words of this law.”⁹

By the time God made His covenant with David to build a house (dynasty) for him, David’s generation still carried the same charge of training their children. The classic Bible passage is Psalm 78:1-8:

“Give ear, O my people, *to* my law; Incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old, Which we have heard and known, And our fathers have told us. We will not hide *them* from their children, Telling to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, And His strength and His wonderful

works that He has done. For He established a testimony in Jacob, And appointed a law in Israel, Which He commanded our fathers, That they should make them known to their children; That the generation to come might know *them*, The children *who* would be born, *That* they may arise and declare *them* to their children, That they may set their hope in God, And not forget the works of God, But keep His commandments; And may not be like their fathers, A stubborn and rebellious generation, A generation *that* did not set its heart aright, And whose spirit was not faithful to God.”

The perspective of this Psalm covers at least four generations of theological training.

“This covenant instruction which is passed on from generation to generation is the means whereby each succeeding generation learns to set its hope in God and keep His commandments. That is, God has ordained that He will save His people in the line of generations and that the means whereby this salvation will be reserved in the line of generations is instruction in the mighty works of God and in His law.”¹⁰

Proverbs: the Discipleship Manual

The Proverbs of Solomon put great stress on training covenant children. In fact, the book of Proverbs was Israel’s official manual for adding to the wise and subtracting from the number of fools in their society.

The Book of Proverbs follows the biblical anthropology that portrays human nature as corrupt, even in children: “foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child,” and “a child left to himself brings his mother to shame.”¹¹ Therefore the Hebrews worked to counteract rebellion in young fools by training their children in the fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7).

A key proverb for parents in training their children is Proverbs 22:6: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” Significantly, the Bible enjoins parents to train their children, not just teach them. Teaching engages the intellect, but training in true religion involves the mind as well as the will. Some interpreters¹² understand this verse as a warning: “Train a child in the way he *would* go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” In other words, if parental training follows the path of least resistance in giving the child his head, the willful child will grown into a stubborn adult. In this sense the verse is taken ironically: “Go ahead and follow the child’s own training manual if you care not how he turns out.” Few Bible translations, however, follow this ironic understanding. While the Geneva Bible of 1597 implied this interpretation,¹³ all others have stressed the positive charge of training a child. The Hebrew literally commands to “train” or even “dedicate” the child upon the beginning (“entrance”) of his way.

Conclusion

The first promise of hope to humanity after sin and death entered the world was not just to one man. It was to him and to his posterity. God’s promises offered a future based on

deliverance from the curse and a corrupt nature. “Sin in conquering Adam, had conquered the race. The parental relation became the very instrument of sin’s universal perpetuation.”¹⁴ Sin may be perpetuated from generation to generation, but so may grace.¹⁵ Children are by nature and by environment involved in the sin and guilt of their parents. By God’s gracious covenant, children of believers are partakers of the divine promises given their parents.

God gives the promises of life to those most dear to believers, to their offspring. With His promises, He also gives the means to establish these children in the way of life—through the influence of loving, godly parents.

“When God restores the parental relation it then becomes the very instrument of His grace. The relation that perpetuated the sinful nature now becomes the instrument for perpetuating the redemption of God. . . . The parental relation had been sin’s mightiest ally, the very instrument by which sin had acquired universal dominion. This principle is rescued from the power of sin, adopted into the covenant of grace, and now made subservient to the establishment of redeemed families.”¹⁶

The godly family has always been a church in miniature, and the church is a large spiritual family. In God’s design, the family not only is an incubator for spiritual nurturing, but it is a place of worship that brings families to the threshold of heaven in preparation for glory.

¹ Consider how the church and family mirror each other: “I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named” (Eph. 3:14,15). The *Westminster Confession of Faith* captures this Bible teaching: “The visible Church Catholic consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children [as] the house and family of God” (25:2).

² *The Family in Its Civil and Churchly Aspects* by B. M. Palmer, p. 18.

³ Palmer, pp. 11-12.

⁴ “. . . Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him” (Gen. 18:18).

⁵ Mt. 1:1; Gal. 3:16.

⁶ Gal. 3:8, 9, 14, 29.

⁷ D. H. Small, *The Biblical Basis for Infant Baptism*, p. 53, emphasis added.

⁸ “And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant” (Gen. 17:14).

⁹ Deut. 32:46.

¹⁰ Herman Hanko, *We and Our Children: The Reformed Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, p. 53.

¹¹ Prov. 22:15, 10:1.

¹² So Jay Adams and Bruce Ray.

¹³ Geneva version of Proverbs 22:6: “Teache a childe in the trade of his way, and when he is olde, he shall not depart from it.”

¹⁴ Small, p. 51.

¹⁵ Exodus 34:6,7.

¹⁶ Small, pp. 51-52.