

Upbringing Part 1

We will consider this important theme in three parts. We begin — how could it be otherwise — with a basic introduction. This is followed in part one by a look at man’s calling to father - and motherhood. This theme is demanding. Thus the following text deserves more than a superficial study.

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I. Introduction

Is up-bringing necessary?

Physics has a well-known law of entropy — the law of disintegration. Everywhere and at all times disorder and chaos increase more and more if not specifically countered by order, barriers, and forms. We experience this law daily in ourselves. We have to make a conscious effort to maintain a certain degree of order. Even in the universe the heavenly bodies are moving further and further apart.

Order and fruitfulness

No order and no form comes about on its own — and thus no fruit either. Therefore, we cannot take for granted that new life will grow into optimum circumstances where it can develop. A vine must be trimmed and freed from the wild, useless branches, which only draw sap from the main stem — taking substance without bearing fruit. Only a trimmed vine bears edible fruit — however it has fewer shoots than a wild one.

For his development

Every child needs other people to bring him up, care for him, and create a place where his life can develop. A person who is left to himself will grow wild and destroy his own life and that of others. His life will disappear like a trace in the sand.

The goal of up-bringing: life

By upbringing we mean the formation of a personality. A personality matures in increasing awareness of God’s reality, its own reality, and that of the environment. If this awareness grows in a framework of security and clear orientation, the result will be a healthy relationship to God, to self, and to others. Such a person can relate to others and handle conflicts. The ability to relate to others and handle conflicts are both vital to the development and fulfilment of the calling God gave us — living in fullness of life and bringing life to others - to create a wide space for ourselves and our neighbours to develop.

Moulding is indispensable

As soon as parents begin bringing up a child they must face the question of who God is and formulate a picture of God and man by which they can orient themselves. All parents should strive for clarity in this. The way we see God, ourselves, our neighbours and the world will determine the form, the outward expression, and the manner in which we mould a life.

Whether we like it or not, whether we keep God's instructions or not, every life will be moulded and shaped. This will either promote and build up, or hinder and destroy the development of our own lives and the lives of others. A person's life will always take on form in accordance with the way he was moulded.

Thus, it is all the more important for us as Christians to examine our view of God, man, and life and ask ourselves how it affects our lives and the lives of our children. The real question is this: What image of God should take form in our lives? Remember that our view of life will determine whether our children grow up with the the freedom and the capacity to relate to others in trust, in fruitfulness, in hope and love — or they will relate to others restricted by distrust, motivated by suspicion and fear, influenced by resignation and lack of hope, and motivated by self-rejection and apathy.

The nature of man

When we think about the foundation and the ultimate goal of our up-bringing we take God's word and intended plan as our point of departure. He is our creator. We want to understand and follow the principles he has put in us. This is not a matter of some method of up-bringing, but of understanding what nature God has given us. We need to understand the principles by which our nature develops and matures.

God makes order

Our history begins with the act of creation. From the beginning God works in a creative and orderly way. He separates the elements: light from darkness, land from firmament, water from mainland. He gives everything a certain form and a name.

Fulfilment in a relationship to God

God creates man according to his image within this ordered earth. Man is created for fellowship with and relationship to him. God is the sole source and goal for man's life. God created man in such a way that he would find fulfilment in a relationship to Him. Only to the extent that a person knows God and grows into a relationship to Him will he know who he himself is and what is the meaning of his existence. Only in a relationship to God can a person develop his self-identity.

Without God, evil grows

Wherever God is not a reality in human society, wherever his countenance disappears, man increasingly loses sight of his own identity and his calling. He loses his orientation. In this chaos all life-preserving and meaningful principles and values get lost. Now the individual person is no longer able to grasp who he is in relationship to himself and his neighbour. He can no longer judge what fosters life and what destroys it.

This leads inevitably to the disintegration of every fellowship and society. This is exactly what is happening in our time. God is increasingly pushed aside. He becomes less and less real in the life and thoughts of modern man. The result is that values such as truth, order, love, and justice become relative. They lose meaning. But there is no such thing as neutrality of values. There is only God who is life and peace — or there is the antithesis: that is destruction, isolation, and death.

II. The calling to father- and motherhood

“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it” Gen. 1:28.

This double commission is God’s call to father- and motherhood, just as he understands and reveals himself as father and mother toward mankind. God calls every person to act — in varying degrees — as father and mother to others. This is the most perfect reflection of God’s character.

Reign

God called man to reign in his name over this creation. Man is to make God’s character known, visible, and tangible to this creation, to show who and how God is. Where God reigns there is always room to live. Before he created man, God brought light and order into the darkness. In the same way he calls man as father and mother into the lives of their children. It is within parents’ authority to separate light from darkness, good from bad, up from down in their children’s lives; to create a clear direction and to name things:- emotions, processes, conditions.

Mental and character training

Like a growing vine, it is the parents’ task to see the difference between their children’s good and bad shoots. They have to prune away the useless shoots — even if this is painful for them and the child — so that the child’s life will be strong and fruitful. This requires much mental and character training, which make a child capable of learning self-control, overcoming selfishness, and allowing himself to be used by God. This requires parents who have themselves taken this path, so that they can lead their child by their example.

Parents are examples

A child experiences God first of all in his father and mother. For a child, parents have all God’s qualities such as omnipotence, omniscience, power, care, etc. What a child experiences is transferred directly to God. For example, the ability to trust depends on whether a child has experienced that he could fully depend on his father and mother and on their relationship to each other. His image of God is formed from his experience with earthly father- and motherhood.

The kingdom of God is peace, joy and righteousness. These qualities are the condition for life itself. A child is introduced to this realm by his parents. They have the power to make a child familiar with God, who is his source of life, to introduce him to a relationship with God, and to anchor his life in fellowship with God.

Guiding to maturity

Just as a person can know who he is only in relationship to God, a child also develops his identity first of all in his relationship to his father and mother. In the security of the relationship to his parents his self-identity grows and awakens. Thus his relationship to himself takes on ever clearer forms. His own conscious identity grows. The goal of bringing up a child is that he increasingly know God and his kingdom until he develops an independent relationship to God, taking responsibility for his own life without his parents’ help.

Multiply

“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth....”

To be fruitful means to multiply one’s own life. God gives man a share in the act of creation by ordering and ruling, as well as by having children.

God is love

In order to make clear who he is from the very beginning of life, God allows this start — the conception of a child — to take place where the relationship between two people is the most close. God embedded the beginning of each single human life in this love and affection, so that this new life can from the beginning recognise in the parents’ love who He is: God is love.

Give one’s life

“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces much fruit” (John 12:24).

There is increase and fruit only when the mother kernel dies. God laid this principle into his creation and it works also in bringing up and calling forth fruit in children. If father and mother do not dedicate their life, their self, their power, and their time, their life will bear no fruit and the children will not come to life. Just as Jesus gave his life for us so that we may live, we should also give our life that others come to life, first of all our children. Through parenthood God gives man a share in the salvation of a human life, in bringing a person back to God.

A high degree of discipline

Bringing up a child for God demands a high degree of self discipline and dedication. It calls for undivided involvement. Because this touches our whole lives and cannot be considered simply an isolated task, bringing up or even having children is increasingly unattractive in our day. It would mean giving up one’s own plans and concepts. It would involve much time and money, and limit the full expression of one’s needs.

Sons and daughters of God

God wants his nature to be visible in us as his sons and daughters. In his eyes this is the goal of all up-bringing: that we and our children grow up as men and women of God, men and women after God’s heart. This is not too high a demand!

Thus the primary goal is not that our children one day have a good life. Nor can bringing up a child be only a matter of satisfying his needs. We must make a child capable of looking away from himself to God. This presupposes that our own goal is not the satisfaction of needs, either.

Taking one’s place in God’s kingdom

God’s concept of his sons and daughters is clear:

“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” (Psalm 127:3-5).

When God's sons grow into the Fathers' character, which is life, peace, freedom, and righteousness, they confront and overcome evil in this world, evil which is expressed in egoism, destruction and hate.

“Our daughters will be like pillars carved to adorn a place” (Ps. 144:12).

God's daughters are women with profile (carved), capable of bearing a load like pillars. They have a great capacity to hold out, and do not desert their place (woe to the house if a pillar leaves its place...!).

Capable of encountering the world

The goal of bringing up a child is to equip him to encounter the world and evil, the enemy of God who is the enemy of life, peace, freedom, and righteousness. A child should be able to resist in a specific way. He should become resistant but not hardened — not according to the principle that whatever doesn't kill me makes me strong.

Become fruitful

Bringing up children or anybody is an act of love in God's eyes. He does not want a life to grow wild and be ruined. We are important to him and he wants our life to bear manifold fruit. Up-bringing has nothing to do with making someone docile and dependent. Rather, it frees a life to be lived in the broad space and the power of God's kingdom, and to help others attain space for life.

Impediments

The Fall totally changed the conditions for relationships between God and man and thus also from one person to another. This can be seen in the relationship between parents and child. Mistrust and rebellion on the children's part, misuse of power and apathy on the parents' part impede the guidance of a child into God's kingdom. Up-bringing in relationship to God, growing up as a son and as a daughter of God can no longer be taken for granted.

Not only the arable field is cursed, bringing up a child has also become hard work as a result of the Fall. Parents have to persevere through many inner and outer conflicts.

Parents need perseverance

Consciously realising parenthood requires firm perseverance and personalities which are founded and held in a relationship to God. When we are leading a person to God, or bringing up children — whatever their age — we will meet resistance from the enemy of God and man. Therefore fathers and mothers will have to take a firm stand — as described in Ephesians 6. They have to know where they stand, with solid ground under their feet. They have to put on the armour so that they will not become discouraged but will have faith for their children, as well as truth and discernment in their guidance.

Protection from evil

Father and mother have the task of protecting their children from the destructive powers in and around them. For if left to themselves children are at the mercy of the law of the stronger, of evil, of destruction, and of chaos. It requires much energy, decisiveness and alertness to

fulfil the task of consciously and constantly guiding children in everything . Such parenthood can ultimately be lived only under the authorisation of God, the father of all fatherhood. “For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being” (Eph.3:14-16).

This is God’s task and investment for every father and mother.

The meaning of marriage

Marriage, the relationship between mother and father, is the best place to bring up children. Man was created for relationships and becomes capable of relating only when he experiences relationships. A child first experiences what a relationship is in his father and mother’s relationship to each other. He learns from this model what respect, affection, forgiveness, and care can do in a person’s life and how these can be expressed.

Single parents

Thus the situation of single fathers and mothers is difficult. Alone, the father can not fulfil a child’s emotional needs, nor can a mother build up a child’s ability to cope with conflict (=prerequisite for encountering this world as a personality). One parent can offer only one dimension. As members of one body, the believers in a congregation are therefore called on to fill this lack, to stand in the gap, and to take over responsibility. Even in the Old Testament God wanted the believers to care for the widows and orphans, and not only in a material sense.

Upbringing Part 2

In this second part of the topic Up-bringing we are considering the way in which parents bring up their children. We will look at the prerequisites or the framework which is necessary for successful up-bringing.

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III. Prerequisites and framework

There are certain prerequisites, such as the parent's own identity, their marriage relationship and their relationship to a child which form the framework for up-bringing. We will look at these components and others in greater detail in the following paragraphs. All the components are inter-related and are influential in the bringing up of children at all stages of their development. As parents, the way in which we bring up our children and the success of our efforts will largely depend on our awareness of the importance of these qualities and our view of them.

In the following paragraphs we are addressing those for whom faith in Jesus Christ and belief in the content of the Bible are the binding basis of their lives.

1. The Parents

Identity clarified

The first prerequisite for up-bringing is in the person of the parents. Each one of us can only give to this process what we have and are and not what we would like to be. Therefore parents must be consciously thinking about their own identity and have as clear a self image as possible. The degree to which I am aware of my relationship to God, myself and my neighbour is the degree to which I can guide and lead others down a clear path. Identity, self-image and a sense of belonging grow out of a close and trusting relationship with the Heavenly Father. If parents are living in deep relationship with God and open relationships with others and are open and transparent in their lives they will be able to disciple their children the same way.

Self-image as Man and Woman

A clear self-image is dependent upon an understanding of God's concept and purposes regarding manhood and womanhood and a total affirmation of one's own gender. This will make it easier to wholly fulfil one's place in the family, as father or mother, and to be aware of the corresponding responsibility of one's spouse. If I do not know what God has entrusted to me in this regard, it will be difficult to fulfil the task with authority.

Character

The character, preferences and weaknesses of a father or mother and the way they cope with them will affect the way they bring up their children. Therefore it is of great importance that as a parent I know my own character and have learned self-control regarding my strengths and weaknesses. Because the parent's personalities are reflected and enlarged in the children, it is important that the parents are always advancing along the path of character formation. They should be consciously striving to let the image of Jesus become more and more visible in their lives. Then the fruits of the Spirit will ripen and the children will pick them and live from them... from love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Disciplined life style

Bringing up children in this way is best suited to a deliberately chosen, disciplined life style, in which the parents are able to deal with any situation that may arise and to create space for their children to live in. It requires a great deal of energy to create an environment such as this, in which the parents are not just coping with everyday family life but are also leading their children to a specific goal. A parent is only able to accomplish this if his source of security is totally in God and he draws his own strength from this relationship.

What is life's meaning, this is the question!

The personal life-goals of the parents will be expressed in the way they bring up their children. Even unformulated, vague concepts or illusions will influence the up-bringing. The parents themselves must understand that their life's meaning must be to make God's kingdom visible, if the children are to be brought up to become sons and daughters of God. They must expect more from their relationship with God than personal blessing. In their own lives they should expect the fulfilment of the petitions, „Your name be holy, Your kingdom come, Your will be done“. Only then can parents lead a child to God and help him anchor his whole life in

this relationship. The child himself will become fruitful and God's kingdom will come into this world through him.

Therefore, we see that the first major factor in the bringing up of children concerns the parents. Their relationship with God and the extent to which they are allowing Him to work His process of up-bringing in their lives will affect the lives of their children.

2. Marriage

A place for maturing

The second most important prerequisite for up-bringing is marriage. The relationship of the father and mother to each other, the marriage, is the place where the child matures. Here a child receives his primary experiences of life, which form his identity. A child develops his own self-image and a basic knowledge of himself and the world, when he sees how his father and mother behave toward each other and toward him; when he sees their attitude to life and to others and their relationship with God. At first sub-consciously, then with growing awareness, the child orientates himself by observing his parents' behaviour in their marriage relationship. A child has no other life environment in which to develop other than this marriage relationship into which he was born.

Fruit ripens

Marriage is like a vine from which the branch draws living sap. The branch grows according to the state of the roots and the vine itself. A child is not born and then able to grow up independent of his outward circumstances. Human life is like fruit. In order to develop properly in spirit, soul and body a child needs nourishment from birth to maturity. God purposely gave a child two authorities in order to provide sufficient latitude for his development. The child can move around within these relationships, as in a garden. He is not limited to one track only but has the opportunity to discover his own way between father and mother.

The trustworthiness of those in authority

A child first learns whether authorities are trustworthy by the way his parents behave toward each other. This trustworthiness is the prerequisite for all further values which a child develops leading to inner maturity. If a child sees his parents relationship as a battlefield, where life is always a power struggle where the parents are ultimately only concerned about themselves, he will become insecure and his growth will be hindered. In the marriage the child should experience that two completely different people, wholly concerned for each other, are also concerned for him. Together they give him clear guidelines and when necessary in unity they give him discipline. He gets to know authority as a power which creates living space for him, gives him security and builds up a clear attitude; making him a personality with profile.

Unity in the marriage

The extent to which a marriage is fulfilled and the parents have inner unity in their relationship, is the extent to which each of them has authority to handle whatever happens in the children's lives. If the marriage itself is difficult, if the partners cannot even give each

other security or handle their own conflicts, it will also be impossible to fulfil the children's needs and guide their lives.

Integrity

The parents' relationship will also demonstrate to the child whether their lives are in line with their words. In puberty, the knowledge of his parents' integrity will be the decisive anchor for his life and enable a youngster to keep trust in his relationship with them. From observing his parents' marriage a child learns how to show respect and express his emotions freely without hurting others.

In summary, the more a marriage is rich and deep, grounded, stable and fulfilled, the fewer problems there will be bringing up the children. The children will feel secure under the authority of clear guidance.

3. Image of man

Biblical image of man

A third prerequisite for successful upbringing is my image of man and this is as equally important as the concepts already mentioned. When we are encouraging and developing a child, we must use the biblical image of man as a basis in recognition of the child's nature. Idealising the child leads to false evaluations, disappointments, exhaustion and neglect.

"Evil from childhood..."

Every child has problems because it comes into the world as a fallen creature. Even a new-born baby without a history of his own, is born as part of the fallen creation with a rebellious heart. Rebellion and self-will, as well as a tendency to stun and repress his fallen realities, are already written in his heart. No child comes into the world as an unwritten page, with a pure heart. The opinion that a child does not become infected with evil until he comes in contact with the fallen creation is not Biblical. Every inclination of man's heart is evil from childhood. (Gen 8:21) God makes this statement after the Flood. He allowed only the righteous to survive and yet during the course of man's history unrighteousness rises again and again. Not even a sweet new-born's disposition is simply good.

A born egoist

By nature a child makes himself and his needs the measure of all things. He experiences himself as the centre of everything that happens. However, he must be guided into the reality of a network of relationships with both parents and siblings. He does not intend to react against his parents, who are his authorities but he just sees his own needs. As much as man was created for relationship, he is still born as a fallen person, as an egoist. Initially he is incapable of any relationship which does not cater to his needs.

Instant satisfaction

A child, left to himself, will always look for the easiest way to find instant satisfaction. This is the motive behind many of his requests and desires. He is always ready to consume whatever is available. Every kind of entertainment is welcome, the television or an adult who is willing

to be used as an entertainer, even if they later walk away and forget the child. In this area it is important for parents to decide what is good for the child's development and what is harmful.

Introducing the child to life

A child's primary, emotional perception of himself and the world is egocentric and chaotic. It is the parents' role to bring order into this chaos, determine the rules and create structures in the child's life just as God brought forth creation from the desolate and dark void. Parents must lead the child onto the path of life. For every child who is left to himself will be at the mercy of evil and will become a servant to it. He will go astray and end up in isolation. Setting boundaries for a child protects him from evil. His life energy is channelled purposefully like water in a stream bed, not seeping away into the sand. These boundaries will help form in him a sound personality and profile.

Love and firmness

Leading a child onto the path of life requires love and firmness. They belong together in the up-bringing of a child. They are interactive. A child needs to experience loving firmness and firm love. This builds a strong character in him.

4. The relationship to a child

Unconditional love

The kind of relationship the parents have with the child is just as important as the goal of up-bringing itself, because the parent/child relationship mirrors God's relationship with man. The basis has to be unconditional love. The deep conviction that the parents will never desert him is the fertile ground in which the child can grow and develop.

Motivation and vigour

A child who is surrounded with such love will be free to live. He will be motivated and have the freedom to grow into his own identity. Unconditional love for a child means totally accepting him as a person. It means providing physical and emotional closeness, so that a strong emotional relationship can grow, enabling him to cope with tensions in his upbringing and later on in the world. Unconditional love creates the vigour, stamina and deep trust which make it possible for the child to obey even when he finds it difficult.

Emotional tank

A child (and an adult) stores this love in an emotional tank, a reserve on which he can call in times of tension and stress. From this reserve the knowledge of deep love and being taken seriously can be drawn. The child collects into this reserve by receiving concentrated attention as well as in other everyday encounters with his parents. This love, in which everything is in favour of the child, is not only to be drawn upon at his disposal but is also expressed when it exposes and identifies guilt, leads into truth and forgiveness.

More than natural love

To be willing to show unconditional love is a decision which parents should make before a child's conception. It is very costly. It is the explicit willingness to give up an undisturbed life,

expensive purchases, personal hobbies, a part-time job, vacations and much more!
Unconditional love goes beyond natural love. Natural love goes only to the point where the pain becomes greater than the reward.

Unconditional love costs me my life, just as it cost Jesus his. When parents dedicate their time, energy and lives to up-bringing, they create a space for the child to live in this evil world. They thus participate in the salvation of a human life. Only if we realise that we ourselves are unconditionally loved and accepted by God can we give this love to our children.

God's possession

The provision of a child is evidence of God's trust in parents. They should not misuse this trust by building and developing their own lives through the child, or fulfilling their own dreams. The child is only lent to them from God. No one has the right to dispossess God of a child. The child is God's possession from the very beginning, created for a relationship with his creator. His life will be fulfilled in God's sonship not in the sonship of his parents. As a son or daughter of God, every child deserves respect and dignity.

Letting go

As God's stewards, parents should make every effort to create a space for the child to live. But no matter how much they invest in him he will never become their possession. Even if they bring the child close to themselves and he experiences their unconditional love, from the beginning they must be willing to allow the process of letting go to take place, so that the child can become a healthy, independent human being. In the early years it is especially difficult for mothers to let go and later on fathers too have difficulty in letting go of the child, so that he can find his own identity.

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