

Building a Stronger Church: Through Dads

Dr. Stuart Bond

June 15, 2008

Cindy and I had a great time being away on vacation. Right after church two weeks ago we hopped in our loaded car and headed to Palm Springs where I had a wedding to do that evening. You know, in Palm Springs it can be very hot, or it can be very windy. There are also those times when it can be hot and windy. This was neither. It was perfect. We had a great time. We stayed and played in Palm Springs for two more days, then came back here. We had friends who came down here to visit and we showed off Malibu and just had a great time. Then it was two nights away at Cambria. We had not fully anticipated the wind up there. It was blowing at gale force and we asked, "Is it this way often?" People just nodded. The next day the wind was calm but I noticed that the trees are permanently shaped like this (indicating being blown around).

I got Cindy to go with me to Hearst Castle. Cindy has a tolerance for museums that is about a "four." Mine is closer to a nine. It was fabulous to see the views and that ridiculous house. Cindy was just glad to see the return bus. When we got back on the vehicle Cindy muttered, "You tricked me." But I'm sure she really enjoyed it...

Thanks to Dana for taking the pulpit two weeks ago. I heard it was a very powerful service using the anointing of oil as a tool to help us understand the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And then last Sunday, the young turks took over! Kudos to them for doing the work that goes into a service like that. It is good to have such a strong team to work with from the preachers to the music Erika organized to making sure the other elements work like clockwork around here.

This is the last message in our series, "Building a Stronger Church." Next week I am going to start a six week exploration of the Lord's Prayer. We have talked about building a stronger church through a number of ways. Some of those have involved our own role in our family. We have looked at what it would take to build a stronger church by investing in children. We have emphasized the youth as part of building a stronger church as well. We have talked about moms and how their trust in God and letting go is critical to building up young people who will become stronger in their faith in years to come. In each case, we have an eye towards the future and look forward to deepening the spiritual roots for ourselves and the next generation.

Today we talk about dads. What is the specific contribution we can make if Emmanuel is to be a stronger church?

I want to focus this morning on the baptism of Jesus. The day Jesus was baptized, there is nothing written in the Scripture to indicate the day was anything out of the ordinary. It wasn't a special festival day. It wasn't a high holy day. What was out of the ordinary was Jesus presenting himself to John. John knows he is in the presence of greatness. He says, you should be baptizing me. Jesus said, for now, we do it this way.

It is interesting to contrast Jesus to other figures from history. For example, when Napoleon became the self-proclaimed Emperor, he faced a great problem: who would be worthy to place the crown upon his head? Would it be one of the leaders of his army? Then that person would be the presumptive number two, and that is a very dangerous person to have around if you are number one. Should it be a head of state? They had all been conquered and no one could not be seen as having special favor with Napoleon. How about the Bishop? But then it would mean he

was under the authority of God. He may have only stood at 5'2" but in spite of that, or perhaps because of it, he thought he was bigger than God. His solution was to crown himself.

That is exactly what John is inviting Jesus to do, but he says no. For now, let it be this way. Some water is poured upon his head or he is laid down in the water—we don't know if he was sprinkled or dunked. Then we see his crowning, a crowning that is not done by John, but by God. Here, then, is the coronation of Jesus:

Matthew 3 13Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

15Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

16As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. 17And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Israel had labored long under many rulers. It seemed to them that the Spirit had left them and the messianic promise was never going to be fulfilled. So you begin to understand the significance of the statement that the Spirit of God descended like a dove on him. The dove is a loving, gentle creature and so illustrated the fact that God was coming to them in a loving, gentle way. (By the way, sometimes you hear that the Bible does not have the Trinity in it. Here is one of those rare scenes when the entire Trinity is depicted in one event.)

The visible arrival of the Spirit also meant that God is beginning a new era. This baptism and this moment is different than all others. Part of God the Father's work in this moment was to say, this one is special.

Then it gets more specific: this is my son. This young man is part of me. He is the one I claim. He bears my image. He represents me in a way that no one else can. That is my boy.

He then takes it one step further: this boy is not an accident of biology. This son is no burden that I make time for between other obligations. This is the son "whom I love." God is saying, this boy has my heart. He is the one that makes me smile. I love this kid.

And then one step even further: I am well pleased with him. In other words, he is doing a great job. He is moving forward and finding his place and doing just what he should be doing.

So those are the three affirmations: he's mine, I love him, and I think he is doing great.

This entire statement has a root that goes much further back than the baptism of Jesus. It is found in Psalm 2:7: "I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.'" But it goes even further back. It is one of the central pieces of the Bar Mitzvah. It is in the Bar Mitzvah that the father honors his son and says, "This is my son, with whom I am well pleased."

So when we read this statement from God, we begin to realize he is saying something like, “I am so proud to be his father! At this moment, this boy has become a man. He is gifted to do the task before him and I am with him one hundred percent.”

Today, the question for us men is a simple one: How can we take God the Father as our model? What is our role in the process of transitioning our young people from children to men and women?

Some of you might say, “That happened a long time ago for my kids.” In a chronological sense, I am sure you are right. By all outward appearances they are fully adult; they have moved out and have their own, established lives. (Although, I must tell you that I was speaking to a group of folks who had these very scary stories of their adult children moving back home. Don’t let those kids start talking to our kids and give them any ideas!)

So, many of your kids have grown up. However, isn’t it also true that many kids never truly move into adulthood until they have the sense that their parent, and especially their father, believes in them?

In this country nearly sixty percent of children go to bed without the sound of a father in the house. Isn’t it interesting that part of Barack Obama’s story is that, by his account, there is a sense in which his significant achievements have partially been an effort to impress or gain the attention of the father who left when he was two years old?

Even if a fatherless household is not the situation for some, there are millions and millions of households where the father is there—but he isn’t present. He is behind a newspaper or lost in a cloud of worry or anger. Maybe he is like our two men in the sketch—half wanting to show emotion and half afraid to. Something is withheld from children in those households that they long to have all their life long. I’ll always remember a statement made in my counseling program. He was lecturing on families. He stopped and looked at us and said, “Most of us would kill for the approval of our fathers.” We said, “Say that again?” He did: “Most of us would kill for the approval of our fathers.”

So let’s take a deeper look at God the Father’s example from this baptism as a way of helping our kids grow up, no matter how old they are.

The first affirmation is, “He’s mine.” I heard about a short-lived television show called, “Who’s Your Daddy?” The idea was that the adult who grew up in a single-parent household would ask questions of three men and try to guess which one is their dad. If they get it right, they get \$10,000. It was a pretty hideous premise that commercialized a fragile encounter.

Our kids don’t wonder what the identity is of their dad. But they may wonder if we will claim them, if we will be glad to say “She is my daughter” or “He is my son.”

For many if not most kids this question is even more complicated because there are several daddies. There is bio-dad and step-dad. That gives a whole new twist to the question, “Who’s Your Daddy?” Make sure that you tell your kids that you see some things in them that you recognize in yourself. Make sure you let them know that you would stand up in a crowd and claim them. Make sure they know you would say, “He’s mine.”

The second affirmation is, “He is loved.” This past week many of you were here as we had the celebration of Edwin Graves Holt’s life. It was a great time. He once said that he had lived such a full life that no one would have believed it. He was a business man and I’m sure he had many responsibilities. But as his son and grandson and granddaughter got up to speak, one thing was certain: they knew he loved them.

We have all been saddened by the sudden passing of Tim Russert. We know he worked hard because every time we turned on the television he was there. Still, the stories of his devotion to his family—especially to his father and son—are pretty remarkable. Somehow he made it happen to both work hard and invest time in his family.

A pastor named Phil Lester told this story:

I had accepted the call as senior pastor of a large congregation that had recently erected a huge, state-of-the-art building resulting in major debt. Feeling the pressures of my new responsibility—and with a strong desire to impress my parishioners—I hit the ground running. I was in the office early every day, and almost every evening I was out shepherding the flock or reaching out to potential church members.

My wife, Teresa, was very understanding, but our two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Mandi, was perplexed by my absence. Mandi loved for me to read to her after dinner each evening—a practice I continued in my new position, with one caveat: I would sit on the edge of my recliner with her seated by my side and read a quick story or two before rushing out for another night of harried activity.

One evening Mandi said something that jolted me back to reality about my role as a father. I had sat down with her in my recliner—once again on the edge, ready to quickly read and run. While I was reading, Mandi interrupted me, patted the recliner seat, and said, "Scoot back, Daddy, scoot back." She knew on those rare occasions when I wasn't going back out that I would relax, sit back in my recliner, and leisurely read stories to her heart's content.

Her words pierced my soul as I understood what she was really saying: "Please slow down, Daddy. Make time for me!" Appropriately chastened, I scooted back.

In Mandi’s world, scooting back meant, “I love you.” Figure out how you might be sending a message that is more on the edge of your seat...and scoot back a little.

The third affirmation is, “I’m well pleased.” In other words, “You’ve done well. I believe in you. You have made some great choices along the way.”

I am at various stages of this affirmation with my kids right now. The oldest has worked hard and I am so well pleased with him, although I still have some work to do on him spiritually. Geoff is starting to find a good path, and I am pleased at his determination. Brynn was such a fun girl, but not so much a student. Do you have a child like that? So I was glad to claim her, I loved her, but I couldn’t say I was well pleased with her. However, something has happened this past year. I was just thinking about it the other day: I think she is growing up. She is making wiser choices and she is going to get this degree and move on. Then there is our youngest, the guy who crossed

the country to be with his x-box friend. Well, Andrew got a part-time job this week and is starting to begin the process of heading towards something that works.

So, they are at various stages in my eyes. I'm alright with that. It is realistic that our kids don't get "well pleased" simply handed to them. They earn it. But I would say to my fellow dads, look for it. The odds are that your kids are going to do life slightly different than you do. Sometimes it takes some creativity and some careful inspection to pick up on some of their accomplishments. And a little patience since their trajectory is often not quite as you envisioned it.

A father passed by his son's bedroom and was astonished to see the bed nicely made up and everything neat and tidy. Then he saw an envelope propped up on the pillow. It was addressed, "Dad." With the worst premonition, he opened the envelope and read the letter with trembling hands:

Dear Dad,

It is with great regret and sorrow that I'm writing you. I had to elope with my new girlfriend because I wanted to avoid a scene with you and Mom. I've been finding real passion with Joan, and she is so nice. I knew you would not approve of her because of all her piercings, tattoos, tight motorcycle clothes, and the fact that she is so much older than I am. It's not just her passion, Dad. She really gets me.

Joan says that we are going to be very happy. She owns a trailer in the woods and has a stack of firewood—just enough for the whole winter. We share a dream of having many children.

Please don't worry, Dad. I'm 15 and I know how to take care of myself. I'm sure we'll be back to visit someday so you can get to know your grandchildren.

Your son, Chad

P.S. Dad, none of the above is true. I'm over at Tommy's house. I just wanted to remind you that there are worse things in life than the report card that's in my desk drawer. I love you! Call when it is safe for me to come home.

This kid will get far, I'm sure. Dad's, create a little space for your kids to make a mistake or two. We are often the ones who set the standards, who try to build consistency into kid's lives, who want them to earn what they receive. But when we are all about responsibility and taking out the trash and talk nicely to your mother, we keep our feelings bottled up somewhere way down here and we lose touch with who our kids are. It never, never hurts to say once again to your kids, "I want you to know I believe in you."

Sometimes we don't even understand what they are trying to do. Even then, you can applaud their courage for taking the route they have chosen. Look for ways in which you can tell them that you are well pleased with them.

The Message paraphrases our verse today this way: "This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of all my delight." Isn't that good? Do your kids believe they are the focus of your delight? Do the rest of your family members and your friends know what you see in your kids?

I mentioned that this phrase comes out of the Bar Mitzvah. That is a rite that says, “This day, you are a man.” We had a kind of Bar and Bat Mitzvah here last week. Jane was telling me how powerful it was when the kids who are graduating from Club 56 to the Middle School program were blessed by their parents.

The dove descending on Jesus was God the Father giving Jesus a Bar Mitzvah. This day, God was saying, the mission begins and I am so pleased, so confident to know you can accomplish this great task.

Our kids need that recognition that they have become men and women. Ed McGlasson has written a wonderful little book called *The Difference a Father Makes*. I bought a case of them and Cindy has them up here if you would like to buy one for yourself or give it to the younger dads in your family. Ed is a pastor now who has been a lineman in the NFL.

In that book, Ed tells the story of his accidental Bar Mitzvah. His step-dad was a sub commander. He writes:

His duty with the Navy often led him away for months at a time. As a Navy family, we understood that the term “Med” meant the Mediterranean Sea, and that dad was leaving for at least three months to serve our country in the waters off the coast of Europe.

One day as his submarine was getting ready to depart for maneuvers in the Mediterranean Sea, my mother and I went down to the dock to say good-bye to him. With ceremonial colored smoke blasting out of the engines, the 300-foot Tiranti Fish started backing out of its berth. Then, my stepfather realized he had made two grave mistakes: He had driven the Volkswagen Beetle to the dock, and he still had the keys in his pocket!

My stepfather grabbed the bullhorn and shouted over the crowd of well-wishers, “Son, today you are a man. Drive your mother home.” With that, he launched the keys through the air toward the dock and his 14-yearold stepson — and I snagged them before they hit the ground. I remember to this day the feeling of catching those keys with my left hand. Something happened to me that day when my stepfather declared over the whole crowd that I was a man. I remember grabbing the keys and looking at my mother and saying, “Let’s go home.”

There was just one problem — I had never driven.

My stepfather’s mistake of not handing over the keys was an obvious one; driving the Volkswagen was not a readily apparent mistake. However, my mother’s inexperience at driving a stick shift quickly revealed how much of a mistake it was. But there was no need to worry. I had just been declared a man, and learning to drive a stick shift was going to be easy, or so I thought.

After we got into the car, I turned the key in the ignition, not realizing that the car was in gear, or how to use the clutch. The car lurched forward a few feet through a shrub brush before coming to a sudden stop. My mother quickly began explaining her limited knowledge of clutch usage.

My next challenge was to find “reverse” on the stick. However, my stepfather had upgraded the stick shift knob to one with a walnut finish, only to affix it with

the gears listed sideways. I cranked the ignition without stepping on the clutch again and launched the car through the bushes in front of us. Finally, I found reverse. But as I started backing out, I didn't quite trust the accelerator or the clutch. As I kept toggling those two pedals, it made an unpleasant jerking motion. While I kept trying to find first gear, I pressed the accelerator and rode the clutch. I was bucking the car — and my mother — back and forth all the way home for two miles with her screaming, "Would you please stop doing that?!" But I made it home because I was a man and my stepfather had said so. I don't think my mother recovered for months from the whiplash I gave her that day!

I knew something had changed in my 14-year-old heart because of his pronouncement over me. It was an accident, but his public declaration over me changed the way I viewed myself. After that, it was hard for my mother to get me to submit. We had many fights because I misunderstood that being "the king" meant to serve her, not to rule her. (But that's another story for another day.)

If we want your boys and girls to be men and women, we have to toss the keys. We have to give them a statement of support, the sense they carry in their heart that they are ours, that we love them and that we are pleased with who they are becoming. Somehow, we have to get on the bullhorn and say, "Today, you are a man."

And it is never too late to do this. It doesn't matter how old they are or how old you are. I'm 53 and it would still mean the world to me if my dad would pick up the phone and say, "I just wanted to say that I love you and I am proud of you." I am probably not going to get that, but I can give it to my kids. And now, I've just made sure that I will. You do the same.

Dads, Father's Day can tell us a lot. Today you are going to receive a very useful measure of where you are with your kids. You're getting father's day cards and calls today. You can pretty quickly gauge the temperature of the relationship. If the conversation is cool and the card is non-committal, you have some work to do. Lay aside the question of who owes who. Do what you can to get across these three affirmations: You are mine, I love you and I am pleased with you. If it is a great card or conversation, feel free to underline these affirmations. It never hurts to say it again.

Outside of God the Father, there are no perfect dads. We are all working on doing this the best we can. The same is true for moms and kids. But we can always do a little better. This is my son, this is my daughter, marked by my love, focus of all my delight." Let that be your message to your kids this Father's Day, whether they are five or fifty-five. Happy Father's Day, Dad.