Many current social and cultural forces discourage father involvement with children. An important, but usually overlooked, positive influence on men and fathering is religion. This article presents some of the findings of the scant social science literature on fathering and religion; discusses the ways that religion encourages and supports responsible, involved fathering; touches on some of the similarities between the men's movement and religion; and addresses some of the concerns expressed about religion and fathering, including possible negative effects of religion, different forms of spirituality, and religion and gender roles. I argue that future scholarship and practice may well show that religion (i.e., a covenant faith community with teachings and narratives that enhance spirituality and encourage morality) is the most powerful, meaningful, and sustained influence for encouraging men to be fully involved in children's lives.

A large body of scholarship affirms that father involvement is important to children's well-being and that children suffer in many ways when fathers are absent or uninvolved (see Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996). Research also has clearly shown that the quantity and quality of father involvement, even more than mother involvement, is strongly influenced by institutional practices, employment opportunities, cultural expectations, and social support (Dienhart & Daly, 1997; Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998; Gerson, 1997). Most men desire to be good fathers, yet they face significant challenges stemming from increasing economic, societal, and familial changes, demands, and complexi-

I am grateful to Alan Hawkins, Christian Kimball, Loren Marks, Dan Judd, Edward Kimball, and Don Norton for their helpful substantive and editorial assistance on a previous draft of this article.

Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to David C. Dollahite, Department of Family Sciences, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602, or dave_dollahite@byu.edu.

The Journal of Men's Studies, Volume 7, Number 1, Fall 1998, pp. 3-15. © 1998 by the Men's Studies Press. All rights reserved.
ties. Thus it is critical to consider family and community supports and stressors when studying or encouraging responsible, involved fathering (Doherty et al., 1998).

The powerful, complex, and dynamic forces that serve to separate fathers and children include changing and increasing occupational demands that make time with children more difficult; increasing divorce and unwed birth that structurally remove fathers from day-to-day contact with children; an increasing culture of expressive individualism that emphasizes adult pleasure and self-development and can diminish child-orientation; an increasingly powerful youth entertainment and recreation culture that turns children toward peers; increasing work-oriented technological intrusions (e.g., computers, modems, cell-phones, beepers) that interrupt family life; and difficulty for fathers in finding willing mentors who place children at the center of their lives.

In today's context of high expectations by and for fathers, greater challenges to their ability to father as they would like to, and the high salience of fathering in popular rhetoric, it would be reasonable to expect society to provide adequate resources and encouragement for fathering. Unfortunately, this is not the case (Blankenhorn, 1995; Dienhart & Daly, 1997; Doherty et al., 1998; Popenoe, 1996). Many current social and cultural forces actually discourage father involvement with children. And even greater structural barriers to involvement exist for nonresidential fathers, whether never married to, or divorced from, the mother of their child. In fact, Popenoe (1996) goes so far as to argue that if a culture were specifically designed to be unfriendly to strong father-child ties, it would not look much different from that of contemporary American culture.

Our culture is characterized by numerous assumptions and influences, which focus on men's failings and would either limit father involvement or would use shame or coercion to induce fathers' involvement. These approaches include (a) radical feminism, which suggests that men (and therefore fathers) are, by choice, oppressive, abusive, uninvolved—or simply unnecessary (some radical feminists even view father presence at birth as an exercise of male dominance); (b) assumptions in law and policy about which custody arrangements will serve the "best interests of the child," arrangements that often lead to limited involvement by nonresidential fathers; and (c) the media and entertainment industry, which usually depict men and fathers as absent, uninvolved, abusive, irrelevant, bumbling, or hopelessly flawed. Even necessary laws that deal with irresponsible fathers, such as paternity establishment and child-support wage garnishment statutes, carry an implicit message that many men must be legally browbeaten into responsible fathering. And some social commentators and scholars, who have done much to highlight the importance of fathers, argue that men have been biologically programmed through evolution toward "paternal waywardness" and assume paternal responsibility only if coerced and corralled by powerful cultural and legal forces (e.g., Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996).

For some men, in some circumstances, these types of assumptions, influences, and forces may be needed to promote responsible paternal involvement. However, there is serious question whether the vast majority of fathers need, relate to, or should accept the assumptions underlying these ideologies and efforts (Doherty, 1990; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). I do not believe that efforts that rely on shame, blame, or notions of biological determinism take us very far toward widespread, enthusiastic, long-term, fully committed fathering.

On the other hand, some positive social and cultural influences explicitly or implicitly encourage father involvement and assist fathers with various degrees of success.
FATHERING, FAITH, AND SPIRITUALITY

These influences include mothers and children themselves, mental health professionals who do not maintain deficit perspectives, fathers’ and men’s support groups, community efforts such as child and youth recreation programs, and some employment policies (e.g., flex-time, paternal leave, daddy tracks). These positive influences—particularly family members and recreational activities sponsored by communities—are helpful to many fathers. Of the others, however, therapy is either unneeded or unavailable; few fathers are involved in fathers’ or men’s support groups; and employment policies are hit and miss and are underused even when available (Hochschild, 1997).

FATHERING AND RELIGION

An extremely important, but usually overlooked, positive influence on men and support for responsible fathering is religion, which I define as a covenant faith community with teachings and narratives that enhance spirituality and encourage morality. Historians have documented that for much of the early history of America most of the formal parenting advice provided was written by religious leaders and directed to fathers (Griswold, 1997; Popenoe, 1996). Many of the now over 323,000 religious congregations in the U.S. have long facilitated father involvement through moral persuasion, personal examples, community support efforts, and explicit teaching of marriage and family life—including responsible, involved fathering—as a religious blessing and obligation. In recent years, there has been new emphasis on fatherhood in religious circles. Groups such as the Promise Keepers (Evangelical Protestant) and St. Joseph’s Covenant Keepers (Catholic) have begun working with men on issues of faith and responsible involvement in family life. Over 3.5 million men have attended Promise Keepers gatherings in stadiums across the nation (Paul Edwards, vice president, Promise Keepers, personal communication, June 15, 1998). Though not explicitly religious, the 1995 Million Man March for African-American men had a decidedly religious tone as well, and urged men to responsible action in family and community. And millions of men (not necessarily church-goers) are involved with children and youth in activities created and sponsored by religious institutions (e.g., YMCA, YWCA, and CYO). Leaders of both the Southern Baptist Convention and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have recently adopted formal statements on the family, which include language on paternal responsibilities.

National leaders in many sectors of society are also coming to see the importance of religion in promoting responsible fathering. In June 1998, I attended the Second National Summit on Fatherhood convened in Washington, D.C., organized by the National Fatherhood Initiative. National leaders from many sectors of society mentioned, in one way or another, the positive power of religious involvement in encouraging responsible fathering. Vice President Al Gore stated that good fathers guide the moral development of their children. National pollster George Gallup stated that churches are in a wonderful position to make a huge difference in responsible fatherhood. Father advocate Ken Canfield suggested that we need to develop a healthy theology of fatherhood. Jeff Kemp, former NFL quarterback and current executive director of the Washington State Family Council, asserted that churches have to be at the center in providing moral mentorship for children. Author David Blankenhorn (1995), whose book Fatherless America helped place the fatherhood movement on the national agenda, gave his opinion that the most inspiring
DAVID C. DOLLAHITE

programs encouraging father involvement are coming out of the African-American Church. Mike Singletary, NFL Hall of Fame football player for the Chicago Bears, related that the only way he could shepherd his seven children was to keep his eyes on the greatest father—God—and said he believed that the solution to fatherlessness is for more men to believe they come “under the authority of a Holy God.” Heavyweight boxing champion Evander Holyfield stated that he prayed every day that God would always help him be the kind of father his children need and discussed the power of faith in his work with men in prison.

It appears that a kind of spiritual awakening is occurring among many fathers. In spite of this, the media and social and behavioral scholars and practitioners have often ignored religion as an important influence on responsible fathering. This lack of attention to the influence of religion on fathering may be partly because it is often thought that only a small proportion of people take religion seriously and that most people are influenced mainly by secular institutions, ideas, and ideals. But this is simply not consistent with the data. Newport and Saad (1997) reported that, according to a recent Gallup poll:

[N]ine out of ten adults both indicate a religious preference of one kind or another and say they attend church on at least some occasions. Two-thirds of Americans maintain an affiliation with a church or synagogue and six in ten consider religion to be of high importance to their personal lives. (p. 20)

This poll also showed that although only about four in ten adults say they attend church or synagogue regularly, six in ten people believe that “religion can answer all or most of today’s problems” (p. 25).

RESEARCH ON FATHERING AND RELIGION

Although there now exists a large body of medical and social science research showing that religion has beneficial effects on physical and mental health, life satisfaction, and coping with stress (Matthews & Larson, 1995; Matthews & Saunders, 1997; Pargament, 1997), unfortunately research has not as yet shed a great deal of light on the relationship between religion and fathering. Religion has rarely been included as a variable of interest in studies of fathering (Marciano, 1991). Dollahite, Marks, & Olson (1998, this issue) found that while there have been numerous conceptual articles on fathering and religion from theological and philosophical perspectives, there has been little social science research—beyond study of the transmission of religious values from fathers to adolescents. And in what promises to become a highly influential article on fathering, Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson (1998) have conducted a thoughtful review of the literature and presented a compelling conceptual model of responsible fathering. However, they do not include religion among the “contextual factors” that encourage responsible fathering in their model because they could find so little empirical research on the subject (W. J. Doherty, personal communication, June 9, 1998).

Fortunately, some recent meaningful findings do pertain to this issue. Canfield’s (1996) study of over two thousand fathers found that the greatest discrepancy between
"what [fathers] considered to be important for being a good father and their actual performance in the family" was in the area of "moral and spiritual development" (p. 236). Thus, fathers both recognize the importance of the moral and spiritual dimension and their need to improve in it. In his highly informative and influential four-decade study on fathering, John Snarey (1993) found that "father-child church attendance was a common occurrence and, rated as providing social-emotional child-rearing support, it was an important element of this type of parental generativity" (p. 315). Fathers' religiosity has been found to influence adolescents' religiosity, though not much is known about how or why religious beliefs and practices influence fathers' conduct or which religious beliefs and practices are most helpful and influential (Clark, Worthington, & Danser, 1988; Giesbrecht, 1995). Dollahite et al. (1998, this issue) found that religious belief and practice was important to the way Latter-day Saint fathers parented and thought about their children with special needs. Nock (in press) cites evidence that men become more religious when they become fathers, and Palkovitz and Palm (1998, this issue) present data showing that fatherhood can influence fathers' religiosity and values.

These data suggest that American men know that some of the most important things they can provide children are a sense of meaning, direction, solace, and involvement with a caring community, and they understand that religious beliefs, practices, narratives, and communities can provide these things. Thus, although studies are few, research has provided some empirical evidence of religious activity's positive influence in "turning the heart of the fathers to the children" (Holy Bible, Malachi 4:6). But there is much work left to be done. Notwithstanding the paucity of current attention to and scholarship on faith and fathering, future scholarship and practice may well show that religion is the most powerful, meaningful, and sustained influence for encouraging men to be fully involved in children's lives.

HOW DOES FAITH FACILITATE GOOD FATHERING?

The question may be asked: What is it about religious belief and involvement that facilitates strong father-child relationships? If a father believes that his children are spiritual beings with divine origin, purpose, and potential, rather than merely intelligent animals governed by genetic endowment, environmental forces, and fate, then he believes a power greater than himself is involved with his children. Religious beliefs encourage the view that human beings and family relationships are sacred, and therefore profoundly important and meaningful. If a father believes that the Creator of the universe cares profoundly about people and family relationships, then he will likely believe he should care, too. If a father believes that God has called fathers to care for, protect and provide for, and teach and bless their children, then fathering becomes sacred service for God, not just a social role. If a father believes that there is a loving God who will provide him divine assistance in his efforts to raise his child, then his faith can provide courage to overcome earthly challenges.

Religious practices such as participation in sacred rituals (as individuals, as families, or as fathers and children together) and the retelling of sacred stories can give transcendent meaning to intergenerational relationships. Practices like mealtime prayer, church attendance, and scripture reading can give structure and meaning to family life. Experi-
ences with religious communities and with personal spirituality can give a sense of transcendent connection with others, since those communities often make covenants and sacrifices that bind the members of the community to one another in profoundly meaningful ways (Dollahite, Slife, & Hawkins, 1998; Hawkins, Dollahite, & Rhoades, 1993).

If marriage is seen in sacred—not merely social—terms, then likely marriage will be highly valued, promoted, and supported. If a father believes that family relationships are part of a divine plan, rather than simply the result of social convenience or biological destiny, he will more likely commit to and work toward the continuation of those relationships, regardless of personal cost or inconvenience. Since the divorce rate of highly religious couples is significantly lower than that of the general population (Call & Heaton, 1997), and since a large body of research has shown that “the kind of mother-father relationship most conducive to responsible fathering is a caring, committed, collaborative marriage” (Doherty et al., 1998, p. 286), religious faith strengthens marriage, and this in turn strengthens fathering.

Because religious belief typically connotes a relationship of some kind with a God who is loving and powerful, religious beliefs frequently connote the possibility and desirability of divinely-assisted personal and relational transformation and reconciliation, which can help fathers and children improve their relationships. Finally, religious faith is potentially a more transformative influence than law and policy in the lives of those whom some would call “bad dads” (Furstenberg, 1988), that is, those men who have abandoned paternal responsibility. That is not to say that laws exacting resources from fathers for child support are not needed and effective in certain cases. Rather, it is to say that religious conversion or a renewal of religious devotion will more likely lead to significant, lasting change in willingness to support their children without continuing coercion.

Thus, religious faith can provide fathers and other family members with a sense of identity and purpose, a meaning structure, a set of moral guidelines, social support in times of relational difficulty, and spiritual resources for personal and relational transformation.

THE MEN’S MOVEMENT AND RELIGION

As I have read the literature of the men’s movement and men’s work (e.g., Bly, 1990; Keen, 1991; Meade, 1993; Moore & Gillette, 1990, 1992) and talked with numerous men involved with it, I have noticed much in common between the core concepts articulated in the men’s movement and many of the fundamental experiential elements found in many religious communities, including:

- the importance of caring and generative mentors such as fathers, grandfathers, older men, and community and religious leaders;
- the value of sacred myths or stories in giving meaning to individuals and in binding a community;
- rituals of initiation in order to facilitate transcendence and transformation;
- the need of men to receive “blessing” (confirmation of worth and potential) from “elders” (family and community leaders);
 regular gatherings with ceremony and fellowship in order to bind communities and allow individuals to heal;
- personal transformation through deep introspection, sorrow, and grief (what Robert Bly terms "descent" and religion terms "repen-
tance") rather than avoidance of transformation through denial, repression, projection, or blaming;
- the critical importance of relationship and reconciliation with one’s father (or Heavenly Father);
- and sacred music (whether drums or organs), which calls people out from mundane concerns and invites deep contemplation, joy, exhilar-
aration, or transformation.

Indeed, my sense is that many of the best ideas and methods of the men’s movement and men’s work originated with ancient religious ideas and methods, which Bly, Moore and Gillette, Keen, Meade, and others learned in their studies of various cultures, especially the religious practices of these cultures. This is not to say that the men’s movement is simply derivative of religion, but rather that the leaders of the men’s movement have not hesitated to bring the benefits of the ancient powers and blessings of religious faith, practice, and community to men who have been struggling spiritually in a highly secular, skeptical, postmodern culture.

In my work as a counselor, some of the concepts and narratives from the men’s literature have helped me assist men resolve grief arising from father absence through death, divorce, or psychological distance. As I work with these men, I find that religious beliefs and communities provide many men with the types of important stories, mentors, meanings, rituals, and social support that the leaders of the men’s movement seem to be trying to provide for men. This is not to suggest, however, that religious faith and community can provide all that every man feels he may need, nor that many religious men might not also benefit from involvement with a men’s group of some type. Indeed, my sense is that men’s groups can provide much support to fathers. I do believe that religiously based men’s support and education groups can also offer much, since they can extend the type of connections already present in a religious community.

There are some interesting parallels between the literature of the men’s movement and concepts articulated in this special issue of The Journal of Men’s Studies. For example: As Jason Latshaw (1998, this issue) points out, faith can be the “Axis Mundi” (i.e., sacred center) that orients the father in the world and gives fathering a profoundly meaningful purpose. Men’s movement leaders Moore and Gillette (1992) also use Mircea Eliade’s concept of the Axis Mundi in their book on the male psyche. Several of the authors in this issue (e.g., Christiansen & Palkovitz; Dollahite & his colleagues; Latshaw; Palkovitz & Palm) draw upon the concept of generativity developed by Erik Erikson (1950, 1982) and the related concept of generative fathering articulated by Snarey (1993) and Hawkins and Dollahite (1997), while Moore and Gillette (1992) employ a similar concept of the Generative Man, also based in Eriksonian theory.
CONCERNS ON SPIRITUALITY, FAITH, AND FATHERING

In this section I discuss some of the concerns I have heard expressed about religion and fathering, including possible negative effects of religion, different forms of spirituality, and religion and gender roles.

IS RELIGION A WHOLLY POSITIVE INFLUENCE ON FATHERING?

I assume that religious beliefs, practices, narratives, and communities are generally positive influences that encourage and assist fathers toward meaningful involvement with children. My scholarly and clinical experience with men, along with my very positive personal experience with my own faith community, leads me to focus on the positive value of religion. I realize, however, that many people have had less than ideal experiences, or no experience at all, with religion. Thus, in these cases, religion is not the positive influence on fathering that I propose.

Some men experience the moral calls from religious texts and leaders as a coercive influence that induces guilt and shame. Some experience their religious communities as a constraining and demanding force. Some experience religious ritual as meaningless form and theology as unsatisfying. People within the same religious community can have very different experiences with that community, ranging from wonderfully supportive to woefully oppressive; and so to say that “religion is supportive” may be true for some, but not others. And people can experience their faith community as supportive at some times and in some ways and not in others. And religions certainly differ from one another in matters of belief, practice, and experience, and some may more likely engender negative emotion than others. Some religions are more family-centered and provide more supports for fathering than others.

These points are granted. But my theory is that religion can provide an extremely positive influence on father involvement for a very great number of people across a great variety of contexts and cultures and that it is likely to be more salient for more fathers and children than any other cultural or community influence. I look forward to research that will explore the interactions between fathering and faith and discover which type of religious beliefs and practices are most facilitative and encouraging of responsible fathering and which may have negative effects.

ARE ALL KINDS OF SPIRITUALITY HELPFUL FOR FATHERS?

Private, authentic spirituality can lead to inner strength, healing, and peace, which may indirectly encourage better fathering. Support for this idea is available in research on male spirituality by Ian Harris (1997), who found that “spirituality has a positive effect on male behavior, because men who are spiritual hold themselves to high moral standards” (p. 51). For men who are fathers, if these high standards include or influence their commitment to involved fathering, then spirituality is beneficial to the father and child.

However, certain types of spirituality are inherently “inner-oriented” and do not necessarily encourage responsible fathering. Excessive involvement in certain types of private spirituality (like certain types of hobbies, or psychotherapies, or men’s retreats) may simply take time and energy away from children and have little or no positive benefit for children.
or the relationship between fathers and children. Along these lines, while Popenoe (1996) mentions that "religion has long been a supporter of marriage and family life," he adds an important caveat: "We may turn, as have many in Hollywood, toward an individualistic, self-centered, new-age style religion that is silent or even negative about marriage and family life, to say nothing of fatherhood" (p. 227). I believe that faith-based communities that facilitate authentic spiritual renewal and emphasize the sacred nature of family relationships are likely to encourage responsible fathering in ways that merely private spirituality alone often does not (Dollahite et al., 1998; Dollahite, Marks, & Olson, 1998, this issue).

DOESN'T RELIGION PROMOTE OUTDATED, HARMFUL GENDER ROLES?

Most contemporary scholars (Doherty et al., 1998; LaRossa, 1988, 1997; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Marsiglio, 1995) view fatherhood as a social construction or a set of images, expectations, symbols, and norms that are formed by societal experts and the media and are shared by the general public. Thus, the social constructivist model assumes that fatherhood largely involves "playing a social role" determined by others. And fathers are now being asked to play a role that looks a lot like mothering (Popenoe, 1996). Kraemer (1991) believes there really is no such thing as fathering, only men who mother. Garbarino (1993) suggests that we need to "rewrite the parenting scripts" in order to "reinvent fatherhood" so that fathers parent like mothers (p. 53). Many men resist this notion, since, as Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) argue, "a sex-role change operation is neither appealing to most fathers nor respectful of their lives, experiences, and skills" (p. 14).

Many men do base their fathering primarily on a conscious or unconscious desire to conform to changing societal expectations. They are considered by society (and themselves) to be "progressive" and "responsive." On the other hand, devoutly faith-oriented fathers try to be true to what they believe God expects of them, which is typically based on a faith community's understanding of sacred scripture thought to reveal unchanging truth. More "conservative," "orthodox," or "fundamentalist" faiths often hold to more "traditional" beliefs on gender roles; thus, highly religious fathers are often considered "quaint" or "old-fashioned," at best, and "rigid," "doctrinaire," and "oppressive," at worst, by those who attend more to societal family roles—this despite the fact that these fathers are considered to be meaningful contributors to the faith communities to which they belong and are supported in their traditional roles by most women in those communities.

There are certainly powerfully influential societal expectations and images of fatherhood, and fathers should attend to what is expected of them by their communities and should learn from mothers, fathers, and other mentors. However, I believe that because of the uniqueness of each child, the dynamic nature of child development, and the challenges that contemporary fathers and children face, the best fathering is done in a way that is more personal, spiritual, and specific-child responsive, while not ignoring and to some extent being responsive to broad cultural "scripts" and societal expectations. Thus, rather than focusing on fatherhood as simply socially constructed or biologically determined, I prefer to think of fathering as a spiritual process that each father works out in relation to his beliefs, his relationships, the moral call he feels from God, and the spiritual connection he feels with his child. And for me, religion is not merely another social force acting on fathers from the outside, but more important, a set of personal beliefs, practices, values, commitments, and relationships that help fathers from within.
Deborah Lupton and Lesley Barclay (1997) assert that “many feminist academics continue to take an extremely critical approach toward men as fathers.... They have sought to demonstrate that the father figure both supports and reproduces patterns of the oppression of women” (pp. 54-55). All religions give parents authority over children, or at least require of children that they honor parents. Some faith communities that have been particularly vigorous in encouraging responsible, involved, faith-oriented fathering also give fathers a religious leadership role, which extends to wives as well as children. However, these faith communities also strongly emphasize commitment, obligations, and benevolence in family relations and stress the importance of “servant-leadership” involving sacrifice and service for others, kindness, gentleness, and humility.

One of the things that concern many feminists about both religion and the men’s movement is the demonstrated ability of these types of ideas, stories, and rituals to bring men to a clear sense of identity and authority; and this, unfortunately, leads some men to exercise unrighteous power or dominance over women, citing, for example, Biblical teachings such as Paul’s teachings about women submitting to men (Ephesians 5:22)—but ignoring verse 25 which calls men to serve and sacrifice. While religion is sometimes associated with dogmatism and chauvinism, and some men abuse religion in this way, I believe that “faithful fathers” instead allow authentic spiritual and religious ideas, ideals, and experiences to create within them a sense of spiritual and moral obligation that calls them to treat family members with great respect, to serve family members in kindness, and to lead their children in love, equity, and equanimity.

In my professional and pastoral counseling, I have learned that human beings often see in God the image of their own fathers—particularly if they believe the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the Fatherhood of God (I Chronicles 29:10; Isaiah 9:6; Matthew 6:9). That is, if their own fathers were kind, patient, and nurturing, it is not difficult for them to believe in a Heavenly Father with those characteristics. However, if their own fathers were absent, neglectful, abusive, or even just impatient and arbitrary, it is very difficult for them to believe that God is not this way also. Thus, in my mind, fathers—especially religious fathers—have an obligation and opportunity to strive to be as kind, fair, generous, humble, patient, self-sacrificing, and forgiving as possible so that their children’s spiritual growth may be allowed to flourish.

CONCLUSION

In this age of widespread father absence and father longing (Corneau, 1991), it is compelling to find God referred to in scripture as “a father of the fatherless” (Psalms 68:5). Another passage that indicates God’s deep concern with distant father-child relationships is the fascinating prophecy found in the last two verses of the Hebrew scriptures that foretells that God, through a chosen servant, would initiate dramatic changes in the relationship between fathers and children:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse. (Malachi 4:5-6)
This passage demonstrates that God is mindful of men and their offspring, is well aware of the negative consequences of fathers' distance from children, and will act to help fathers and children grow together (Hawkins, Dollahite, & Rhodes, 1993). The well-documented, terrible consequences of fatherlessness (Popenoe, 1996) are, indeed, a dreadful "curse" for children, fathers, families, and communities, and provide empirical evidence that divine concern about distance in this relationship is not misplaced. A sobering implication of this scripture is that God will hold fathers accountable for their actions in relation to their children.

Ideally, a father turns his heart and mind to his child before the child is born and keeps his heart bound to that child throughout his life. But if, for whatever reason, the hearts of fathers and children become turned away from each other, this prophecy holds out the hope of divine aid in their reconciliation. I believe we should encourage and honor fathers and children who seek divine assistance in turning their hearts to one another. They recognize that they are doing God's work on earth, and they know they cannot do it as it should be and can be done without God's help. In a world in which many powerful forces pull fathers and children apart, it is encouraging to share with others the belief that the Father of us all desires to seal the hearts of fathers and children to one another—and to Him—in bonds of eternal association.

REFERENCES


