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Does the Family Have a Future? Part 2

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Furthermore, most persons lived within an extended family unit comprised of various grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and others, who lived within close proximity, if not within the household itself. For most Americans, this is now far from the case.

The industrial revolution produced enormous social transformations that inevitably transformed the family structure. Just a century ago, most human beings were directly involved with the production of food through farming. Today, less than five percent of citizens in industrialized nations live on farms—and many of those farms have become units of vast agricultural conglomerates. The family farm is fast becoming a cultural artifact and museum piece.

An agrarian culture is based upon obligation and responsibility rather than rights and modern notions of individual fulfillment. The soil, seeds, and livestock will not care for themselves. The land represents both place and identity, with land passed down from generation to generation as a matter of stewardship and trust. Children raised in this culture know responsibility from earliest ages, with chores and tasks as well as the rich rewards of a hard-earned harvest. They know the identity that comes from the land as a stewardship, and they understand what it means for each member of the family to depend upon all others.

The vast majority of living Americans feel no ties to this culture. Most Americans live in metropolitan areas where the family unit has been reduced to no more than a father, mother, and children—and the divorce revolution has reduced this further. Industrialization took the father out of the home and into the factory. The family is no longer the primary unit of economic production. Further, the rise of professionalism among the elites in society resulted in individuals whose primary sense of identity is defined by professional role, rather than family.

Beyond this, families move from one metropolitan area to another, from suburb to suburb, with little sense of extended family and even less sense of identity associated with place. Corporations expect employees to move from position to position, and often from state to state on call.

With these developments have come still others. A mass communications culture with entertainment media now competes with parents for authority and influence, and parents are most often the losers. Consumerism drives the expectations of children and their parents. The rise of state education removed that function from the family, and may teach values directly at odds with those of the parents. Many children are actually raised by peers and the media, rather than by parents in any authentic sense.

In the name of personal liberation and financial necessity (fueled by a consumerist culture), mothers followed fathers

out of the household and into the marketplace and workforce. Thus many “latch-key” children raise themselves. Their parents (when they have two) arrive home late, tired, and more focused on their jobs than the family.

Thus, the major messages coming from the culture signal that the family is a negotiable unit made up of persons who happen to live together, but who receive their primary fulfillment in life outside the kinship unit. The individual with autonomous rights is supreme and the family, with its various obligations, is a temporary responsibility at best.

Is this compatible with a Christian worldview, based in Scripture and rooted in the church as the people of God? Obviously not. But what does the Christian worldview offer as a corrective?

First, we must recognize that the family is not merely a sociological development, nor a product of human evolutionary progress, but God’s design for human living—the most basic unit of human society. Healthy families are a sign of God’s pleasure, and the healthy family glorifies God by living within its blessings and responsibilities. This runs counter to the modern claim that the family is a purely secular invention, and that it is negotiable in accord with human whim or desire.

Second, the family unit is predicated upon the integrity of marriage. God created human beings as male and female, and established marriage as the bond of sexual relatedness. Sex was given to humans for both pleasure and procreation, and this gift is limited to be exercised within the sanctity of the covenant of heterosexual marriage. God hates divorce, and the breaking of the marital bond is a matter of grave consequence and inevitably the result of sin.

Third, children are to be greeted as gifts from God, and raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Parents are accountable for how their children are raised, for their education, for their spiritual training, their discipline, and their well being. Parents may not concede this authority to the state or the corporate sector. The family must resist the radical incursions of the secular state into their private domains. Children belong to the family, and not to the state. The rights of parents must be compromised only in cases of genuine extremity. The state increasingly seeks to act as parent and to claim children as its own stewardship, but the rights (and responsibilities) of parents are biblically granted, and paramount.

Fourth, Christian parents must resist the consumerist culture that claims the attention of children from earliest years. With the all-pervasive media and the entertainment revolution all around us, parents must recognize that we face stiff competition, not only for attention, but for the hearts and minds of our children.

Fifth, we must understand that our churches bear an important responsibility to support parents and hold them accountable for their marital fidelity and the raising of their children. The controversy over Hillary Clinton’s book, *It Takes a Village*, is instructive. Arguing for communitarian liberalism, the (then) First Lady argued that communities (including the government) should take on communal responsibility for the raising of children. Conservatives rightly protested her argument as a thinly-veiled proposal for a utopian substitution of the community for the family. They argued for the rights and responsibilities of parents, and for the family as fully autonomous.

The New Testament points us in a different direction, however. Without violating the rights or assuming the responsibilities of parents, the church must call parents to mutual accountability before God. Parental failure and the breakdown of marriage are issues of spiritual importance and matters of church discipline. The church must not accommodate itself to the divorce culture and encourage its members simply to “try harder next time.” The divorce rates among Christians are a scandal that has brought reproach upon the church.

Sixth, while receiving the gift of family with all its rights and responsibilities on earth, and enjoying the blessings of family life, we must recognize that the bonds of family life are not ultimate. One is not a Christian just because of birth in a Christian family or to Christian parents. At the same time, Jesus made clear that discipleship may require the breaking of familial bonds. In Christ, God has created a new people of every tongue and tribe and people and nation. For many persons raised in non-Christian homes, this means breaking with family in order to follow Christ. For many Christians, it means leaving the blessings of extended family in order to follow God’s calling to missions and service.

Last, we must nurture a new vision of the Christian family as a context where God glorifies himself in the right ordering of His people. The ultimate goal of our family life should not be merely to enjoy all the blessings and fulfill all the responsibilities of family relationships, but to glorify God through the integrity of our marriages, through the raising of our children, and through our love for God demonstrated in our love for each other.

That is a vision for the family the world cannot fully understand—but must respect. We must demonstrate that there is something distinctively Christian about the Christian family—and we must show that difference in our own families. Recovery starts at home.

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