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First Mission Outpost: The Family

ALINA BALTAZAR AND
SILVIA CANALE BACCHIOCCHI

“OUR WORK FOR CHRIST IS TO BEGIN
WITH THE FAMILY, IN THE HOME....
THERE IS NO MISSIONARY FIELD MORE
IMPORTANT THAN THIS.”
THE ADVENTIST HOME, 35

The Family: Origin, Creation, and Redemption

Before anything existed—on earth or even in the universe—there was God. And this Being existed as the harmonious unity of three Persons. In a way, we could say that the concept of family was established before the foundation of the earth, being present in God’s very nature: the beautiful harmony of three in one. At creation, God extended His relational love to His children, made in His image. His desire was that they would return His love through their faithful actions and thereby grow closer to Him daily. Tragically, both Adam and Eve chose to exercise faith in Satan’s lie instead of God’s explicit word, and their disobedience resulted in the rupture of earth’s first family, comprised of God and the human pair. But God, in His tender mercy, provided a way of escape through Christ—the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15). In this first

succinct covenant promise the entire plan of salvation was presented, and it was presented to the father and mother of the human race. Their divinely-ordained mission to their family was, in essence, their mission to the world. And it is the same for us today. Our mission to the world begins at home: bringing the gospel message of redemption to bear fruit for eternity in the lives of each member of our families. Then, from the mission outposts of our homes, our children will be equipped to reach out in love and ministry to the wider world.

Ellen White’s Role as Family Counselor

The Seventh-day Adventist church has been uniquely blessed with the prophetic voice of Ellen White—faithful wife, loving mother, and fervent missionary. In *The Adventist Home* she has left tender encouragement and practical counsel to families living in earth’s probationary period (begun in October, 1844). Although the family has always been integral in educating young minds for God’s mission field (Deut. 6:6–8, cf. 4:6), the devotion of parents in training their children is even more critical today as we live in the time of God’s investigative judgement. The devil knows his time is short, and his intensified deceptions and temptations require that we arm ourselves with a deeper knowledge of Scripture and the counsels of Ellen White. Adventist families today often

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resort to various interventions, some of which may be helpful, tending to “go with the flow” of society at large. Though, there are times reaching out to Christian professionals is advisable; as in the case of medical problems, mental illness, or substance abuse. Yet the Creator of the family unit is the best qualified to resolve our problems. As such, our first response should be to go to Him in prayer, consulting both Scripture and what He has advised through His messenger, Ellen White. In this way God will frequently lead us to a solution that is simpler than first imagined, helping us to avoid costly and/or painful interventions. This will also strengthen our family’s faith and allow us to give God the glory. God has given us trained members of our community to provide care along the way. Because this article will only present a few basic guidelines pertaining to the missionary role of the family, we highly encourage all readers to purchase a copy of *The Adventist Home* and consult it regularly, as Ellen White’s counsel will prove an invaluable source of wisdom for meeting trials of many kinds—and emerging from them victorious.¹

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTION:

Where have you turned for help when struggling with parenting concerns? What has been the most helpful?

The Family as Mission Center

Although missionary zeal has waned since the great religious awakening that captured the popular imagination in the 1800s and 1900s, it must be revived today and this revival must begin in our homes. “Home religion is fearfully neglected. Men and women show much interest in foreign missions. They give liberally to them and thus seek to satisfy their conscience, thinking that giving to the cause of God will atone for their neglect to set a right example in the home. But the home is their special field, and no excuse is accepted by God for neglecting this field” (*AH*, 318). Many might think that the true man or woman of God is the evangelist who preaches God’s Word to hundreds and thousands, but

Mrs. White assures us that “the Lord is served as much, yea, more, by faithful home work than by the one who teaches the word” (*AH*, 236).

If God designed the family unit as the first training ground to restore harmony between heaven and earth, this is our most important mission field, and our homes will be blessed only to the degree that we are faithful to this calling. In other words, our families will be truly happy only when we put God’s priorities first, educating our children to love Him and obey His written Word. And when we do this daily and painstakingly, our light will begin to shine far beyond our four walls: “The mission of the home extends beyond its own members. The Christian home is to be an object lesson, illustrating the excellence of the true principles of life. Such an illustration will be a power for good in the world. As the youth go out from such a home, the lessons they have learned are imparted. Nobler principles of life are introduced into other households, and an uplifting influence works in the community” (*AH*, 31).

Love and Obedience

Faithfulness to our home ministry begins very early, even before our children are born. This is, ideally, when the future parents prepare their minds and bodies to pass on—in the infant’s very DNA—habits and principles that will strengthen their ability to fight on the side of right.² And while children need nutritious food to develop strong physical constitutions, they need the daily nourishment of their parents’ unconditional love and consistent discipline even more. Love, and the boundaries that love places, feeds every aspect of our little ones and forms the spiritual foundation that will encourage them in the ways of heaven. Unfortunately, a love relationship with our children does not come automatically. Notice what Ellen White says, “Parents should study the best and most successful manner of winning the love and confidence of their children, that they may lead them in the right path.” (*AH*, 190). Did you see that? *We must study the best and most successful way to win their love!* Love is the result of concentrated effort and diligent study

to know what will bind our children's hearts to us. In other words, love is a battle that we must fight every day to win! Satan is doing all he can to frustrate us in this struggle, but we must persevere since only by love is love awakened. Although each child's love language is different, the guidelines provided below—drawn from *The Adventist Home*—will prove invaluable in helping us win the love war with our children.³ Because when our children know that we love them and want to make them happy, they will open their hearts to us and be eager to do what pleases us—and, more importantly, what pleases God.

Connection Before Direction

A wise author advises parents that the key to binding their children's hearts is to “connect before they direct.”⁴ This is the same principle that Ellen White advocates: “Parents, let your children see that you love them and will do all in your power to make them happy. If you do so, your necessary restrictions will have far greater weight in their young minds” (*AH*, 193). Before we ask our children to do anything, they should first feel connected to us so that their hearts will be open to receiving direction. This can be easily done with a smile, hug, or warm words of gratitude or encouragement. Connection (love) before direction (discipline) shows our children that our relationship with them matters more to us than their actions. If we direct without love, we will likely need to resort to bribes or threats to achieve the desired behavior, and our children's compliance will be fleeting. But when our first priority is to woo our children into a loving relationship, they will more naturally want to comply with our direction and eventually make it part of their habitual character.

Smiles and Patient Tones

Connection and love bloom easiest when there is sunshine in the home, warm smiles, courteous ways and loving words. God intended that “home should be a little heaven upon earth, a place where the affections are cultivated instead of being studiously repressed. Our happiness depends upon this cultivation of love, sympathy, and true courtesy to one another” (*AH*, 15). Often the tender attentions and encouragements of the early years disappear

by the time our little ones reach two or three years and start getting into mischief. As their curiosity and desire for independence grows, they may enter dangerous zones that elicit from us more words of prohibition than of acceptance and encouragement. After the “terrible twos” some parents may experience the relative lull of compliant childhood before the onslaught of the trying tween and teen years erupts. Yet the older our children are, the more they need our smiles and patient tones.

The foundation of home government begins with knitting hearts together. When our children hear love in our voices and it expressed on our faces they will be drawn to us, “The perception of children is quick, and they discern patient, loving tones from the impatient, passionate command, which dries up the moisture of love and affection in the hearts of children (*AH*, 242). Today more than ever, children are tempted at every turn; if parents are not available to engage them lovingly and encouragingly, their affections will lean on the ubiquitous presence of their peers, technology, or other influences (such as alcohol, drugs, and immorality) that will likely prove disastrous. The only solution is to “kindly instruct them and bind them to your hearts. It is a critical time for children. Influences will be thrown around them to wean them from you which you must counteract. Teach them to make you their confidant. Let them whisper in your ear their trials and joys” (*AH*, 191). And when they open their hearts to us, sharing their temptations and mourning their failures, let us be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry (James 1:19). Instead of reproach, let us show Christ's compassion, loving encouragement and total forgiveness.

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POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTION:

What age was the most challenging to be loving with your children? How did you overcome those difficulties?

A United Front

Without a doubt, the most important element necessary for a solid foundation of

loving discipline in the home lies in the union of the parents. If parents want a loving home, it must start with them: “The atmosphere surrounding the souls of fathers and mothers fills the whole house, and is felt in every department of the home. To a large extent parents create the atmosphere of the home circle, and when there is disagreement between father and mother, the children partake of the same spirit. Make your home atmosphere fragrant with tender thoughtfulness. If you have become estranged and have failed to be Bible Christians, be converted.” (*AH*, 16). Wow! Could it be that the reason our children argue or complain is because they’ve seen it modeled in the home? Let us look soberly inside our own hearts and, with God’s help, make the necessary changes (conversion) in our personal lives and marriages.

Love, as they say, is in the details, in the little thoughtful actions that may at times seem superfluous. Yet here is where smiles and patient tones should begin: “A husband and wife should cultivate respect and affection for each other. They should guard the spirit, the words, and the actions so that nothing will be said or done to irritate or annoy. Each is to have a care for the other, doing all in their power to strengthen their mutual affection” (*AH*, 345). While parents might at times disagree with each other, “the father and mother should never in the presence of their children criticize each other’s plans and judgment” (*AH*, 314). If an issue needs to be addressed in front of the children (for example, if you’re in a car and need to make a quick decision), make sure that your children see you work it out with thoughtful consideration for your spouse. These are incredible teaching moments where your attitude as a couple says more to them than the most eloquent of sermons.

Structure and Discipline

Next, after demonstrating the principle of love and respect for each other, parents, as co-regents in the home, must present a united front before their children in relation to discipline. In other words, mom and dad need to agree about house rules and the consequences for breaking them. Imagine if God’s Word were filled with conflicting messages and instructions, one from the Father, another from Christ, and still

another from the Holy Spirit! Thankfully, the message from the Trinity is always consistent and has been neatly summarized in the Ten Commandments. It must be the same in our homes. Using God’s commandments as a guide, make your rules few and clear: “If parents are united in this work of discipline, the children will understand what is required of them. But if the father, by word or look, shows that he does not approve of the discipline the mother gives; if he feels that she is too strict and thinks that he must make up for the harshness by petting and indulgence, the child will be ruined.” (*AH*, 315). However, “if the father and mother in the love and fear of God unite their interests to have authority in the home, they will see the necessity of much prayer, much sober reflection. And as they seek God, their eyes will be opened to see heavenly messengers present to protect them in answer to the prayer of faith” (*AH*, 315). Isn’t it wonderful that simply being united in prayer will invite the presence of angels into our home to help us lovingly discipline our children?

Dealing with Disobedience

Although God’s ideal for the family is to live in perfect harmony, where each family member conveys, in look and tone, only kindness and respect for one other, the reality is that none of us are angels and we will often fall short of this ideal. Here is where we as parents must be careful not to pull the splinter from our child’s eye while a branch impales our own. For instance, reprimanding a child for not cleaning up his room while our own room or office looks like it was hit by a small tornado, won’t work. Children are extremely perceptive and will note this hypocrisy, which will bar our influence with them. Instead, we could say, “Looks like we both need to put a bit of time into cleaning our spaces, let’s see who can finish first!” Similarly, yelling at our teenager who has lost their patience and hit their sibling won’t work either. Instead, as soon as the Holy Spirit brings our faults before us, we should be quick to note our own shortcomings and confess them to our children. If we yell at our child, rather than excusing ourselves, it is much better to say: “I’m really disappointed in myself and sorry I hurt you. Will you forgive me?” If our children see our humility and contrition, they will more easily acknowledge

their own wrongdoings and candidly confess. In short, while the goal is to lead by a Christ-like example, when we fall from the mark, let's swallow our pride and give our children the example of humility and repentance—and ask for their forgiveness.

After we have attended to the horizontal dimension of confession and forgiveness with each other, it is time to bring our sacrifice of repentance to the Lord. This is one of the primary ways in which we help our families reconnect with our heavenly Father—seeking forgiveness, expressing gratitude and growing in the knowledge of God. All this occurs most effectively in the context of family worship.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTION:

What are some mistakes you have made as a parent? What are ways we can make up to our children when we make mistakes?

Family Worship

The Example of Ancient Israel

A spirited and love-filled family worship is quite possibly the single most important tool in our arsenal to unleash the protection and blessings of God in our families and communities. Looking back at God's actions in history, we note that God's purpose in redeeming the Israelites from Egyptian bondage was that they might share a sanctuary home with Him, where they would learn to worship God correctly and thereby receive His bountiful blessings (Exod. 15: 17; 25:8). In other words, it was through this sanctuary system of worship that the gaping chasm caused by sin and rebellion was to be bridged, each sacrifice foreshadowing the one perfect Lamb who would take away the sin of the world (Isa. 53:7; John 1:29). In this way the earthly sanctuary was a place where the Israelites confessed their sins, praised God, and were taught by the priests to live lives that distinguished between right and wrong (Lev. 10:10). This holy lifestyle would then draw the nations to Israel and to worship the one true God (Deut. 4:5–6).

Morning and Evening Sacrifice

Just as the priest offered the burnt offering—symbolizing the atonement of Christ—once at morning and again at twilight (Exod. 29:39), “morning and evening the father, as priest of the household, should confess to God the sins committed by himself and his children through the day. Those sins which have come to his knowledge and also those which are secret, of which God's eye alone has taken cognizance, should be confessed. This rule of action, zealously carried out by the father when he is present or by the mother when he is absent, will result in blessings to the family” (*AH*, 212).

Here we note at least three elements of family worship: 1) it should be daily, both morning and evening, 2) parents—either the father or mother—must lead out *zealously* and 3) it will result in great blessings to our families. When we sacrifice what seems urgent for what is truly of eternal consequence, God will bless us beyond what we have experienced! These three elements also underscore another crucial point: Worship is non-negotiable.

Worship is Non-Negotiable

Just as the parents in ancient Israel educated their children to appreciate sanctuary worship (Deut. 6:6), we as parents in spiritual Israel must do likewise. Unfortunately, the flurry of activities that assaults families tempts many of us to put family worship on the backburner or engage in it only sporadically, when time permits. Yet notice what Ellen White says, “Family worship should not be governed by circumstances. You are not to pray occasionally and, when you have a large day's work to do, neglect it. In thus doing you lead your children to look upon prayer as of no special consequence. . . . Fathers and mothers, however pressing your business, do not fail to gather your family around God's altar. Ask for the guardianship of holy angels in your home. Remember that your dear ones are exposed to temptations” (*Child Guidance*, 520). Here we see that family worship doesn't just bring us closer to God, it literally brings the physical protection of angels to our families, shielding us not only from physical harm, but also from temptation! Neglecting family worship would be like heading out in the car for a family trip

without bothering to buckle our seatbelts, or going out in a boat without life preservers—unthinkable!

Make it Short and Sweet

A final word about family worship: shorter is often sweeter. “Let the seasons of family worship be short and spirited. Do not let your children or any member of your family dread them because of their tediousness or lack of interest. When a long chapter is read and explained and a long prayer offered, this precious service becomes wearisome, and it is a relief when it is over” (*CG*, 521). The goal is to direct the mind to God in praise, gratitude and prayers for forgiveness and blessings. Tailor the content and length of your worships to the age and attention span of your children. If your child has a hard time sitting still, let them color, draw or do a nature puzzle while listening to the reading. Regarding length, follow the lead of your child, some children love to have Bible stories read to them and ask for more, while others (especially during the tween and teen years) may be in a rush with homework or other tasks. While brevity is often key during the week, Sabbaths are a special time for worshipping God; as such, more time should be devoted to Bible readings and spiritual discussions. Family worship on Sabbath should be the sweetest not only because we have spiritual and physical refreshment during those hours, but because we can often worship in our homes with extended family members and friends. This is indeed a little foretaste of heaven!

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTION:

Share some family worship ideas.

Working for Eternal Rewards

We have seen that our mission as parents is to lead our children, day by day, to love and serve Christ. But that is much easier said than done. As a mother, Ellen White keenly sensed the responsibility of her divine appointment against the many shortcomings in her boys, of whom she had four.⁵ Most likely speaking from her own experience she advises parents to persevere

in prayer, looking in faith for the eternal reward, “Parents should labor with reference to the future harvest. While they sow in tears, amid many discouragements, it should be with earnest prayer. They may see the promise of but a late and scanty harvest, yet that should not prevent the sowing. They should sow beside all waters, embracing every opportunity both to improve themselves and to benefit their children. Such seed sowing will not be in vain. At the harvest time many faithful parents will return with joy, bringing their sheaves with them” (*AH*, 533).

On the flip side she warns, “Parents who have neglected their God-given responsibilities must meet that neglect in the judgment. The Lord will then inquire, “Where are the children that I gave you to train for Me? Why are they not at My right hand?” Many parents will then see that unwise love blinded their eyes to their children’s faults and left those children to develop deformed characters unfit for heaven. Others will see that they did not give their children time and attention, love and tenderness; their own neglect of duty made the children what they are.” (*CG*, 561).

Thankfully, while there is life there is hope! If we have been negligent as parents, let us acknowledge this candidly, confess it, and move on in faith. Today is the day of our salvation! As Ellen White stated, our prayers for wisdom to lead our children in the ways of heaven will elicit the help of angels! Let us live each day—and teach our children to live each day—with our eyes fixed on the prize of an eternity with Jesus. This earth is not our home, we are pilgrims here, but even though our time here is transitory it is of eternal value. Let us therefore make the most of each opportunity, making decisions that will honor God and bless our families.

Enjoying the Journey with our Heavenly Father

While the work of parents is a demanding, twenty-four seven job, we should never be discouraged because God has not left us alone to do the work! The assurance He gave Joshua, as leader of the family of Israel, is the same He gives

to parents of spiritual Israel today: “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9). Let us always remember that our children belong first and foremost to the Lord, which means He is infinitely more concerned with their present and eternal wellbeing than the most devoted of parents among us. “The God of heaven marks your solicitude, your earnest work, your constant watchfulness. He hears your prayers. With patience and tenderness train your children for the Lord. *All heaven is interested in your work.... God will unite with you, crowning your efforts with success*” (AH, 205, emphasis supplied).

While we will certainly see some fruit of our efforts this side of heaven, we will never know the full extent of our success till we get to heaven. “The work of wise parents will never be appreciated by the world, but when the judgement shall sit and the books shall be opened, their work will appear as God views it and will be rewarded before men and angels. It will be seen that one child who has been brought up in a faithful way has been a light in the world. It cost tears and anxiety and sleepless nights to oversee the character building of this child, but the work was done wisely, and the parents hear the “Well done” of the Master” (AH, 536). What a wonderful encouragement! Let us remember to make this mission to our family—to bring up our children to love and obediently serve their Creator—our top priority. It won’t be easy, but with God on our side we can enjoy the journey, trusting that He is guiding us and blessing every effort, answering every prayer. Let us remember that “one well-ordered, well-disciplined family tells more in behalf of Christianity than all the sermons that can be preached” (AH, 32). If this is so, then let us preach to the world through our families. And perhaps, by God’s grace, when we get to heaven we may see that our faithful home lives have not only helped to redeem our own children, but also influenced the eternal destinies of countless others. With this goal in mind, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our family’s faith.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTION:

How can we support one another in our spiritual journey as parents? What can help us persevere?

Notes

- ¹ Two other books we highly recommend for families are *Child Guidance and Messages to Young People*. These and other Ellen White books are available for free through the EGW app (reading) and in audio version through ellenwhiteaudio.org.
- ² It has only been recently (the last decade) that health professionals have begun to counsel moms—and dads—to go through pre-pregnancy detoxes, which include both physical, mental and spiritual cleansing. If you google, “pregnancy detox” you will get nearly 6,000 results, if you google “mental and spiritual detox for pregnancy” the results are nearly 3,000,000! Even though science is only now proving how intricately the parent’s pre-pregnancy mindset and lifestyle affect the lifelong health of their baby, over 150 years ago Ellen White was already advising mothers to pay close attention to their physical and spiritual health before conceiving, as the law of heredity meant that their offspring would necessarily carry the results of these choices. See chapter 43, “Prenatal Influences,” in *The Adventist Home*.
- ³ Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell have noted five basic love languages in children: 1) physical affection, 2) words of affirmation, 3) quality time, 4) gifts and 5) acts of service. They also help parents to discover their child’s primary love language to more effectively reach their hearts. See *The 5 Love Languages of Children* (Chicago, IL: Northfield Publishing, 2012).
- ⁴ Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Mate, *Hold On to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2005).
- ⁵ Sadly, only two of Ellen White’s sons lived to adulthood—James Edson and William Clarence (Willie). John Herbert died at three months and the Henry Nichols died when he was sixteen years old, of pneumonia.