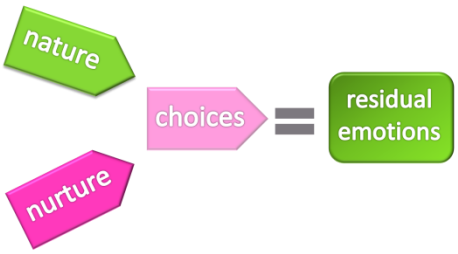
Understanding and Changing Family Patterns

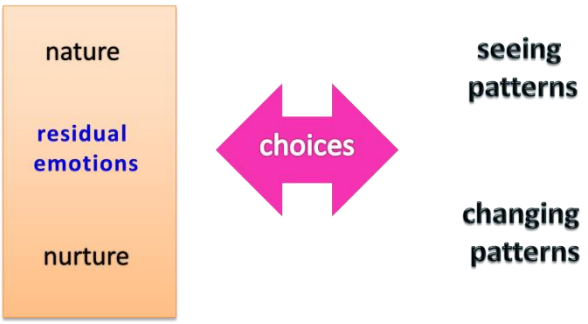
In Step Two (Session 4) we learnt that our feelings at this moment in time are a combination of 'residual emotions' and the emotions that our present situation produces.



We looked at the way in which nature, nurture and choices combine to produce those residual emotions and we considered the role of each of those components. Now we are going to dig deeper and focus on the part that family patterns have played in producing our 'residual emotions.' At the same time we will discover how those family patterns, combining with our temperament blends, have led to the 'emotional stance' that we have adopted in life.

As we grew up we increasingly understood and made choices – for good or ill. If we understand who we are (nature), what has happened to us (nurture) and the choices we have made, we will understand how we have ended up the way we are today.

We cannot change our nature or nurture - but we can change what we do with both. That is where the power of choice comes in. Many of the situations we face each day are 'repeats' of childhood situations. Our responses might not have been the best then – but they can be different now. Understanding that we have the ability to make a different choice gives us the freedom to use who we are to the full and not to spoil ourselves and our relationships with poor choices.



Understanding family patterns so we can make better choices

It is self-evident that in any functioning social group, roles and responsibilities need to be clearly defined. In business, from the boardroom to the factory floor, everyone needs to know their position and what they are meant to be doing if that business is going to be productive and efficient. Families are not about producing physical products but quality relationships and in the same way roles and responsibilities play a significant part in determining the quality of those relationships. Muddled roles result in muddled relationships.

In Step One (Session 1) we learnt that understanding our temperaments enables us to understand the 'blueprints' that God had in mind when he called us into being. In the same way, God has designed blueprints for family life. Just as we were able to understand what has happened to us as individuals when the blueprints were deviated from, so we will gain understanding from seeing the results of any deviation from God's blueprints for family life. So what are those blueprints?

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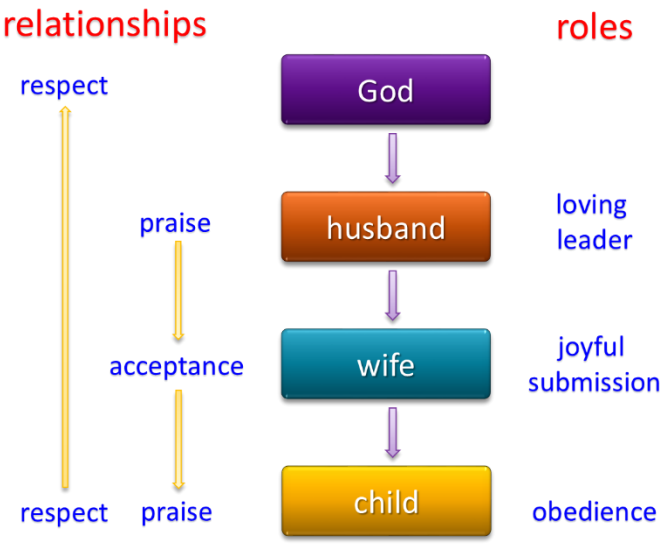
What did God intend family life to look like?

The Bible says, '*the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God*' (1 Corinthians 11:3). We have order, protection, strength and security. For some ladies this can produce a real fear – a deep reaction to possibly years of pain – either at the hands of a father or a husband – or both. They will see in this verse only abuse of authority, control, restriction or subservient submission. For a woman who has fought to find herself and her identity the thought of having to allow a man to be some kind of 'head' is a nightmare. For those whose trust has been betrayed, to contemplate trusting again feels like opening the door to life's worst experiences. This response is understandable but we must not allow our experiences to rob us of the possibility of finding God's best – or, at the very least, being helped to properly understand what has shaped the person we are today.



For an accurate perspective we need to remember that when Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus about various roles and relationships, including those of family, he prefaces them all with, '*submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*' (Ephesians 5:21). So, in the husband taking up his responsibility as a leader in his family he is submitting to his wife and children. He is putting their needs before his own and serving them. To fail to provide leadership is to fail to submit to Christ – and his family.

It would be easy to confuse roles and value at this point and to feel that a 'superior' role equals superior value. This comes from a way of thinking that confuses value with status (Step One, Session 5). Does an adult have more value than a child? Is Jesus of less value than the Father? Jesus could say, 'the Father is greater than I' (i.e. in rank and authority, John 14:28) – but could also say, *'I and the Father are one'* (John 10:30). We must not confuse value with status, or essence with differing roles. Jesus happily submitted to his Father, and Father and Son thereby enjoyed a perfect relationship.

If a man is in right relationship with God then he will have an attitude that enables him to be a loving leader to his wife. She will be secure because she knows that her husband hears God. That openness to God means that he will be open to his wife. Just as Father and Son work in harmony so husband and wife will act as one and be united in heart and mind. Where there is proper order a wife will respect her husband and he will look for every opportunity to praise and encourage her.

Within this structure any children will know exactly where they stand. They will feel very safe and will live in a context of positive and constructive attitudes. They will understand obedience because they see humilty in both parents. They will be made strong as the respect and praise that is shared between husband and wife spills out onto them.

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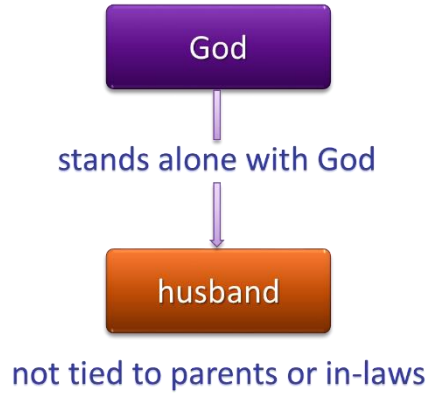
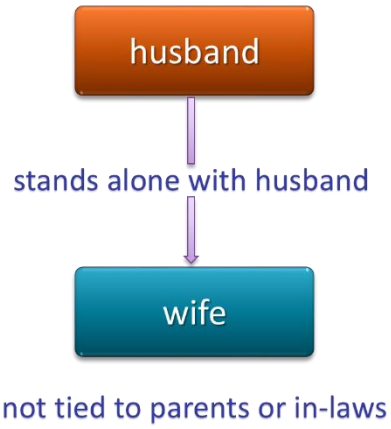
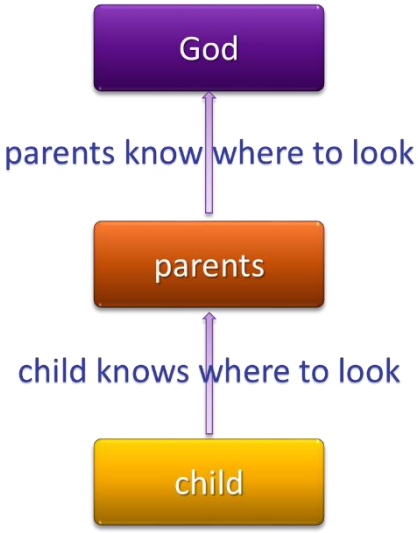


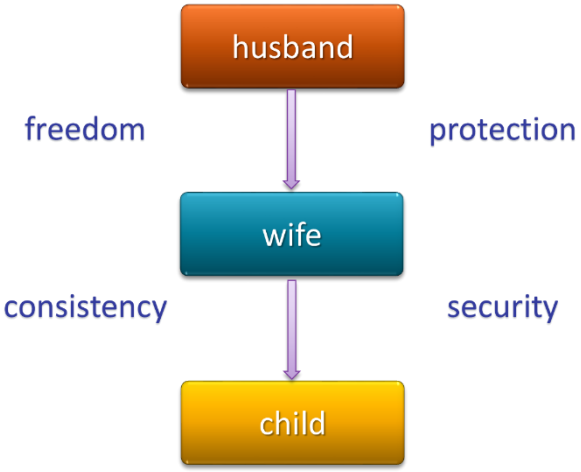
It is important that a husband takes his direction from his relationship with God. As he walks with God, is in fellowship with others, and gives himself away to his wife and children then any areas of his emotional and spiritual life that are lacking are filled. He needs to 'leave' his father and mother, so he can 'cleave' to his wife (Genesis 2:24 AV).

Likewise, a wife will look to her husband as God's representative. She will have her own relationship with the Lord but it will often be through her husband that the Lord is able to make up anything that was missed in her childhood. Again, if she has not truly 'left home' emotionally then that emotionally strengthening process is hindered and conflict can be the result. It is not that children should not have ongoing friendships with their parents – the issue is where the primary emotional allegiance lies – not just in word but in deed and in reality.



When the 'lines are clear' in the relationships between husband, wife and children there are enormous benefits for all concerned. There is no ambiguity about 'where the buck stops' or what is expected of each family member. Within the security and protection that such a structure provides is a freedom that enables each one in the family – including both parents – to live to their potential.





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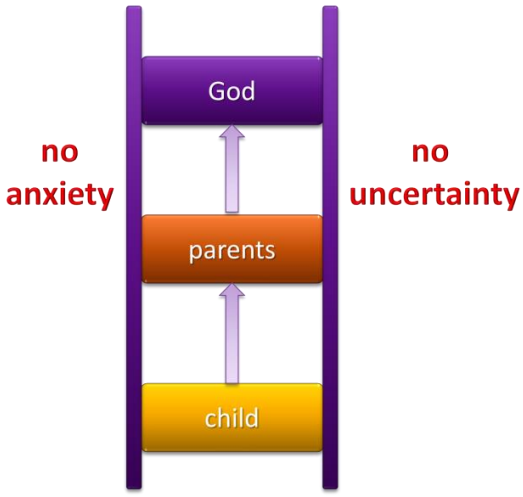
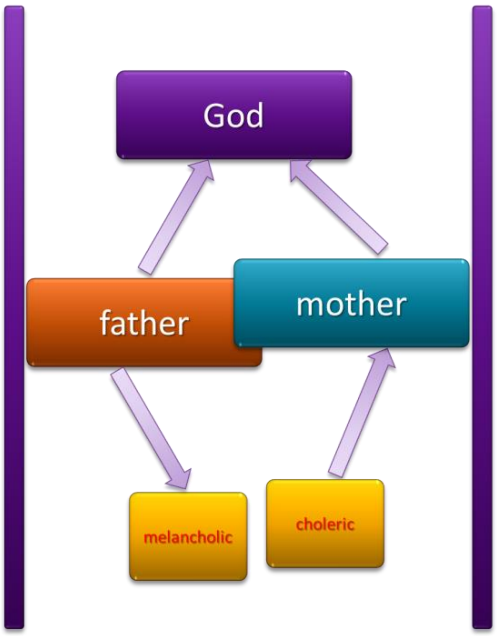


This understanding of roles and responsibilities enables the family to be held tightly together 'in the Lord'. This minimises the negatives in each individual and prepares the children to go out and form their own healthy relationships.

However, where parents are not functioning as a unit, the lines that hold the family together are forced apart – and it is in this slackness that the child begins to 'separate out' within himself. This allows room for negatives, such as fear, anxiety, low-self-worth and false guilt, to expand and even dominate. These negatives accelerate the process of forcing the child's temperaments apart. The end result is a child not at ease with himself with all the resultant issues. In Step One (Session 1) we discovered that God's design for us is that we should live in shalom – 'being joined up on the inside.'

A possible scenario in our example could be a predominantly Choleric wife married to a predominantly Melancholic husband. If the husband doesn't exert himself and give the lead then his wife may step in by default. She may also be the stronger spiritually so she brings the spiritual direction to the family. It may not be what she wants but she feels if she doesn't step in then nothing will happen!



Now let's put a Choleric Melancholic child into that family. What happens? The Choleric in the child relates to mother and mother is his role model – and the Melancholic in him relates to his father – he knows his dad understands him. He might wish his dad would step up and give the lead but he knows dad loves him so he settles into what for him is the 'norm.' And because the parents' actions and attitudes have a direct bearing on what happens emotionally to the child, his temperaments adjust in the corresponding position of the dominant temperaments in each of his parents. In that sense, sadly, he will invariably continue the pattern down through succeeding generations. The principles behind this process hold true whatever the temperament combination so it will be helpful to think through how this has worked out in your particular family situation.

The family life we have described may well be very different from what you experienced – and that can be very painful. However, by looking at God's original intentions we can understand our muddles today – and that is important because if we don't understand, the chances are that we will turn the blame back on ourselves. Understanding what has happened to us enables us to put the responsibility where it belongs, forgive where necessary, and move on in freedom.

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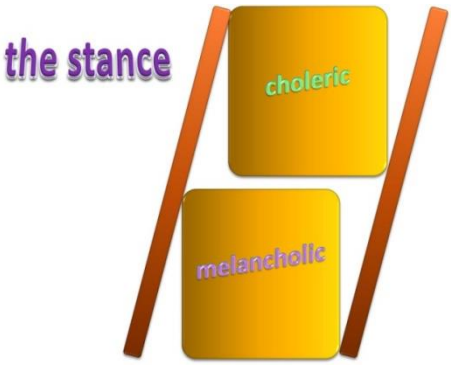
Being 'separated out' on the inside

The kind of family dynamics that we have been describing cause us to adopt a particular 'stance' as we grow up. The diagram to the right illustrates the effects on the child of the dominant temperaments in the parents when those parents are not in right roles. Not only has a gap been created between the temperaments but the extrovert has moved out of position and adopted a role as protector and substitute for the Melancholic.



this is where the damage is done

If we push the temperaments into an upright position we can see how the natural tendency of the Melancholic to be low on self-worth would be exacerbated by the Choleric's takeover. This makes it easier for the Melancholic to withdraw even further into the shadows and it is that withdrawing that does the damage. Where there should be connection and engagement there is a vacuum which attracts all the negatives of the Melancholic. Weaknesses thrive here, the Choleric works even harder to pull away – and so the process goes on.

Bringing healing

In Step One (Session 3) we discovered that, if we are really going to help someone we need to reach their introvert – and the best way to do that is by using your own introvert. The challenge that faces us is how to get past the Choleric and into the area of negatives that surrounds the Melancholic. For a full answer to this challenge refer to the six essentials for healthy relationships (Step One: Session 6). I will highlight three essentials here:

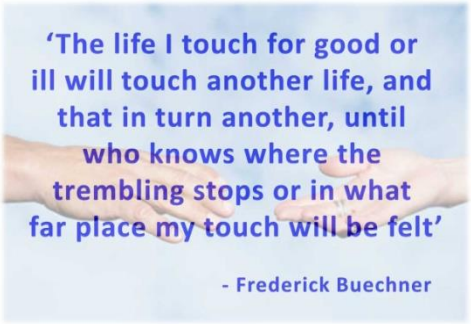
1. Create a safe environment that removes the external reasons for the Melancholic to withdraw. Build a bridge of trust.

the result

joined up on the inside

2. That safe environment should give you the freedom to be honest so that the unhelpful ways in which he is using his temperaments can be challenged – whether it is the misuse of the Choleric as a defence or substitute, or the specific weaknesses that you will have to work through in order to reach the Melancholic.

3. At the same time, encourage the strengths of both temperaments, or, to put it another way, help him to use who he is properly. There is no short-cut to this process and time will need to be spent talking through issues and practical situations with these objectives in mind. As you draw the Melancholic forward and the Choleric steps back he will begin to function as a whole person. Now he will be able to give more of himself away and bring life to other people.



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