Raising children in the fear of Almighty God

David d'Lima, FamilyVoice Australia - June 2021

Part of the privilege and responsibility of parents and teachers is to encourage young hearts and minds towards knowing God, who is both loving and holy, and who therefore is to be loved and to be feared. Indeed, all authorities in society, including parents, teachers and governmental leaders, should be loved and respected, and therefore it is good to encourage those responses among the children we nurture.

The word 'fear' is regarded somewhat negatively within modern thinking, both in Christian and secular contexts. Hence it is valuable and necessary to restore the wise and biblically-endorsed concept of fear.

The gift of fear is built into creation itself. Hence, people are rightly frightened by unexpected loud noises, and sources of pain, such as hot surfaces or sharp implements. As expressed by an Irish proverb: *A man who is not afraid of the sea will soon be drowned*. While such examples of fear may be called a common grace (functioning as good gifts that are granted to all humanity), other aspects of fear must be taught and learned - in response to the revelation by God concerning his character and qualities.

The biblical Christian virtue of fear arises as God reveals himself with awesome power. Many passages of Scripture explore that reality, including this prayer of Habakkuk that deserves to be read loudly:

> *LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds ... His glory covered the heavens and his praise filled the earth. His splendour was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hand, where his power was hidden. Plague went before him; pestilence followed his steps. He stood, and shook the earth; he looked, and made the nations tremble* (Habakkuk 3:2-6).

The terrible *pestilence that stalks in the darkness* and *the plague that destroys at midday* (Psalm 91:6) are among the most feared phenomena in the fallen world, but are less to be feared than the Almighty. Even those most dreadful personified entities are portrayed in submission to God who is supreme.

People who hold God in awe and fear, by his grace, are prompted to praise him and may gain blessing:

> *God said: "Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!"* (Deuteronomy 5:29);
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> *The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper* (Deuteronomy 6:24);
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> *The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them. ... Fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing* (Psalm 34:7-9);
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> *He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD* (Psalm 40:3);
>
> *O God, you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name* (Psalm 61:5);
>
> *The LORD reigns, let the nations tremble; he sits enthroned between the cherubim, let the earth shake. Great is the LORD in Zion; he is exalted over all the nations. Let them praise your great and awesome name - he is holy* (Psalm 99:1-3).

Further, God delegates aspects of his fearful nature and mission to parents, teachers and civic leaders.

Parents understanding, exhibiting and inculcating Godly reverence

By raising children, we share in the divine drama of knowing, showing and commending the awe of God. Children will learn respect for their parents, and consequently may learn to revere Almighty God, as they are guided by love and firm discipline in their early development, and through coaching for wise autonomy in their teenage years.

Parents who carefully impress on their children the *kindness and sternness of God* (Romans 11:22), will treat their offspring as God deals with us. Reverence and respect relate to firm discipline that follow after the same amazing generosity, encouragement and patience that is at the heart of the Gospel.

Since *the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding* (Proverbs 9:10), and because *the rod of correction imparts wisdom* (Proverbs 29:15), the love of God expressed by parents must also involve a requirement for firm discipline. While some young children can be chastised simply by a word of correction, others may need stronger measures, that should be applied with care and with self-control. But creative measures are needed when training older children and anyone of low self-esteem; wounded people reject being shaped by reward or punishment. And teenagers especially resist both reward and punishment, in their God-given quest for autonomy.

As parents understand and exhibit the love and fearful characteristics of Almighty God, their children may learn to love and to revere him, through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. As children come to realise how God is generous, patient and encouraging, they come to exhibit those same qualities.

Obedience to parents, as a stepping stone to encouraging submission to Almighty God, can only prosper when children feel secure, loved, encouraged and valued. Although parents are quick to express anger, it must be carefully handled, and (concerning older children, or those who have been wounded) it may be necessary to refrain from punishment or reward, in favour of coaching for wise autonomy.

Lessons should be learned from the father in the Parable of the Lost Son, who neither disinherited nor denounced the wayward lad, but granted the appalling request to liquidate the family assets so he may not have to wait for the father's death to gain his wealth. Yet when the boy came to his senses, he was sufficiently humbled, and certain at least that his father might grant him employment. However, the father ran to meet and kiss his son - without having heard any word of sorrow or repentance (Luke 15). No requirement was applied, as the boy came to his own conclusion about the father's awesome heart.

Indeed, the fear of God imparted by parents, is of no value to children who do not enjoy the love of God expressed by people who themselves have experienced divine grace. Hence the story of his goodness (evident in the crossing of the Jordan) is the underlying feature in the following obedience imperative:

> *"Assemble the people - men, women and children, and the aliens living in your towns - so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess"* (Deuteronomy 31:12-13).

Understanding God's love, parents may cherish their children and impress on them the precepts of God.

It is our prayer that non-Christian parents especially would come to experience God's love, and begin to comprehend its value for raising children, and as it enables Christian schools to earn the right to urge parental cooperation, as the school excels in loving and training the children placed in our classrooms.

Educators imparting reverence for Almighty God

Teachers in Christian schools may help students gain awareness of the fear of the Lord and his love for humanity, through daily devotions in the classroom, prayer before eating lunch, and by the continuous reference to the claims of Christ during every aspect of the school's mission. The attitude of teachers, expressed by actions and words, should represent Christ who is both loving and to be feared.

Since Jesus Christ is the one true teacher, his people who especially serve as teachers have borrowed their teaching vocation from him. We are to be therefore to be Christlike in our teaching - accurately testifying to the Father's loving, but also stern and awesome character, as in this biblical narrative:

Interacting with the Rich Young Ruler, it was observed and recorded: *Jesus looked at him and loved him* (Mark 10:21), before he gave a firm rebuke. Earlier in his work, Jesus was very upset with his accusers: *He looked around at them in anger ... deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts* (Mark 3:5), it is written.

The character of Christ, that we must understand and apply, is shown by his words and his description: He said, *"Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent"* (Revelation 3:19). Of him it is written: *... his eyes were like blazing fire ... and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword* (Revelation 1:14-16). In Christ we see the Father's love and his fearful character, and we see the pattern of ministry that we do well to apply: firstly loving, and on that basis rebuking, disciplining and discipling.

The teacher's role to make disciples is encouraged by our efforts to reveal the majesty and awesome nature of God, displayed in the natural world which we may study, explore and enjoy. Biology, physics, chemistry, music, art, drama, history, geography, literature etc provide rich opportunities to explore the character of God, which is revealed by creation:

> *For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse* (Romans 1:18-20).

The loving and fearfully awesome nature of God is therefore discernable through the study of creation. Hence, according to a saying possibly authored by Malcolm Muggeridge (1903-1990): *Every happening, great and small, is a parable whereby God speaks to us, and the art of life is to get the message*.

Further, each mystery of creation is to be revealed through inquiry, and this should be facilitated and urged by teachers who invite their students to glorify God in their learning, in a most regal endeavour: *It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings* (Proverbs 25:2). Indeed, *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands* (Psalm 19:1).

The wise educator especially reveals theological truths that encourage and strengthen faith in God - like Jesus who constantly drew spiritual observations from the material world, as in these examples:

> *"See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field ... will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?"* (Matthew 6:28-30).

As Jesus drew glorious lessons about the fatherhood of God from the lilies of the field, and if he could look into the chicken pen and see a witness of his own love for Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37), our great challenge in applying the curriculum is to identify and explain spiritual lessons about our awesome God.

Encouraging respect for civic authorities - as they are called to serve Almighty God

Parents and educators do well to convey and engender respect for civic leaders, who are to be feared and reverenced, since their authority and duties are divinely ordained, as noted in Romans 13:2-4:

> *For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer*.

While law-breakers live in fear of the civic authority, to avoid possible punishment, it is also necessary to regard authorities with a certain reverence and awe, by virtue of the office or the uniform - as we look beyond the errors and weaknesses of governing leaders, for the higher purpose of Christ our Lord:

> *Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. ... Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king* (I Peter 2:15-17).

While there is a place to criticise and oppose the errors of government, our default position should be one of prayerful respect, that promotes political reform. Unfortunately, parents and educators are at risk of presuming to critique the authorities and may instill the belief that MPs are corrupt, government is incompetent, lacks sufficient generosity, and is inherently evil. In fact, government and community leadership are gifts from God that should be received with genuine gratitude whenever they do right. And if they fall short of the mark, prayer is necessary, as emphasised in Paul's first letter to Timothy:

> *I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone - for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness* (I Timothy 2:1-2).

Reverence for government, civic institutions and for God the *one Lawgiver and Judge* (James 4:12), who has is *made every nation of men* (Acts 17:26), may occur as parents and educators promote a positive attitude, through understanding and discussing current events, praying for the authorities, interacting cooperatively with civic leaders (such as the police), and by enjoying flag ceremonies, the singing of the National Anthem, and commemorating events including Anzac Day, Australia Day, National Flag Day, Citizenship Day, and reciting key statements, such as the Australian Citizenship Pledge. Students who learn to be civic-minded may become responsible citizens, and possibly leaders, who heed these truths:

> *"Now let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Judge carefully, for with the LORD our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery"* (II Chronicles 19:7).

> *"When one rules over men in righteousness, when he rules in the fear of God, he is like the light of morning at sunrise on a cloudless morning, like the brightness after rain that brings the grass from the earth"* (II Samuel 23:3-4).

Teachers and parents do well to tell children that we are *fearfully and wonderfully made* (Psalm 139:14) - by Almighty God, who is rightly reverenced and feared. Knowing God as the source of all wisdom and knowledge, children learn to love and rightly fear him, their parents, teachers and the civic authorities.

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