

Table of Contents

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STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

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Subject	Page
Program Orientation:	
"Strengthening Families: Time for a Fresh Beginning"	7
Harry N. Hollis, Jr. Director of Family and Special Moral Concerns, Christian Life Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, Tennessee	
"What Is a Family?"	7
David R. Mace, Director of Marriage Enrichment Training, Division of Human Enrichment and Development, Department of Pastoral Care, North Carolina Baptist Hospital, Winston-Salem, North Carolina	
"Presentation of Distinguished Service Award to President Jimmy Carter"	9
Foy Valentine, Executive Director, Christian Life Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, Tennessee	
"Response"	10
President Jimmy Carter	
"Presentation of Distinguished Service Award to Rosalynn Carter"	11
Foy Valentine	
"Response"	11
Rosalynn Carter	

"The Family and Aging" The Honorable Claude Pepper, Member United States House of Representatives and Chairman, House Select Committee on Aging, Miami, Florida	12
"Family Values for Surviving the 80s" Charles Petty, Executive Director of the Governor's Office of Citizen Affairs, Raleigh, North Carolina	16
"Marriage: The Core of the Family" David R. Mace	24
"Strengthening the Pastoral Family" Wayne Oates, Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, University of Louisville School of Medicine, Louisville, Kentucky	26
"God's Plan for Sex" David R. Mace	30
"Families and Television" Robert Keeshan, Television Personality "Captain Kangaroo," New York, New York	32
"Strengthening Families Through the Church" Neal T. Jones, Pastor, Columbia Baptist Church, Falls Church, Virginia	36
"Strengthening Families Through the Church" H. Dale Keeton, Minister of Counseling, Columbia Baptist Church, Falls Church, Virginia	39
"Strengthening Families: A National Priority" The Honorable Walter Mondale, Former Vice President of the United States, Washington, D.C.	42
"Marriage as Companionship" David R. Mace	45
"The Challenge of Being Single" David Edens, Director of Family and Community Studies, Stephens College, Columbia, Missouri	47
"The Modern Crisis in Marriage" David R. Mace	52
"Strengthening Families in the Nation" Jimmy Allen, President, Southern Baptist Radio and Television Com- mission, Fort Worth, Texas	54

would like to focus attention on the reproducing family. Let's go back to the Bible. I am convinced that the Bible is the right place to begin. If the developing church in the early centuries had only paid more attention to what the Bible teaches and had been less influenced by Oriental and Hellenistic philosophies, the tragic downgrading of Christian marriage and family life in favor of asceticism, celibacy, and monasticism might have been avoided.

The Old Testament presents us with a very healthy and positive concept of the family. It was all based on a deep conviction that God the Creator made us in his own image; that he chose to make us of two kinds, man and woman; that he then delegated his function as Creator to be continued by the coming together of man and woman in the sexual act, which led to the production of new beings also bearing the Divine Image; that this fact so sanctified sex that it must never be considered unspiritual or unclean; that parents are under a solemn obligation to give their children protection and security, to provide for them during their years of coming to maturity; that in fulfilling these functions parents are to model themselves on the love and care of God the Heavenly Father; and that this is the highest priority in their whole lives. Therefore all Hebrew boys and girls were expected to marry, usually in their teens, and, if at all possible, to have children. A young man could even be excused a year of military service when he married, to enable him to establish a home and if possible to start a family.

Of course there were some elements in the Old Testament view of family life that are a little hard for us to understand--occasional polygamy, for instance, and the strange custom of the levirate marriage. But they all made sense in terms of what the Hebrews knew and understood at that time. In every day and age, unusual social and cultural factors have led inevitably to minor variations in our family practices. But what I want to say here at the outset is that the basic Bible teaching about family life is clear, consistent, and leaves us in no reasonable doubt about the original purpose of God. If we depart from that original purpose, we do so at our peril.

In my later talks, I will try to grapple with some of the complications with which we are having to cope in this particular period of human history as a result of all the extensive and bewildering cultural changes that are taking place. But I wanted to lay down, simply and clearly, at the outset, what is the basic meaning of the word "family" as I understand it, and how that word must for Christians be interpreted in the light of what the Bible teaches about the divine purpose.

Let me try to sum it up.

The primary function of the family is parenthood. The Bible portrays parenthood as pro-creation, which means creation for and on behalf of another--and that other is God himself. As men and women, we are made in God's image. As parents we act in God's stead. He has entrusted to us the continuing work of creation, power to make new beings in the divine image. In other words, becoming and being a parent is the most God-like activity of which men and women are capable.

But the Bible, in the New Testament, unfolds an even deeper mystery. As Creator,

God becomes the parent of mankind. As Redeemer, God in Christ born of a woman becomes the child of mankind. So the mystery was unfolded, and the eternal purpose was fulfilled. God became the child of man in order that man might recognize himself as the child of God.

All is not well with families in our world today. All is not well with Christian families. But there are some beautiful Christian families, and we need to affirm them.

It was Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet and mystic, who once said, "Every little child who comes into the world brings with it the message that God has not yet despaired of man." And every Christian parent who accepts the awesome ministry of raising children as the first and foremost claim in his or her life vindicates and renews God's faith in humanity.

This, I believe, is what the Christian family is all about.

Presentation of Distinguished Service Award to President Jimmy Carter

by Foy Valentine

In 1981 in the last annual meeting of the Christian Life Commission, we discussed at some length our agency's presentation of its next Distinguished Service Awards for outstanding contributions in applied Christianity. There are seven of our Christian Life Commission board members elected by the Southern Baptist Convention present here this afternoon, including Patsy Ayres, our vice-chairperson, and David King, our chairman, who is on the platform. It was the unanimous feeling of our board members last year that we would be honored and pleased to present to President Jimmy Carter and, separately, to Mrs. Rosalynn Carter our Distinguished Service Awards if they were willing to accept them from us. When I was able to meet with the Carters and ask them if they would be willing to let us honor them in this way, they willingly accepted our invitation to come for this afternoon and they are here.

President Carter, would you stand first, please. This is an award from the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, presented to Jimmy Carter for Leadership in Christian Social Ethics, in recognition of unique and outstanding contributions in applied Christianity

As, "Committed Christian for whom Jesus Christ is Lord in all of life."

As, "Faithful Baptist churchman." (We remember, President Carter, that you are an ordained deacon and that you have taught Sunday School. It is even rumored that you have gone to Church Training.)

As, "Loyal son (and we think of Miss Lillian and of your daddy), husband, father, and grandfather (and we should have said, good brother) whose strong personal family commitment has strengthened families throughout society."

As, "Courageous champion of human rights." (I was in a meeting sponsored by the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs a couple of weeks ago in Washington where Robert Drinan spoke. He had just been in South America where he mentioned your courageous work in human rights and spoke of how when your name was mentioned, he received a long and standing ovation at the mention of your name.)

As, "Patient proponent of peace with justice." (We remember Camp David and your work with Mr. Sadat and your work with Mr. Begin and all of the work you did as a public figure, and are no doubt continuing to do today for peace with justice.)

And we have said, "Compassionate commoner." (My wife, Mary Louise, did not want me to say that about you; but I remembered that our daughter, Carol Berg, who is here, called from Auburn University where she was a student at the time, crying, on the day of your inauguration to say, "They're walking! They're walking down Pennsylvania Avenue." We remember that William Pitt, the Elder was called the Great Commoner, and we use that word here in appreciation of who you are, who you have been, and who, we believe, you intend to continue to be.)

We have said on this plaque as, "Disciplined exemplar of character, courage, honesty, honor, work, wisdom, humility, and integrity." (We started that list with character and ended it with integrity; and we think that is the way it ought to be.)

We have said as, "Principled proponent of separation of church and state."

We give this to you as, "Model of a moral Presidency."

We give it to you as, "World leader of grace and vision."

And the Christian Life Commission gives this award to you as, "Statesman of high principles on whom history is destined to smile."

On March 22, 1982.
God bless you.

Response:

by President Jimmy Carter

Those words are somewhat embarrassing to me because Foy doesn't know me nearly so well as my wife does, and I'm thankful for that. I was waiting to see if David Mace was going to leave before my speech. I'm certainly glad that I got here in time to hear him, and I'm deeply regretful that I missed his speech

in Baltimore. It's not often that a President gets a letter from a saint! Even on Inauguration Day, I got a lot of advice and I have to say to you in complete candor that I got a lot of better advice from other people than I did from David Mace in trying to have a President's Conference on Families. There were many times when I wanted to give him that conference back.

But I think it did open for the American people's consideration perhaps an accurate picture of the turmoil that sweeps around the families today. A family can no longer be a quiet, secluded, isolated, encapsulated group of loving people who are not challenged by the direct threat of the outside world. Both my family and Rosalynn's family have been in Plains for a long time. Those who were born in the 1700s are buried right there in Plains. And we had a chance to grow up in that kind of isolated, secluded, and protected family life where Christ was an integral part of it. But even at a very early age, I was shocked by some of the revolutionary statements that Christ himself made about the family. When I was only five years old, or so, I remember hearing that one day Jesus was teaching and someone came in and said, "Master, your mother and your brother stand outside." And Jesus said, "Who is my mother and my brother?" And didn't go out, so far as I know, to see his own Mama. And he looked at his disciples and said, "These are my brothers and my mother, and those who do the will of my Father in heaven are my mother, my brothers, and my sisters." That disturbed me deeply, even then, and I wasn't assuaged too much when later on I learned that Jesus told a would-be disciple, "You can't even go home and bury your own father who has died. Follow me now." So the revolutionary teachings of Christ have always shown us Christians some truths about the family.

What Christ was trying to say, I believe, was that there should not be any encapsulating by us of the degrees of love. We shouldn't say, "I love my mother on one level, my father on the next, my wife, my children, my brothers, my sisters and then further down, the members of my church and then much further down the people who don't come to my church and then Georgians and then other Americans--maybe even foreigners." Christ was trying to teach us in his statements about the family that our love should be broad. And, when he referred to God as Father, that again was reassuring to me, and later in my life I began to see that Jesus was trying in that way to define the family as broadly as possible, with all people on earth having the same Father. Christ himself said we are brothers and sisters with him. And then when the Bible says to leave your mother and father and cleave to your wife, that disturbed me, too, in a way, because I thought there was a limit on my heart's capacity.

When we had to move from Washington, the saddest part about it was tearing Amy away from her friends. And when she got down to Plains and started going to school in the tri-county school, she for months deliberately refused to form any friendships with her new classmates because she felt that in doing so she would be abandoning her cherished friends in Washington.

Well, Christ teaches us that love breeds love. And the definition of a family in Jesus' words should create excitement in us

and teach us that we must expand our minds and expand our hearts and not define who is worthy of our love. And it's no sacrifice when you love two people instead of just one or two hundred instead of two, or two thousand or four billion people.

Homes are important to us. Just early this morning when I was making some notes for this talk, I read about a memorial service that was held for Abraham Lincoln just a few years after he died. The orator who gave the memorial speech pointed out that in one of the crucial battles of the War Between the States, as the troops were lined up at night waiting for the battle the next day, the bands had a contest, and the Union band first played "Rally Round the Flag, Boys," and then there was a moment of silence and the Confederate band played "The Bonny Blue Flag," and then the Union band came back with "Hail Columbia," and the Rebel band played "Maryland, My Maryland," and then the Yankees played "The Star Spangled Banner," and the Confederates came back with "Dixie." And then the Union band started playing "Home Sweet Home," and in a few minutes they realized that the Confederate band was playing along with them. In war and in peace, the home and the love it exemplifies stay with us.

Jesus was saying, "Take the family and expand it as you expand your life. Let it reach broadly, limited only by your own selfishness, your own callousness or unconcern about others, your own pride." But we know that with Christ, when we are one, perhaps in those rare moments, there's no place for selfishness or pride or callousness or hatred or misunderstanding. It's only when we push Christ out of our lives, temporarily we say, that we can constrict our hearts. And Jesus taught that God is love, the first memory verse we ever learned, perhaps. And he tried to use the family and the love that we feel for our mothers and that we feel for our fathers to show us the depths of God's love for us.

So, the family life plays an integral role in the growth of a Christian's consciousness--theological considerations as you get older and older--but the depth and the breadth of the meaning of the word "family" is literally unbounded.

During the four years I spent in the White House, I didn't forget about Christ, and I was constrained to be constantly concerned about peace and to be constantly concerned about the control of nuclear weapons and to be constantly concerned about human rights, justice, freedom--not just here, but throughout the world. And I was constrained to worry about the beauty of the earth and the environment within which we grow and can be nourished and fulfilled.

So, to me as a commoner who became President, with your help, sustained by your prayers, I'm grateful--to you, to my mama and daddy, to my wife, my children and my grandchildren, to the concept of my personal family. And I pray for an ever-expanding definition of my family among other human beings around the world--where the borders don't stop at the shores of Africa or the international boundary surrounding Nicaragua or even the Soviet Union, but where Christians reach out with the hand of love and understanding that we learned at our mothers' breast.

Presentation of Distinguished Service Award to Rosalynn Carter

by Foy Valentine

On behalf of the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, we present to you, Rosalynn Carter, our Distinguished Service Award for Leadership in Christian Social Ethics, in recognition of unique and outstanding contributions in applied Christianity that you have made

As, "Committed Christian for whom Jesus Christ is Lord in all of life."

As, "Consistent practitioner and effective advocate of strong family life."

As, "Conscientious champion of responsible freedom for women." (It seems to us immensely important that you have taken the leadership in the country over a long period in working on behalf of responsible freedom for women; and we honor you for it.)

As, "Compassionate heroine of hope for the mentally ill (We remember what you did when you first came to the Governor's Mansion in Georgia, and we remember what you did in this area in the White House), the aging, the hungry, the poor, and the needy."

We give this award to you as, "Authentic proponent of a finely principled life style."

We give it to you as a, "Faithful friend and perceptive marital partner in pursuit of enduring values and ideals," with your husband.

We give it to you as "Model First Lady."

Most particularly we make this award to you from the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention as, "Excellent example of the beautiful spirit of Christian womanhood at its best."

On March 22, 1982.

Response:

by Rosalynn Carter

Thank you, Foy, for those beautiful words. I'm overwhelmed. And I thank the Christian Life Commission for the Award. I hope that I can live up to the words that you have read on that Award. It's a great challenge. I'm really glad that I can be here with you today in person because the last time I was invited to speak to the Christian Life Commission--or the last time I spoke--was the day that the peace treaty was signed between Egypt and Israel and I had to address you by telephone. Today I'm glad I could be here with you and I again, as Jimmy said, am a little bit embarrassed by all of your kind words.

I commend you for studying and for search-

ing ways to strengthen the family today. I have a quotation that I want to read to you. It's a quote from the thirty-ninth President of the United States, whom you've already heard, but I thought I was safe in putting it in my remarks because I don't think he quotes himself--and it was so appropriate for your meeting today. He says:

The entire history of the human race teaches us that the family unit is the best way for men and women to live their lives, the best way to raise children, and the only solid foundation upon which to build a strong nation. Whenever we strengthen our families, we strengthen our country.

I grew up the best way. I grew up in a Christian home, as Jimmy did, and we have tried to give our children the sense of stability and belonging that comes from a close family and that comes from loving Jesus. We've had our problems. We've had our frustrations, as all families have, but the wonderful thing about being Christians is that Jesus is always there. We know that he's always there to love us and to help us and to guide us if we let him. And that's the secret: if we let him. Jesus has guided our family through a lot of experiences. He's been in the valleys with us, and he's been on the mountaintops with us. And one of the most important things that we have learned is how much it means for Christians to support and care for one another and how important are prayers--within our own families and within God's family, Christian brothers and sisters. Our family has had some heartwarming and unexpected experiences from Christian brothers and sisters in the world who know that we love the Lord. And I thought today that you might like to know some of those experiences.

I was invited to Ecuador and went on an official visit for my country. When I arrived there, one of the assistants to the Ambassador told me that everybody in the country knew that I was going to be there. He said that many of them were illiterate, but they all have transistor radios. It doesn't matter how far they live back in the country, they know what's going on. And the day before, an American tourist had come to the Embassy, and he said that he came with a message for me. He wanted them to tell me that he had been driving through the countryside and he stopped at a little fruit stand and got out and was standing there and a shepherd came up to him. He said, "You're an American and I know you're going to see Mrs. Carter when she's here and I want you to tell her something for me. Tell her that all of the shepherds in Ecuador are praying for her and her husband."

And another time we went to Belgium. We went to the Palace and met the King and we sat down at one of the most beautiful banquet tables I have ever seen. I was seated by the King and he turned to me and the first thing he said was, "Mrs. Carter, I know you love Jesus and I love Jesus, too, and I go to church every day and I ask God every day to guide me, to do what is right for my country, and to do what I can to further the kingdom of God on this earth." And he said, "And every day I pray for you and your husband in your responsibilities." From shepherds to kings--we're all one in the sight of God and

we who love the Lord have great responsibilities as individuals no matter where we are and no matter who we are, to trust him and to love him and to pray for one another, to strengthen each other, to strengthen our families and always to let others see Jesus in us, because we never know the extent of our influence.

Thank you very much.

The Family and Aging

by The Honorable Claude Pepper

Dr. Valentine, President King, Mr. Petty, wonderful members of this great conference. Dr. Valentine, I'm profoundly grateful for those very generous and kind words of introduction and especially grateful for the privilege and the opportunity of being here with you. Before I say more, I think most of you share the sentiment when I say that America and people of goodwill everywhere will long be grateful for the exemplary personal lives and the dedicated public service of President and Mrs. Jimmy Carter.

I heard a story the other day about a couple who were down in Miami to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. They ranged around among the places that we think are beautiful and had a great time celebrating their second honeymoon. Several times every day the devoted husband told the beloved wife how much he loved her, how wonderful she was, how fortunate he was to have been her husband for half a century. Apparently came the last day of their visit there. They had lunch in a restaurant overlooking our beautiful Biscayne Bay toward our lovely beach. As the husband first looked across the table into the face of his dear wife and then his eyes fell upon the beautiful scene out of the window, sentiments of romance came again to his heart, and he thought one more time he'd tell his wife how much he loved her. So looking very earnestly into her face across the table, he said, "I'm proud of you." She had grown a little hard of hearing and evidently missed the word that he used. She looked right back at him and said, "I'm tired of you, too."

Well, my mother always told me to run with the best people, and I don't know of any better people than the Baptists. Some of the first memories I have are of my dear mother playing one of these old organs that you pump with your feet in a Sunday School in a rural community where my father was superintendent of the Sunday School. They were a little bit shocked a while later when I was approached by my cousin who was the teacher of my boys class to join the church during the revival. I declined to join and my cousin came back again. He said, "Claude, I don't understand why you're not joining with the other boys. You've got a good mother and father; you've been a good boy. Why don't you join with us?" "Well," I said, "Cousin Will, if you just want me to tell the truth, I'll tell you this: I'm not going to join the church until I whip Tom Cotton." I didn't want to dedicate myself to a life of peace until I'd gotten even with a fellow that had whipped me the last time we had a fight!