

GROWING UP A "PK"

by

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[Dr. Donald A. Carson serves Christ as a professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL 60015. Prestigious author of several books, renowned theological professor, much sought after preacher and teacher, an humble, Spiritual-minded and faithful servant of our Lord Jesus Christ. The makings of this gracious man finds strong Biblical roots in his parental home. This is his story. Dr. Carson's testimony should encourage saints to take hope as they labor diligently in the home for godly and righteous influences upon their children. Editor.]

THE DECLINE of the family unit in the western world has made its own ugly impact on the church. It would be nice to say that only peripheral families have been affected; but of course that is not true. Even the families of pastors and other Christian leaders fall into jeopardy all too frequently. Valuable ministries are destroyed because of divorce or because of thoroughly pagan children who effectively destroy the credibility of their parents. Worse, some ministers see no entailment from their families to their pastoral duties, and continue their service despite the fact that Scripture seems to say they should resign.

I am one of three children. My father was a pastor for many years in what most would consider a missionary setting: preaching the gospel in Québec, in the French language, in trying and discouraging circumstances. Sometimes he was self-supporting; at other times he was supported by the Baptist fellowship of which he was a part. Now in his seventies, he still serves in a diminished capacity. The fact that Québec has seen astonishing spiritual fruit in the last ten years cannot take away from the fact that all the time his children were at home the work was painfully slow and disheartening.

Yet the fact remains that my sister and her husband have served the Lord as missionaries in New Guinea and in churches in Canada and the US, and my brother, after several years of solid ministry in a rural, English-language church in Ontario, is now actively engaged in a rapidly expanding church-planting ministry in Montreal, this time in French. (All three of us were reared with fair fluency in both languages.) I myself have served both

in English and in French, both in church planting and in more sustained pastoral ministry; and I currently teach New Testament subjects to graduate students in a seminary committed to training people for ministry.

TO MANY, this is a family "success" story; and so I suppose it is not surprising that I have often been asked what factors have contributed to this outcome. That is the genesis of this article.

In one sense, I am delighted to have an opportunity to testify to the grace of God, and to pass on some reflections that may help parents who struggle with common temptations and weaknesses (I Cor. 10:13). Nevertheless I must begin with some blunt disclaimers.

My parents are not super-saints; and their children are far worse. One of the three suffered two nervous breakdowns in the course of growing up; another for a time exhibited no interest in spiritual things, and linked such disinterest with a surly attitude that brought my father to the brink of resigning from the pastoral responsibilities he held at the time. The third, less adventuresome than the other two, suffered quietly as something of a misfit, until growing maturity that left that stage behind. In some respects even now we are not a very close family, owing partly to years of geographical separation, and partly to substantial differences in outlook, theological and otherwise, that have developed over the years. It would neither be fair to history nor honoring to the Lord to paint a picture of a home characterized by unmitigated godliness and joy. And if all three of us have gone on to marry Christian spouses and are in turn seeking to rear our children in the fear and nurture of the Lord, we nevertheless remain an imperfect crew with a mixed record and many stumblings.

WHEN we were growing up, we faced many of the problems confronted by other "PKs" and "MKs". My father was out most evenings: we saw far too little of him, and my mother bore too much of the burden. The family quiet time was not always brilliant and scintillating; indeed, during particularly stressful periods of our lives it could disappear for days at a time. In addition to moral and spiritual pressures, as a family we faced dramatic illness, and at some points financial strain which by today's standards would be considered remarkable: we weren't even close to attaining the heralded "poverty line". Looking back on certain crucial turning points in the family's life, a thoughtful historian would have to conclude that apart from the grace of God all three of us children could have turned out quite another way.

But my purpose in writing is not to complain, still less to provide an even-handed assessment of things that were done well or poorly in the home in which I grew up. I doubt if I shall be qualified to do so until I in turn have become a grandfather. But it might be a help if I outline some of the things which my parents did right -- or, otherwise put, some of the wonderful advantages of growing

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up a PK. They are not automatic advantages; but they became such in our home because of what my parents were and did within the context of the ministry to which they had been called. I list them in no particular order of importance; and not all of them will be useful in every pastoral setting. But they were features in the home that shaped me, features for which I thank God as I look back over the twenty years that have elapsed since I left home to go to university.

1. My parents were biblically literate; and they took pains to pass on that heritage without cramming it down our throats. My earliest memory is sitting in the bathtub; and when it was my father's turn to clean me up, I invariably heard a Bible story -- complete with review from the last session. These were fun times: have you ever heard the story of Naaman while you are sitting in the bathtub? For many years Dad reserved an hour or two on Sunday afternoons to play with us. The nature of such play varied over the years, of course; but very often we played assorted Bible games that taught us a lot of elementary biblical content. At the age of five or six, I could have told you who Mahershalal-hashbaz was, owing to the hours playing games of Bible names. And we sang -- we sang a lot! Mom had a lovely voice, and both parents could play the piano acceptably (though they were shortly to be outclassed by my sister). At the age of three I was singing: "Jesus is my shepherd; / Guess who I am? / What a lovely secret; / I'm his little lamb!" We sang old hymns, bible choruses, and much more -- in English, in French, usually on key, and sometimes in harmony. We therefore learned a great deal of elementary Bible knowledge and theology in the context of enjoyable family interaction.

2. We grew up seeing Christianity at work. My parents weren't perfect; but more important, they weren't hypocrites. They did not simply talk about the Lord, they put their faith to work. In general they wisely tried to protect us from the swirling struggles through which they sometimes passed; but they could not and doubtless would not shield us from the drunks who occasionally came to our table, from the difficult family situations with which they had to deal, from the triumphs and trophies of grace that transformed the most remarkable characters. After breakfast my mother used to have her own "quiet time"; and we understood she was not to be interrupted. Dad's study was in our home; and not only did we not normally intrude, but we could often pass his door and hear him praying. One of my most powerful memories concerns a Sunday morning when Dad had preached an evangelistic sermon in the church. After that service he did not join us around the piano while dinner was being prepared, as he normally did; rather, he disappeared into his study, and a curious little son crept up to the door looking for his Daddy, only to discover him weeping and praying for some of the people to whom he had just preached. If in later years I had to learn to struggle with large questions of doubt and faith, truth and revelation, obedience and

world-view, at least I was never burdened with a heritage of parental hypocrisy. My parents' faith was genuine and self-consistent; and there are few factors more important in the rearing and nurturing of children in the Christian home than this one.

3. One of the entailments of this heritage was a sense of value and proportion. I have already mentioned that we did not have a lot of material wealth. But the remarkable fact is that I really did not have a very good idea of our financial status until I left home and went to university. I had just bought my first suit, a cheap and ungainly outfit; and the first time I wore it, some of the other students made fun of it. I never wore it again. Inevitably that experience forced me to begin the process of reevaluating my worldly goods. In time I came to appreciate the fact that my parents did not make a habit of complaining about their lot. They cultivated gratitude; and usually if we children complained, we would be reminded of people in the world who were much worse off than we. In a society so set on material well-being, I cannot adequately express my gratitude for such a priceless heritage. And that is only one of a wide range of Christian values passed on to us as much by consistent example as by precept.

4. Usually my parents pulled together pretty well, especially in matters of discipline. It was very difficult to get them to contradict each other, even though we children often did our best to drive a wedge between them, as children do, in the hope we could get our own way. If the request was out of the ordinary, the parent first approached would most likely respond, "Have you asked your mother (or father, as the case might be)? What does she (he) say?" If the decision was fairly important, we could not squeeze out a hasty ruling; they would often force us to wait until they had found time to confer and arrive at a joint policy. Because mothers are usually around their children more than fathers.

they often end up administering more of the punishment; yet although this was true in our home, the final threat was punishment from Dad. They pulled together in family discipline, avoided favoritism, and thereby made the home a secure and consistent shelter.

5. Certain things evoked sure and certain punishment. One was willful disobedience; another was sass. No surer way of brining down the doom of Dad on our heads could be found than by sassing Mom. One of the spankings I received, however, and certainly one of those I remember most vividly, was for neither disobedience nor cheek, but for a whining, complaining attitude that had soured a two-hour journey for the entire family. I was perhaps eight or nine at the time, and it did me a great deal of good. I learned that endless complaining and whining were not only offensive to others but were likely to prove painful to me, and that my parents would not tolerate such behavior in their children. Yet their regime, though firm, was certainly not harsh or nasty. And sometimes my parents, especially my mother, would take some pains to explain exactly why I was being punished, inevitably working in something about her love for me.

6. My parents tried hard to let us grow up as much as possible like "normal" kids. Some things of course could not be avoided. So fierce was the opposition of the Roman Catholic Church in the Québec of those days that I was beaten up once or twice as a "maudit Protestant" ("a damned Protestant.") I suspect such incidents hurt my parents more than they hurt me. But where Dad and Mom could protect us, they did. If carping critics in the church suggested that the Carson children shouldn't be permitted to do such and such because we were "PKs", we were invariably shielded from the criticism; and if the critic were persistent, he would be firmly told to mind his own business.

When I was very young, my parents went through an extraordinarily painful experience. It involved a serious breach of promise on the part of a world-famous preacher, some terrible denominational struggles that should never have taken place, accusations and slander levelled at my parents, and much more. But the remarkable thing is that I never learned of this until years after I left home. My parents often spoke of the preacher in question, but always with respect. They mentioned how mightily he had been used by God, and recalled his earlier years with priceless anecdotes. Not the least memorable, in retrospect, was their report of his sermon on II Samuel 1:20. But not one word of their own pain, not one trace of resentment arising from that miserable affair ever came to my ears while I was growing up. Eventually I attended the seminary where one of the lecturers, who had also been a participant in that struggle, told the class the entire story, and ended up with an astounding assessment of my father's forbearance throughout the episode: "One of the first things I want to see when I get to heaven," he remarked, "is Tom Carson's crown." The next time I went home, I

told my parents what I had learned, and asked them to tell me the whole story from their perspective. They did so, quietly and without rancor. When I asked why I had never been told before, they said that they had made it a policy to shield their children from the harshest realities while they were in their tender years and their faith was still child-like and immature. The time for disappointment and blows would come soon enough; meanwhile they wanted us to put down deep roots. Moreover I suspect that their silence also reflected a deep commitment to let God be God, to refuse to judge anything before the time, and to believe that vengeance belongs to the Lord alone.

7. The same decision -- to let us grow up as normally as possible -- also guided my parents in what they allowed us to do. As a boy, I nurtured a terrible addiction to cowboys and Indians; and my parents bought me toy guns. Doubtless some Christians were aghast. I could list a long series of decisions my parents took that others might have taken another way. I wouldn't try to defend each separate decision; but I am quite sure their policy was wise. Once we reached our teens, my parents sometimes did no more than explain why they would prefer that we not do such and such; for if there were clear limits beyond which we could not go without incurring carefully considered sanctions, there were also areas where they left us some room in which to make our own decisions and experience some of the consequences.

8. My mother in particular was blessed with that most uncommon gift, common sense. Not physically a strong woman, she nevertheless worked long hours keeping the home in order, sewing clothes, and sharing in certain aspects of the ministry; but what I was most grateful for was her common sense. Some of my happiest memories are sitting on the stairs with my chin in my hands, talking with my mother as she sewed some garment or other on an old treadle Singer. On one occasion, after my older sister had made a profession of faith and was showing the first signs of spiritual life, I decided I should take the same step, a decision motivated in no small measure by a desire to gain similar approval. In one of the stairs-by-the-sewing-machine sessions, I told my mother that I too had accepted Jesus. "That's nice, dear," she said -- and never missed a beat of the treadle. And that's all she said at the time. Her wisdom in such matters often staggers me as I look back on it from my present perspective.

9. My parents' combination of commitments kept my mother from working outside the home until we children were largely grown up; and then for a few years she returned to nursing. Say what you will, there is something that breeds security, trust, loyalty and warmth when a child, even a fifteen or sixteen year old, can return home from school, bellow "Mom!" as he comes in the door -- and expect an answer. My mother was never particularly bothered by fads anyway: she maintained a healthy independence of outlook. Asked if she felt trapped and

thwarted by the demands of three small children, her British indignation bristled: "I'm not just looking after three small children. I'm building character."

10. My parents held goals before our eyes, but did not try to squeeze us into too narrow a mold. When I was perhaps ten or eleven, I remember being driven by the gates of McGill University (widely perceived at the time as Canada's Harvard) during one of our infrequent trips to Montreal, and being told, "Perhaps you will study there some day." But what I was to study was left almost entirely in my own hands. I never felt any pressure to go into the ministry. My parents' attitude might be summed up like this: "Whatever you do, we'll encourage you; but do it for the glory of God, and do the best you can." For years the Christmas present they gave me was the next set of Meccano (a superior version of Erector); and when I was in my teens, my father helped me build a little laboratory in the basement. Small wonder my first degree was eventually taken in chemistry and mathematics. To this day we remain a family of prodigious readers -- a heritage of parents who wanted our goals to be expanding and our interests to be broad.

11. By most human standards, my father was not a "successful" pastor during the years in which we were growing up. The bilingual church he was serving, like most binlingual or French-language work in Québec at the time, made but little headway; and whenever there seemed to be a minor breakthrough, things seemed to fall apart. Dad himself was neither aggressive nor innovative; and as long years ground on, he sometimes became disheartened. In retrospect, I do not think he talked with his family enough about his situation; and this silence resulted in some negative reactions and misunderstandings by at least one of his children. But there was also one overwhelming "plus" in all this. Very often the sons of "successful" leaders go through

a period of rebellion against their fathers as they seek to establish their own identity over against that of the "great man". We experienced very little of that pressure. From this I deduce that, "successful" and prominent or not, a good father must be a humble man. This is part of his responsibility not to exasperate his children (Eph. 6:4). A genuinely humble man is less likely than others to be the target of his children's rebellion, a "test" figure against whom they must prove themselves.

12. Within reasonable limits, our parents accorded their children the trust that was their due at each stage of their development. When such trust was misplaced, the strings were temporarily tightened; but it was not long before they were slackened again to permit new room for growth. This occurred at so many levels and in so many ways that a hundred memories surge forward and clamorously offer themselves as anecdotes; but I shall mention only one. While studying at a certain institution under a supervisor who was genuinely trying to undermine my faith, I wrote a letter confiding some of my struggles to my parents. My mother wrote back that she was praying for the supervisor's conversion. What a marvellous response! I have no doubt my parents were also praying for me; but the reply I received not only hinted at their confidence in me, but transformed what could have been an embattled defensiveness into an opportunity for thoughtful evangelism.

I COULD ADD much more; but perhaps I should quit with this apostolic number of observations. Today my parents are in their mid-seventies, both must ow endure certain physical limitations; both show some signs of advancing years. But if the Lord spares me until I reach their present age, I pray God I shall be able to look on my children as they do on theirs, and express gratitude that God has mercifully overridden my bungling, sinful ways

and protected my children from the worst ravages of the world, the flesh and the devil.

I STILL draw strength from the assurance that my parents are constant in their prayers for me. Even for that reason, among many others, I am grateful that God continues to leave them here, interceding, like Job, on behalf of their children.
