

The Family in Crisis

Whatever happened to the family? In our time, there seems to be a worldwide concern about its status. Twenty centuries ago, the indissoluble marriage and the Christian family were novelties. Under great duress and opposition, they were slowly making inroads into a morally corrupt, pagan society. Today, history seems to reverse itself as Western nations are abandoning their Christian heritage under the banner of tolerance, pluralism, open-mindedness, and the humanistic spirit. Ever since the early 1970s, the traditional family has continued its downward spiral. Carlson, of the Howard Center for the family said, "We are moving toward a post-family society." Sadly, his assessment rings true. Hardly any observer of Western society is not painfully aware of the great strain family life faces. We see its disintegration with all its dire consequences. We fear its loss. Without a family, we have no way of identifying ourselves. Through the family we get to know who we are, how we got that way, and what we are expected to become. We are born into a family. Children are dependent on their biological family for nurturing, protection, and instruction.

Loss of Religious and Social Meaning

As an institution, the modern family has lost much of its religious and social meaning. Furthermore, marriage has lost its support even among the religious faithful. In some Christian denominations, pastors avoid preaching and teaching about marriage, and the family, for fear of offending their parishioners. Marriage is also quietly losing its place in language. With the growing plurality of intimate relationships, people tend to speak more about "lover" or "partner" than about husbands and wives. Moreover, some of the so-called elite dispute the need for a heterosexual marriage-based family. And the definition of a family has become even controversial. Anne Roiphe argues in her book, *Married: A Fine Predicament*, that we cannot say that conventional marriage is necessary for the stability or the success of the individual child. "Marriage needs another defense if it's to remain a part of our lives." She claims that marriage is not the only way to be respectable these days, and social power is possessed by those who defy the rules. She points to rock stars, rap stars, and movie stars, who mock traditional morality without any serious consequences for their careers. Strenuous efforts are also made to abolish as many practical differences between marriage and other sexual relationships. The ultimate goal is to open up marriage to all sexual partners who have been excluded. Some definitions of the family are bizarre. Angela Shapiro of the American ABC Family cable network, explains, "The word family has taken on a wonderful and extended meaning... and can include people like coworkers or roommates."

Divorce

One obvious consequence of the breakdown of the modern family is the high frequency of divorce. It is no longer seen as something abnormal. It has become socially accepted. But a society that begins to believe in divorce as socially acceptable is

beginning to disbelieve in marriage. Many children are now growing up in a culture of divorce. They witness marital failure, breakdowns in their own families, and in the families of friends, neighbours, and relatives. There are no painless divorces. Divorce is always a profession of failure and disillusionment.

Man: The Measure of All Things

What lies at the heart of the breakdown of the family is not only unbridled individualism, and the cult of self-fulfillment to be achieved at all cost, it is the spiritual breakdown and moral bankruptcy of Western society. The great majority of its decision makers live, talk, and act as if God does not exist. Men and women are the ultimate measure and standards of all things," we are told reassuringly by the secular humanists. They kneel before themselves and their own reason. They say, "We cannot know, hence we cannot trust in, anything that is beyond what we can think. No one can tell us how we should live." What happens when people do "their own thing?" Many develop a lifestyle which follows one commandment, "Be good to yourself." There is plenty of evidence that this flight from morality, as expressed in extending the boundaries of sexual permissiveness, is gathering momentum at an alarming rate, with only the unforeseen occurrence of the dreaded AIDS to bring any kind of caution. All forms of sex drives are approved. The unmarried as well as the married, homosexual as well as heterosexual persons are encouraged to find their own satisfying experiences. They claim there is no unnatural sexual behaviour. Everybody should fulfill his/her own inclinations, desires, and nature, as long as we do not hurt other people. In secularized public schools even young children cannot escape the pressure of postmodern relativism. Under the guise of Moral Values Education (MVE) they are taught that they have to create their own values. General moral beliefs are condemnable as "imposition" on others, and in general, personal freedom matters in most all things. Consequently, God's standards for morality as revealed in the Bible are challenged as irrelevant. The relativists construe their own definition of a family. But the question still is: How should we live? Are there any absolute standards for morality? The obvious answer for the Christian is: We should live in harmony with the teaching of the Scripture. God has set absolute standards for behaviour which have not changed. We are called not to be conformed to the patterns of the world but to be – reformed by the renewal of our mind so that we will be able to discern God's will for our lives (Rom.12:1-2).

The Creation Order

According to the Bible, a marriage-based family is not a human invention. God as Creator and Father precedes all families, tribes and nations of the earth. The Creator has a blueprint in mind for the family. In God's eyes, the family is the cradle of civilization and fosters the development of society. The apostle Paul affirms, "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom His whole family in heaven and earth derives its name." The family tie – from the dawn of history – was an act of God. He instituted it in the Garden of Eden when He gave Eve to Adam and blessed them. There is no other human relationship that is the equivalent to marriage. The family is based on monogamous marriage, which through natural procreation is to ensure the

continuation of the human race. Marriage is more than an intense emotional feeling and experience of erotic love. God created male and female for each other. In other words, in marriage there is a distinct difference between the two sexes. Without it there can not be a marriage. The creation account clearly states, "A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen.2:24). Marriage then is a union of one man and one woman who promise to remain faithful to each other for their whole life (Rom. 7:1-4; I Cor. 7:39).

The Bible commands that we maintain the sanctity of marriage. "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Heb. 13:4). In reference to this text, the 17th century English Puritan, John Owen, defined marriage as a "lawful conjunction of one man and of one woman, by their just and full consent, into an indissoluble union (whereby they become one flesh), for the procreation of children, and mutual assistance, divine and human." Owen notes that the legitimate and orderly continuation of the human race, and whatever is praiseworthy and useful in all societies – economical, ecclesiastical, or political, depends on stable marriages.

A powerful example of the importance of marriage and family is demonstrated in the life and teaching of Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew begins with the account of Jesus' birth and a genealogy of His family. Jesus' first miracle was performed at a wedding, where He turned water into wine. He celebrated with the newlyweds. He placed an extraordinary emphasis on the institution of the family. He often dealt with its nature and obligations. For example, when the Pharisees questioned Jesus about His view on divorce, He expounded, with candour and thoroughness, God's blueprint for marriage. He appealed to Genesis 2 as God's intention for marriage before it became marred by sin (Matt. 19:3-9). In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus used the family setting to illustrate the Gospel of grace and forgiveness. His last thought on the cross was for His mother to have a home. The Biblical message is beyond dispute. The integrity of the family, as the core institution of social and national life must be reverently guarded and stringently secured. In other words, so-called trial marriages, common law marriages, and same sex-unions are simply ungodly. They violate the creation order.

The Covenant

The sins of our modern secular culture have also impacted the church and the family. They too are exposed to its "values" via television, internet, etc. Christians claim to believe what God says in His Word, but the gap between the Biblical view and our view of the family is growing. Closely tied to the disintegration of the Christian view of marriage is the decline of the covenant concept. Even in Christian circles, individualism is taking its toll. The emphasis is now placed on the individual and his/her faith and conversion. The true covenant character of the family is gradually being ignored. But a family is more than a group of individuals living under the same roof. According to Scripture, the family consists of father, mother, and children, who are mutually responsible for one another. We share mutual responsibility for our children within the Covenant of Grace. Both in the Old and New Testament, we are admonished numerous

of times "to care for one another." Where does the caring begin? It begins within the family, including the extended family. In Deut. 4:9, God even mentions the educational responsibilities of grandparents. It says – "make them – the things you have seen – known to your children and children's children." A Biblical marriage then is a covenantal relationship, which is most holy and precious in the sight of God. That's why a Christian may not marry a non-Christian. This is directly against the will of God, a transgression of His command: "Do not be yoked with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14). The family relationship, therefore, is not only a physical but also a spiritual entity. That's why children of Christian parents are called "an heritage of the Lord" (Ps. 127:3). Calvin comments that "every family of the pious ought to be a church." John Cotton, the 17th century New England Puritan, saw the church composed of families rather than individuals. He said, "The faith of the parents doth bring the Children and household of a Christian, even now in the days of the New Testament, under a covenant of salvation, as well as the faith of Abraham brought his household under the same covenant."

In a family setting, we eat, live, and suffer together. We are joyful together and grieve together. We also pray, give thanks, sing, and praise together. When the family is understood as a covenantal relationship, parents understand that their children have been entrusted to them by the Lord, and must be trained "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." God's covenant and His Word are their guides. They take seriously the promises they made when their children were baptized. Repeatedly, the Bible urges parents to instruct their children in the faith (cf. Ps.78).

Love

What is the norm for marriage? It is not sexual desire, nor even procreation. It is love. "True marriage is not possible without love," writes W.G. De Vries in *Marriage in Honour*. "The foundation of every marriage is that husband and wife, joined together in true love, assist each other faithfully in all things belonging to the temporal and eternal life." The Puritan Wadsworth advised no one to marry any person for any reason "unless they can have real cordial love to them; for God strictly commands mutual love in this relation." Consequently, even if a marriage remains childless, it is still a valid marriage. In our time when so many revisionists seek to impose a variety of family styles, this should be kept in mind. A marriage is still a union of husband and wife even though there may not be any children for one reason or another.

Dr. Stanford Reid rightly points out that a family is more than marriage since it includes within its membership, children who are bound to the parents not only by blood but also by love. This love is not a sentimental or a mere erotic feeling for another person. It will not use people's egocentric and self-serving ends. It flows from God's love. God's love for us is the norm for and origin of all genuine love (cf. John 3:16). In marriage, we submit in joyful obedience to the will of our Heavenly Father. When we love the Lord, we obey His commands. Jesus said, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love" (John 15:10). And "this is my command: Love each other" (John 15:17). Within the context of the family, it is this self-giving-sacrificial love which parents have for each other in a marriage which is pleasing unto the Lord.

Conclusion

The welfare of society and the nation depends on the health and well-being of the family. Is there still hope for the family? There is, of course. With God, all things are possible. But we must do our part by making sure that the family is given a proper foundation, not on the shifting sands of economic, social or therapeutic needs, but on its relationship to our covenantal God and His Word. The psalmist said, "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain" (Ps. 127:1).

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