

Responsibilities of Conception (5): Spiritual Training in Social Living

Carol Brands

No man is an island.” Every human being is created with an innate need for fellowship. God has created us as covenant creatures with a need for friendship first of all with Himself and then with other people. The contacts we have with others we call our social life, whether those contacts be few or many.

Our social life is a many-sided complex affair. It can be a source of joy or sorrow. It can be relaxing at times and terribly stressful at other times. A good friendship can strengthen us while other relationships can tear us in pieces.

Our social life doesn't develop without effort. It takes work to build good social relationships. It takes just as much work to counteract bad relationships. We must be very careful what friendships we develop.

As in every area of life, we must seek God's will always in regards to our friendships. God's normal pattern for the Christian life is that of Christians finding fellowship with other Christians. but He alone rules and there are also Christians for whom He severely limits opportunities for fellowship. When God in His providence limits the opportunities for socializing, yet when the Christian's attitude towards others is that of godly love, then God may overrule the situation so that social maturity can still exist. By contrast, when a family visits much but on a shallow, humanistic level (or with much slander, or other spiritual sins), then God's chastisement may send socially distorted youth, lacking in Christian social maturity. We must in our social life, also, be seeking Scriptural guidelines and be submissive to God's rule in our lives.

The importance of training in social living is obvious from the multitude of Biblical directives for this area of life. It is probably the main area of practical emphasis in Proverbs, the book of parental instruction.

For you as young people reading this magazine, an article such as this has three personal applications:

#1. Evaluate the training you are receiving at home. Is it basically in accord with Scripture's principles?

#2. Even if your home training is weak, strive to apply Scripture's teaching to your own life. Remember that while God uses home training, you are still responsible for your life and He calls you personally to total obedience.

#3. Always be preparing yourself for your own future responsibilities. Only too quickly, you will find yourself a parent. Will you be ready to train your children spiritually?

A. Scripture's Guidelines for Social Balance

The Scriptural pattern for the development of a balanced social life follows the view of concentric circles! Our purpose here is not to give proof of this pattern - which would double the article's length - but to show how this pattern works itself out practically in our social lives.

1. God first. The hardest part is to put God first. Of ourselves, by our old nature, we all put self first. We must be taught by God's Word and Spirit that God is of more importance than ourselves (He is All-important and we are NOTHING unless found in Him!) and He must always be first in our lives.

This means that Bible study (hearing God speak to us) and prayer (speaking God's Word

back to Him in application to our lives) are also at the root of our social lives. It means that if we neglect any of the means of grace we have no foundation for Christian life in society.

2. SELF second. In practice there are many times when proper Christian living must put self last, so that self-denial is a vital part of Christian instruction. Yet in the learning process, application of spiritual truths must come to oneself before it can extend to anyone else. The man who can apply Scripture to everyone except himself is a hypocrite.

Thus a parent in his training errs when he tries to instruct his child by pointing out continually the faults of others (although good example may be good motivation). Rather, the parent must instruct the child repeatedly to apply God's Word to his own heart and life first, and only then can he apply it anywhere else.

3. FAMILY third. If a child is adept at making friends in school but creates enmity and strife at home, then that child is spiritually a social failure. If we do not first love those with whom God puts us in close daily contact, then a show of love for others is hypocrisy. Love is rooted in God, accepts oneself because God loves him, and then loves those closest in daily life because he must love his neighbor as himself.

4. CHURCH and CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY. The love of the Church of Christ will not necessarily develop later in time but will grow along with proper love of family, only never in isolation from the family. A person who properly loves God first, self-second, and family third has the only proper foundation for loving also the church membership as a whole.

There must be love for the Church of Christ. Christ died to save not only me and my family but all His sheep in this world. Like myself, all these sheep are sinners and so the Church on earth has sin in it, but, nonetheless, the Church is the only place where the elect for whom Christ died can be found.

Love for the Church of Christ begins with love for the local congregation of which Christ has made us members. It must broaden from there to include our entire denomination. And further still, it must then broaden to include the universal body of Christ. For Christ's sake, we must love His children wherever they are found.

This means, among many things, that racism has no place in a Christian's heart and words. Nationalism has no place either in a Christian's life. God is no respecter of persons or nations but gathers His children from all nations and families of the earth. If He loves the Jew, the Greek, the Mexican, the Negro, the Chinese, who are we to despise them?

Always we love God's children. We hurt when we see them persecuted, in our school or overseas. We sorrow when we see them sin, in our congregation or in the denomination down the street or in Australia. We desire their salvation and their comfort as we desire our own salvation. Paul's beautiful attitude towards Israel as expressed in Romans 9 - desiring their salvation so much he would gladly lose his salvation to save them - must also be our attitude towards all of Christ's body in this world.

5. THE WORLD at large. Only as we "begin at home" and spread outward in spiritual love can we also meet the world in proper love. Towards the entire world of unbelievers, we must have a proper attitude of humility and love. We are sinners, no better than the worst murderer. We are saved only by grace. And as we study and apply God's Word to ourselves, then to our family and church, so also we must apply spiritual principles in all our dealings with anyone, believer or unbeliever.

B. Scriptural Principles for Social Antithesis

We may not overlook in our training that the Scriptural concept of social life also develops in antithesis. Always Scripture pictures a spiritual warfare between godliness and ungodliness,

between Christ and antichrist, between right and wrong. This warfare doesn't begin when we become adults but starts already in earliest youth. This we can see also in the pattern of concentric social circles.

1. Towards myself, I must have both love and hatred. I must hate all that is of the old man of sin, all that does not glorify God in my life, all that ends with this earthly life. I must love that which God through His Word and Spirit gives me: all Scripture and Scriptural instruction, all holiness in my life. I must long to be "perfectly sinless" like Christ.

2. Towards others in the Church - first family, then congregation, denomination and all God's people - I must have this same love and hatred. Because the church is the only place where I can hope to find God's called and sanctified people, my friendships must begin there. But in these friendships, I must apply the antithesis just as in my own life: loving and approving what glorifies God, hating and opposing what is displeasing to Him. Even within the church, this can mean cutting off any friendships which only lead to sin, not to love of God.

3. Towards the world at large we also exercise the antithesis. Proper love of the world means application of God's Word to everyone in every situation we meet. Where we do not receive godly love in return, there can be no uniting of hearts in fellowship and so the antithesis means there can be no friendship with the ungodly world: "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" Anytime there is a response of faith to godly speech, then to that extent also there may be friendship. . . but only to the point that the other person is drawn to Christ and His Church and His Word; such "friendship" must be severed immediately when the relationship would draw the child of God away from God and righteousness. Always God's people must be a light and a witness, never to be led into situations that cause blasphemy of God.

C. Scriptural Application to Social Training

These basic concepts underlie all the training in the social sphere within the home. The concepts themselves are easy enough; the application is often difficult. Application has no end but must be daily, in every contact we have. A few obvious applications in training children follow.

1. Each child must be taught his own value. A parent may never despise his child or look down on him for any reason. Spiritually, his child is his fellow church member, one whom he must "esteem better than himself" just like everyone else in the church. Does the child sin? But how the parent also sins! Does the child have academic weakness? Apply God's Word and merely make sure he is doing his best for God's sake, encouraging and helping him. Is he unlikable? Like him and love him for he was so loved by God that Christ died for him! (Remember that although there will be reprobate in our generations, all our children are in the sphere of the covenant and are all to be trained as God's children.) If God so loved my child that Christ died for him, then that child is very special, very precious indeed.

2. Each child must learn early to use God's Word in his evaluation of himself and his siblings and his peers. He must learn that he may not do anything his brother asks him to do if it is sinful. He may not, either, despise his brother or sister, for they, too, belong to God. He must love and help them. When they sin against him, he may not retaliate but must leave discipline up to father and mother. He must seek their repentance and must forgive. Difficult? Yes, almost impossible at times! But by grace through training he learns that this is what God's Word teaches and he learns to apply it.

3. Friendships outside the family should be cultivated but must be wisely supervised and not overly stressed. If a parent sees a child falling into sin due to an unhealthy friendship, that friendship must be either changed or ended. Proverbs warns over and over against ungodly

friendships. . .and Proverbs is God's Word, not to be ignored without disastrous results.

In this forming of friendships, the issue of dating must receive special emphasis. It is striking how frequently Proverbs warns in lengthy passages against the dangers of young men finding the company of the wrong young women to the destruction of their souls. The same principle will, of course, hold for young women. The key principle in dating is: never date anyone who would not be an acceptable spouse - and no one is an acceptable spouse who does not share a firm Scriptural foundation for life.

Study God's Word in regard to your social life. It abounds in practical instruction! Apply God's Word to your forming of friends and in your friendships. Godly friendships are indeed valuable, but they must be truly godly. Righteousness and love of God and use of God's Word must be their only foundation. Throw out any so-called friendship that hinders your love of God and cultivate every friendship built on the love of God. Such friendships will be a great aid and blessing in our earthly pilgrimage, strengthening and encouraging us in our lives as God's children.

Originally Published in
Vol 46 No 10 December 1987