

A reformational approach to the bonus paterfamilias standard with respect to a father's stewardship duties to his children

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the growing crisis of fatherlessness in South Africa and explores a reformational-biblical perspective on fathers' stewardship responsibilities toward their children. The study was motivated by alarming social realities, including high rates of absent fathers, rising child victimisation, juvenile delinquency and the erosion of family structures. Statistics indicate that approximately 64% of the children in South Africa do not live with their biological fathers, which contributes to emotional, moral and social instability within communities. Against this backdrop, the article investigates the question: What is the reformational standpoint on a father's stewardship duties towards his children? The study employs a conceptual-normative research design grounded in biblical perspectives and moral philosophy. It first clarifies key concepts, such as stewardship, *paterfamilias* and *bonus paterfamilias*, emphasising that fathers are entrusted by God with the responsible care, guidance and protection of their children. Biblically, stewardship is understood as faithful management under God's authority, extending beyond material care to include spiritual and relational responsibilities. The article presents God the Father as the supreme model of fatherhood, characterised by love, provision, discipline, protection and faithfulness. Although earthly fathers cannot attain divine paternal perfection, they are called to emulate this attribute. Biblical teaching highlights several core paternal duties: teaching children God's commandments; training and educating them through consistent guidance; demonstrating love through presence and care; disciplining them responsibly; cultivating integrity; protecting them from harm; and providing for their physical and spiritual needs. The study concludes that Scripture offers a principled framework for fatherhood rooted in stewardship and accountability before God. Fatherlessness significantly contributes to social dysfunction, including poverty, violence, crime and family disintegration. Strengthening responsible fatherhood is, therefore, essential to the well-being of children, families and society.

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Introduction and Problem Statement

More than a million births occur in South Africa each year. In 50% of these births, the fathers' names are unknown. Each year, 30 000 babies are born without a father's name (Jansen, 2021). The disintegration of family structures through divorce or abandonment by fathers adds to the plight of children in South Africa. Although multiple factors contribute to this dire situation, a central concern is the phenomenon of absent fathers, resulting in fatherless households. *The State of South African Fathers 2024 Report* (Van der Berg et al., 2024) indicates that approximately 64% of South African children do not reside with their biological fathers. In some segments of the population, the absence of fathers has reached rates as high as 69.1%. This places a burden on the state, schools and religious institutions, whose primary responsibility is not to raise children (Blankenhorn, 1995; Harris, 2001).

A decade ago, Buchan (2015) concluded that South Africa was becoming a fatherless nation. This trend is not unique to South Africa. In the United States of America, for example, the rise in single-parent households has been well documented. Statistics released in 2022 indicated that 18.3 million children in the United States live without a father, accounting for one in four households (U.S. Census Bureau 2025). Approximately 80% of single-parent households are headed by single mothers (U.S. Census Bureau 2025). Globally, the United States has the highest rate of single-parent households (Kramer, 2021).

The physical absence (and lack of protection) of a father in a family has far-reaching effects on how a household functions (Jansen, 2021). The absence of a father contributes to the risk of children having suicidal thoughts, engaging in risky behaviour, performing self-harm, and lacking knowledge of themselves and struggling with skills like

personal relationships (Freeks, 2019). The data reveal that children under 10 are particularly vulnerable to a range of crimes, with enduring consequences for their well-being. The 2024 Statistics South Africa report indicates that the rate of attempted murder among children aged zero to 17 nearly doubled between 2010/2011 and 2022/2023 – an alarming increase. The most prevalent offences against children were child abuse, sexual assault, rape, murder and attempted murder (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Child abuse was particularly prevalent among toddlers, especially those aged one to three years, with one-year-olds being the most vulnerable.

In the past 15 years, in the absence of their fathers (and the resulting lack of protection), fatherless girls in South Africa aged zero to 17 were consistently far more likely to become victims of crime than their male counterparts. In the 2022/2023 period, cases reported to the South African police indicated that girls aged zero to 17 were victims in 90.1% of reported cases and in 89.7% of cases of sexual assault (Van der Berg et al., 2024)

In Malachi 4:5-6, God says that He will send the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of his judgement so that the prophet will return the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers. This statement indicates the crucial role that fathers (ought to) play in their children's lives. In view of the persistent and growing trend towards fatherless households, we formulated the following research question: What is the reformational-biblical standpoint on a father's stewardship duties towards his children? The objective of the investigation is to determine the reformational-biblical standpoint on a fathers' stewardship duties towards his children. A focus on the stewardship duties of fathers may



contribute to our understanding of the problems that children have to endure, as sketched above, and may help the fathers who read this article to gain a deeper understanding of their fatherhood duties. Our focus on fatherhood and the stewardship duties of fathers regarding their children does not detract from the importance of the roles of mothers and other caretakers involved in the upbringing of children, such as grandparents. Christian mothers may argue that most, if not all, of the characteristics of God the Father also apply to motherhood. It is perhaps for this reason that ethicist John Frame (2008) opted to discuss the roles of both fathers and mothers in relation to family life.

Research strategy (the logic of inquiry)

Our first step towards answering the research question is to determine precisely what is meant by the terms “stewardship” and the “*bonus paterfamilias*” standard and, by extension, the implications of these terms for the duties of fathers as the heads of their households and the caretakers of their children. The study adopts a conceptual-normative research design, employing a primarily philosophical and theoretical methodology. Its objective is to offer a critical and integrative analysis of the concept of fatherhood. The study systematically synthesises existing scholarship from multiple disciplines, particularly biblical and theological perspectives and moral philosophy.

The article advances a normative argument for fathers’ duties towards their children by drawing on these perspectives. The logical progression of the argument structures the article. It begins by outlining the problem statement that situates the research within the broader social and educational tensions associated with fatherless families (see the previous section). The

first task towards answering the research question is to delineate the key concepts of the study. This is done in the next section, titled “Conceptual framework”. The second step is to present a principled view of fatherhood, based on the fatherhood of God, the Father of Jesus Christ. The third step, conceived in the context of our personal position as reformational educationists, is to examine the inscripturated Word of God – the Bible – for guidelines and perspectives regarding fatherhood and the stewardship duties of fathers towards their children (Section 4). In the third and final step, we return to the research problem to determine whether we have indeed formulated a reformational answer to the problem of fatherlessness and the neglect of paternal duties. The next section delineates the key concepts of the study.

Conceptual framework

The Greek word *oikonomos* denotes ‘stewardship’ as used in the Bible. The term derives from *oikos* (‘house’) and *nemein* (‘to manage’ or ‘to administer’) (Vine, Unger & White 2003). Together, these words denote a household manager entrusted with overseeing another’s property. Biblical stewardship is a holistic, scripturally grounded concept that defines humanity as responsible managers, rather than owners, of God’s creation (Le Roux, 2017). It encompasses environmental care, financial management and the faithful use of personal gifts (time and talents) in service of divine purposes.

In 1 Corinthians 4:2, it is required ‘that a man be found faithful’ in relation to his *oikonomos* (stewardship) – the one who must discharge entrusted responsibilities with integrity and accountability. Luke 16 develops this concept further by applying it to the stewardship of a master’s goods. In this parable, the steward



squandered his master's possessions and failed to render an account of them. He was removed from his position, which illustrates that stewardship is contingent upon faithful and responsible management.

In the final analysis, a biblical conception of stewardship entails accountability to God not only for material possessions but also for the oversight of spiritual welfare and the integrity of human relationships. Within this relational dimension, one of the distinctive gifts entrusted by God to humanity is children, who are placed under the care of their parents. Children are portrayed as a divine gift (Psalm 127:3) and are to be regarded accordingly. Proverbs 17:6 affirms their elevated status, describing children as a 'crown of the aged' and 'the glory of their fathers'.

The word 'father' is Germanic, derived from the Proto-Germanic *fader*, historically related to the Proto-Indo-European *fader* and to the Latin *pater*. At some stage, Germanic words began to prefer the 'f' or 'v' to the Latin 'p', which explains the spelling in English ("father"), German (*Vater*), and Dutch (*vader*).

The term *paterfamilias* combines the words *pater* and *familia* and is used to denote the father as the head of the family or household, that is, the person who possesses authority and provides protection and provision. The *Oxford Dictionary* (Soanes & Stevenson, 2006) describes a father as a man who provides care and protection to his family. The concept of *bonus paterfamilias* (literally: the good father of the family or the good head of the household) refers to the reasonable, prudent, careful, diligent, circumspect head of a family. This phrase embodies a view that has become a legal standard in modern civil law jurisdictions (e.g., France, Italy, Spain, and South Africa) and is used to define the benchmark of care, diligence, and

prudence expected of the father as the head of his household (Hiemstra & Gonin 1990). In line with this view, the South African *Children's Act* of 2005 (Republic of South Africa 2006) provides a framework regarding children's rights and parental obligations. However, the purpose of the present discussion is not to focus on such legal aspects but rather to explore biblical-reformational perspectives on a father's obligations towards his children.

A principled, though unattainable, view of fatherhood

Earthly Christian fathers may strive to follow and emulate the perfect example of the greatest of fathers, namely the Father of Jesus Christ. They are, however, unable to do so fully, for two reasons: first, they are earthly rather than divine beings, and second, since the Fall into sin, they are sinful human beings prone to error in the upbringing and education of their children. Although the divine Father of Jesus Christ sets an unattainably high standard for fatherhood, earthly fathers should learn from his example and from the standards that He has upheld since the beginning of creation.

It is noteworthy that Jesus taught his followers to address God the Father as 'our Father in heaven' (Matt. 6:9). According to pastoral theologian Tripp (2014), addressing God as 'our' Father renders the relationship deeply personal and spiritually fulfilling. Christian believers may, therefore, address the divine Being as 'our Father'-the Being who possesses incomparable wisdom and power, who is the creator and sustainer of all things, who exercises supreme authority and sovereign control over history and whose will is accomplished in every respect. Furthermore, it is through his immeasurable love that the plan of redemption in Jesus Christ was initiated, thereby enabling believers to receive new and eternal life. He is the



heavenly Father whose love – giving, providing, instructing, patient and forgiving – characterises a perfect father to both believers and unbelievers.

The Heidelberg Catechism (Question 26) further develops these principles on fatherhood by highlighting several characteristics of God as the perfect Father of Jesus Christ and, through Christ, of all believers as his children. God is described as the eternal sovereign and sustainer of all that He has created and as one worthy of his children's complete trust. He can be relied upon to nourish and sustain them and to protect and preserve them through all tribulations. According to Question 120 of the Catechism, believers are called to regard and address Him as their Father because they are to possess childlike reverence and trust towards Him. Through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, God has become their Father, and consequently, He is able to care for his children far more perfectly than any earthly father could ever do.

God applies the language of the fifth commandment (Question 104) to Himself: 'A son honours his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honour? And if I am a master, where is my fear [respect], says the Lord of hosts to you ...' (Mal. 1:6). Put differently, the fifth commandment can be understood as a mandate to honour God as the Father. According to Frame (2008), this aspect of the commandment takes on richer significance for New Testament believers, who are taught by Jesus Christ to address God specifically as 'Father' (Matt. 6:9; Eph. 3:14–15).

Earthly fathers play an important role in their contribution and provision for their children; God the Father is the source of life, and families need to recognise Him and integrate Him into their daily lives (Freeks & de Jager, 2023). Although earthly fathers can never attain the standards set by the

greatest Father of all, the Father of Jesus Christ, who has adopted all believers as his children, they should attempt to emulate his loving and caring example. The next section explains what earthly fathers can do and attend to.

Biblical perspectives regarding the roles and obligations of fathers

The perspectives on the roles and responsibilities of fathers in Scripture are discussed below.

Imprint God's commandments in their children

When Deuteronomy 6:10 states that 'when the Lord brings you into the land he promised to your fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob', it seems to imply fathers but does not exclude mothers. God calls parents to communicate the essence of the divine commandments to their children. Considering Deuteronomy 5, continual instruction in God's laws should be regarded as a prerequisite for the sound upbringing of a child. Deuteronomy 6:4–7, which contains the *Shema* – the central creed of Judaism (Joubert & Maré, 2024) – commands the Israelites to love the Lord with all their heart, soul and strength. It emphasises parents' obligation to diligently impress this command upon their children: 'when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.' Furthermore, it advises that these commands be fixed as a sign on one's hand and serve as frontlets on the forehead.

The weight and importance of this mandate cannot be overstated. Its seriousness is embedded in the very first Hebrew word of verse 4, שְׁמָע (*shema*), derived from the verb *shama* ('to hear'). In its fuller semantic range, *shama* denotes not merely auditory perception but attentive listening, cognitive comprehension and, ultimately, obedient response. Accordingly, the



concept of *shema* encapsulates attentiveness, internalisation and obedience (Vine et al., 2003).

In this regard, parents are required to set an example. In fact, they are to transmit their love for God to their children, as young children tend to associate their parents, especially the father, with their understanding of God (Dobson, 1996). A child's spirituality forms through established beliefs, norms, and values, with fathers playing an important role in guiding this process. A child's relationship with their father, as well as how they come to understand and experience God as their Father in adulthood, influences the depth and quality of their spiritual development (Jansen, 2021). The father is regarded as the first image of who God may be (McGlasson, 2013). Metaphorically, this entails guiding the child onto the path that leads to entry into the kingdom of God (Barclay, 2001).

Train or educate their children

Lucado (2014) describes a father's unique opportunity to instruct his child in a way no one else can as a 'phenomenal privilege'; no nanny, Bible school teacher, aunt or uncle possesses that authority. In fact, fathers are to be role models for their children. Buchan (2015) remarks that 'more than ever before, children are on the lookout for role models to follow'.

Likewise, Proverbs 22:6 instructs parents to 'train up' a child in the way he should go, so that when he is old, he will not depart from it. The Hebrew term translated here as 'train' is *hānak* (*hanak*), which conveys a meaning far richer than mere 'instruction' or 'teaching'. Whereas 'teaching' denotes the impartation or implantation of knowledge and 'instructing' carries connotations of direction, command or disciplined guidance, 'training', in this context, signifies formative shaping through sustained, intentional

practice and habituation. It denotes the process of initiating, dedicating and cultivating a child's life along principled lines.

In the context of Proverbs 22:6, 'train up' thus portrays a parent who consistently invests time and effort in guiding their child through lived example and the transmission of biblical principles. The emphasis falls not merely on cognitive acquisition but also on moral and spiritual formation, aimed at securing a trajectory of faithfulness. In this sense, proper formation instils a durable disposition, increasing the likelihood that the child will remain steadfast in their commitment to God (cf. Hayford 2020). Fathers play a crucial role as role models and life coaches in nurturing their children's spiritual growth. The strength of a child's spiritual development is closely linked to the quality of their relationship with their father. In line with this, research indicates that a significant proportion of criminal offenders received little to no guidance from their fathers in developing their spirituality (Jansen, 2021).

Love their children

The Bible affirms that love is paramount – 'the greatest of these is love' (1 Corinthians 13:13) – and simultaneously establishes that 'love is the fulfilment of the law' (Romans 13:10). These scriptural principles underscore the imperative role of the father as exemplar. A father is called not merely to instruct but also to embody love in observable, practical terms, thereby demonstrating to the young what love entails, how it is expressed and how it is lived out in conduct. In the Gospel of Matthew 3:17, at the baptism of Jesus, God the Father publicly affirms his love for his Son by declaring Him to be his 'beloved Son'.

Beyond instruction and example, children must also experience love directly, especially paternal



love. Such experiential knowledge underpins their understanding of relational and moral order. This love originates with God – ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8; 4:16) – and is, therefore, not merely emotive but also covenantal and formative. As such, it is intended to be transmitted intergenerationally, shaping both identity and conduct (McGlasson, 2013).

One of the essential ways to express love to children is through attentive presence, that is, giving them time and focused attention. In this regard, the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates rebuked the inhabitants of Athens for devoting excessive time and energy to the pursuit of wealth, while neglecting what ought to be their greatest treasure: their children (Steenkamp, 2018). In the words of Lucado (2014), children spell the word ‘love’ as follows: T-I-M-E. Therefore, the father’s calling in this regard is clear: to invest time intentionally in his child. This calling is embedded in relational presence, through which love is not merely expressed verbally but also demonstrated consistently. A wise family builds its house on love and encouragement, turning it into a ‘safe harbour’ (Scott, 2021).

Discipline their children

A father should not shy away from disciplining his children. Bible passages such as Proverbs 29:17 encourage fathers to discipline their children, promising that doing so will bring peace and joy. Similarly, Proverbs 23:13 advises fathers not to withhold discipline, as it can protect their children from harm and even death. Jeremiah (2004) states that ‘[l]ife without discipline is chaos’. God expects fathers to discipline their children to establish order within the household. It is the duty of the father, as the *paterfamilias* of the family circle.

In 1 Corinthians 14:33, God is portrayed as a God of order, not disorder – a principle reflected

in creation itself, where order emerged from primordial chaos (see Genesis 1). This expectation extends to the household governance of church leaders, such as bishops and deacons, who are required to manage their families well, keeping their children under control and in proper submission (1 Timothy 3:4, 12). Similarly, Hebrews 12 teaches that God the Father disciplines those He loves so they may mature in responsibility. An earthly father, when disciplining his children, should remain calm and exercise control over his emotions. According to Ephesians 6:4, he must not provoke (stir up) his children to anger or discourage them; nor, according to Colossians 3:21, should he irritate them to the point of losing heart.

Teach their children integrity

The concept of integrity, derived from the Latin *integritas*, denotes the quality of being honest and morally upright. It further encompasses a state of wholeness and includes attributes such as incorruptibility, morality, loyalty, fidelity, trustworthiness, reliability, uprightness, sincerity and decency (Soanes, Spooner & Hawker 2001). Integrity can be understood as a quality that includes honesty, conscientiousness, accountability, consistency, adherence to social norms and policies and authenticity (Zahari, Said & Arshad 2022). In defending his character, Job affirms that he avoided lustful thoughts, falsehood and deceit, remained faithful in marriage, upheld justice for his servants and cared for the vulnerable by providing for the fatherless, widows and the needy (Job 31:1–12). He also declares that he did not place his trust in wealth (Job 31:24–25).

Similarly, David acknowledges in Psalm 41:12 that God sustained him because of his integrity. Proverbs 10:9 teaches that those who live with integrity walk securely, while Proverbs 11:3



highlights that integrity guides the upright. In Psalm 26:1, David appeals to God for vindication, grounding his plea in the fact that he has lived a life of integrity. When fathers instil integrity in their children, they equip them with a way of life that offers guidance, protection and security.

Protect their children

Children who grow up without a father need care and protection (Freeks & de Jager, 2023). A child's sense of safety is essential, and fathers should begin building a strong bond with their children by being physically present even before birth (Jansen, 2021). As the head of the family, a father bears responsibility for protecting his household, especially his children, who are still maturing and vulnerable in multiple aspects. He must safeguard them not only from direct physical harm but also from the dangers of substance abuse, emotional vulnerability, a weak self-image, improper conduct, moral risks and feelings of hopelessness. In fulfilling this role, he must simultaneously cultivate in them self-reliance, resilience, hope, a positive self-concept and sound moral standards.

Matthew 18:10 underscores the intrinsic worth of the child, highlighting the supreme importance of children and their elevated value in the sight of God. Thus, this verse calls upon parents to cultivate the latent potential within them (Barclay, 2013). To hinder the development of such potential constitutes a grave loss; to corrupt it is morally reprehensible and may be construed as sin. In metaphorical terms, Matthew 18:10 conveys that for a person (read 'parent') who leads a child into wrongdoing, it would be preferable to have a heavy millstone fastened around their neck and to be cast into the sea and drowned.

Provide for their children

Under Section 9 of the *Children's Act* (8 of 2005), children's best interests are paramount in all matters relating to their care, protection and well-being. Furthermore, Section 18(2) of the Children's Act places a duty on parents to care for their children, maintain contact, act as guardians and contribute to their children's maintenance.

Biblical teachings likewise emphasise parental responsibility. 2 Corinthians 12:14 states that children are not expected to save for their parents, but parents ought to provide for their children. Proverbs 19:14 notes that houses and wealth are inherited from fathers, while Proverbs 13:22 describes a righteous person as one who leaves an inheritance for their children's children. However, the responsibility to provide for children does not rest solely with fathers; mothers share this obligation as well.

Addressing father absenteeism

The negative consequences of absent fathers require local churches to play a prominent role in providing safety to children, to provide training to fathers to equip them to fulfil their fundamental roles, and to collaborate with education, psychology and social work to promote healthy relationships between fathers and their children (Freeks & de Jager, 2023). Another means to counter the effects of fatherlessness is missional parenting, in which parents or caregivers bring the gospel of Christ into everything they do, whether in broader society, in church, or at home. Missional households are involved in their children's schools, know their neighbours, engage in community activities and assist those in need (Freeks, 2017).



Concluding remark

Psalm 127 teaches that children are gifts from God, a reward from Him. It further likens them to arrows in the hands of a warrior, declaring that the one whose quiver is full of them is blessed. It is in view of this perspective that the late president of the United States of America, Lyndon Johnson, made the following proclamation some six decades ago:

The family is the cornerstone of our society. More than any other force, it shapes the attitudes, the hopes, the ambitions, and the values of the child. And when the family collapses [e.g. because of absent fathers], it is the children that are usually affected. When it happens on a massive scale, the community itself is crippled. (Johnson 1965)

From the discussion above, it emerged that much of a family's effectiveness depends on the presence and diligence of the father, who is the cornerstone of the family. Considering statements such as Johnson's and against the background of growing fatherless households in South Africa and elsewhere, we formulated the research question on which this study pivoted: What is the reformational-biblical standpoint on a father's stewardship duties towards his children? To answer this question, we first considered the Fatherhood of God, the Father of Jesus Christ, as the sublime example of fatherhood, an example at which earthly fathers should aspire but will never attain because of their human shortcomings and sinful nature.

We then attended to the core concepts of the study, namely 'father', *paterfamilias* and *bonus paterfamilias*. These concepts painted an initial picture of the importance of fatherhood and provided a standard for all earthly fathers to strive to achieve. We discovered that, according to

responsible stewards of the children entrusted to them and to perform their duties as *bonus paterfamilias* with diligence and responsibility. The subsequent discussion revealed that the duties of the *paterfamilias* (the father of the family) are manifold. His duties include imprinting God's commandments in the hearts and minds of his children, providing for their material and spiritual needs, training and educating them appropriately, loving and disciplining them, and leading them to become adults with integrity. The research showed that Scripture indeed proffers a principled standpoint regarding fathers' stewardship duties towards their children.

A key implication of this finding (conclusion) is that the dynamics of a sound family are fundamentally impaired by the absence of a father. McGlasson (2013) rightly observes that '[i]f a loving, present father stabilises a family, absent and abusive fathers are like fault lines that shake their families to the core'. The absence of fathers, that is, fatherless households, contributes to the breakdown of family structures, as well as to conditions such as homelessness, poverty, juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy, divorce, violence and substance abuse.

Father absenteeism may be addressed by involving the church, education, psychology and social work in promoting positive relationships between fathers and their children and providing training to equip fathers with effective skills in fatherhood. It is also recommended that families adopt the missional parenthood model in which the gospel of Jesus Christ is part of everything the family does.

Further research is required to determine the training needed for fathers to become effective in their roles in raising their children. This study identified the negative influence of father



absenteeism on their children, as well as the roles fathers are expected to play in their children's lives. Further research is required to determine how to effectively empower and support fathers in the roles they need to fulfil and how the church, psychology and social work can be involved in the process

Ethical issues

Competing interests

There is no conflict of interest to report.

Author's contributions

All the authors contributed towards this article.

Ethical considerations

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Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of any affiliated agency of the author.

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