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| |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | **The Model For Church Government is the Family**  By Anne Shirley   |  |  | | --- | --- | | |  | | --- | | A native of Canada, the writer has been a member of the Church of God for 30 years. An Ambassador College graduate, for five years she has home-schooled her three children. Mrs. Shirley and her family live in California. | |   As the Churches of God struggle with the issues of authority, governance and leadership, various people have discussed various ideas. Our common ground is that Christ is the "Head," but the Head of what? *What is Christ's governance model for the Church of God?*  The answer to both of the preceding questions is a mandate that none of the leaders of the Churches of God has taken seriously enough. That is the concept that we are a family.  In both the Old and New Covenants, Christ's relationship with His people is that of a family head. He was a father to Israel and husband to the church.  Also, in both the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, the elders are fathers to the people they serve. Paul viewed the New Testament brethren as his children; he was their father in the faith.  We are so familiar with the idea of the church as the household of God that we fail to fully grasp what God expects of as that household. We need to reconsider the family model as it applies to governance issues within the church.  **The church is not a corporation**  The Church of God is **not** to follow the model of a corporation, democracy, oligarchy, dictatorship or fraternity. God's people are a family. Paul presents such a model when he encourages Timothy to treat an elder as a father, older women as mothers and younger brethren as brothers and sisters.  If we accept this family model, the kind of family we become will be determined largely by the quality of family leadership (the elders), the responsiveness of the children (the brethren) and the goals the church family sets. | | |
| |  | | --- | | What happens in a family when authority is abused by domineering parents, misused by self-serving parents or relinquished by permissive parents? The family suffers, and the light it may send to the world around will be diminished accordingly.  So it is that the church family can be most effective only when respective responsibilities are clearly defined and church leaders exercise balanced authority to promote the self-discipline and intellectual and spiritual curiosity essential for growth to Christian maturity.  The role of leadership in the church is the same as that of parents in the home: *to teach the children to love God and diligently keep all His words* (see Deuteronomy 6 and Ephesians 4). Perhaps that is why an important qualification for elders is that they be known as parents who have ruled their own families well.  Teaching by example is a prime responsibility of the leaders of God's people. In the scriptural stories of Saul, David and Solomon, for example, it is plain that God expected a king, who acted as a father to the people he ruled, to know the law and be an example of godly obedience.  **Apt to lead**  The elders of Moses' day were chosen for their ability to lead the people by their example of godly fear and obedience to the truth (Exodus 18), and it is a credit to the elders in Joshua's time that their righteous example encouraged the family of Israel to continue in God's service after the chief leader's death--a rare occurrence in Israel's history (Joshua 24).  Paul emphasized the importance of elders being "apt to teach," along with having earned a reputation for unimpeachable conduct. Historically, whether serving in the office of priests, prophets or elder, those called or appointed to church leadership performed the role of messengers for God in teaching the people His commandments.  Church leaders are to perform the vital service of teaching sound doctrine to the church, just as parents are to teach their children the ways of the Eternal.  God wants His leaders to exercise justice, mercy and faith. The hearts of the fathers must be turned to the children, and fathers and children must be encouraged to remember the law, statutes and judgments.  Paul emphasized this end-time message when he spoke of the need to continue in and be perfected by the Word of God in the last days. Paul was a father to those he instructed in the truth, and Timothy was a beloved older son, so to speak, who carried on in his father Paul's footsteps to teach the family goals and standard in every church.  **Teaching and providing** It is clear that leaders are to be servants, not overlords, but they are equally responsible to God as "rulers of the household of faith" and must be intent on using their authority to teach and provide for their church family (Matthew 24:45-51).  The Bible offers much wise counsel to elders who would lead and educate the church with the family model in mind. Those who are careless in carrying out Christ's instructions, whose example is ungodly or who exercise their authority in overly permissive, authoritarian or self-indulgent ways will reap the appropriate harvest.  As for the children, we live in a society that has cast off moral restraints, despises authority and firmly believes one opinion is as good as another. Few of us can be considered truly meek and teachable; we too often seek out teachers who do not challenge our pet notions (2 Timothy 4).  Like the world and religious culture surrounding us, we may shun instructions to obey God's precepts, choosing instead quick emotional fixes to our problems that allow us to feel good about ourselves. Thus we reject the hard work it takes to really change our hearts and actions.  As our spiritual parents, church leaders must set standards of thought and conduct and teach by word and example. But, as spiritual children, we the brethren must remain humble and be motivated to act on their instructions.  As spiritual children, we must heed the admonition to obey our parents in the Lord and imitate the righteous examples of our fathers in the faith.  This is not an easy task, since many of us still suffer from experiencing the disloyalty of church leaders who betrayed our trust.  Scorners who mock or refuse instruction not only miss out on the benefits of knowledge, but cause others to stumble by their disrespectful examples. Parents know only too well how often a younger child is encouraged to rebel or misbehave by the haughty, sassy behavior of an older sibling.  **Be eager for instruction**  The appropriate response of brethren to their elders in the faith is one of eager responsiveness to godly instruction. Like the Bereans, who received the words of their teachers with ready minds, so should we as God's children be eager for instruction and to study precious truths for ourselves (Acts 17).  The apostle John instructed his "little children"--and I do not think this term of endearment offended them--to apply the great law of love (1 John 3). He took great delight and comfort in knowing that his teachings had produced fruits in the lives of his spiritual children who were walking in the truth and faithfully caring for others, both brethren and strangers (3 John 4, 5).  Children in the church serve important functions beyond being respectful, responsive students of Scripture. For the family to survive and flourish, the siblings must work together encouraging, admonishing, easing the others' burdens, teaching from personal experience and always being prepared to give wise answers to problems or questions.  A house divided cannot stand, and the church family that permits disrespect, rivalry, jealousy and bickering will disintegrate.  Wise families under the direction of competent parents set goals and plan their fulfillment with the talents and resources of each family member in mind. Everyone, from the youngest to the oldest, needs to be serving the family by using and developing his own talents. There is no excuse for competition or duplication of effort; the goal is big enough to employ everyone's energies.  The church family, like the extended families of the patriarchs, encompasses fathers, mothers, aunts, uncles and children. These individuals, with varying talents at different stages in life, learn and grow together, helping each other towards maturity.  **Transcendent goal**  God has given our church family a goal greater than individual fulfillment or family contentment and prosperity. Our goal is a transcendent mission that takes us out of ourselves and our small, selfish ventures to see the immense need others have for the precious truths God has given us. We will be fulfilled as individuals, strong in our families and united in the household of faith, if our are hearts are set on embracing the work Christ has set before us (Matthew 6:33).  Our church family is a part of the greater community of humanity, and we must appreciate our role in God's purpose that all should have the opportunity to choose the path that leads to eternal life in the family of God.  The church is to serve as a model family, just as Israel was to be a model nation: to demonstrate the fruits of righteous living. Israel did not fulfill its mission. The Israelites forgot who they were and why they were called. They despised the righteous leaders and teachers God sent to remind and reawaken them to their calling. They forsook their fathers. Consequently, their nation-family was destroyeda sober warning to us.  Governance is a critical question, but we need to rethink the issues in light of a family model for the Church of God. Then the issues of the responsibility and authority of those who lead vs. the roles and responsibilities of those who are led will be understood with greater clarity as we search for God's wisdom in guiding our families. | |