

## The Disappearance of Fatherhood

Shortly before her death, American comedian and television star Lucille Ball was asked by Merv Griffin, "Lucille, you've lived a long time on this earth and you are a wise person. What's happened to our country? What's wrong with our children? Why are our families falling apart? What's missing?" Lucy quickly replied, "Papa's missing. Things are falling apart because Papa's gone. If Papa were here, he would fix it."

Lucy was right. There are too many disappearing fathers! In his courageous and forthright book, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*, David Blankenhorn argues that no social trend is more dangerous than the declining role of fatherhood. A growing number of children have no relationship with their fathers. In a 1991 American survey, the National Commission on Children described the father-child relationship as "frequently tenuous and all too often nonexistent." The social role of fatherhood for men has been steadily diminishing. And this should be a matter of grave concern not only for Americans but also for Canadians. As Daniel Amneus noted:

Fatherless families... generate far more delinquency and personality disorders than do normal or motherless families. The ratio of delinquent children living with the mother only compared to those living with the father only is about three to one.

Many negative forces are at work putting down the father's role in the family. During the last hundred years, traditional family values have been attacked in literature and the arts through a radical cultural revolution. Many writers have lampooned and even ridiculed the authority of fathers, not realizing that they were helping to undermine their own world. The prevailing cultural elite view is that fatherhood as a distinctive role in the family is either unnecessary or undesirable. During the last four decades, radical feminism has had a destructive impact.

### Radical feminism

The feminist movement is a highly visible force in the U.S.A. and Canada, nurtured by a small group of female professors in Women's Studies at colleges and universities. These faculty members are often chosen on account of their commitment to various forms of feminist activity, rather than on the strength of their academic credentials. Feminist Jill Vickers, Associate Vice-President (Academic) and Professor of Canadian Studies and Political Science at Carleton University, observes that radical feminism - with its commitment to the absolute sovereignty of the individual - is an important if little understood influence in Canada.

This influence has so dominated the reading lists of Women Studies courses in Canadian universities that a whole generation of young women has become indoctrinated with an anti-male bias. In his book *Lost Daughters: Recovered Memory Therapy and the People It Hurts*, Reinder Van Til directs our attention to the fact that

contemporary radical feminist literature accuses all men of being rapists or, at the very least, potential rapists.

Feminist scholar Jean F. O'Barr, associate professor in the Department of Political Science, Duke University, writes:

It is one of the better-kept secrets that research and scholarship are driven not by abstract, disconnected, isolated thought, but by the very real questions we debate in our daily lives and that we introduce in classrooms and debate with our students.

These debates are always so politically correct. One professor said that her course outline included the following statement: "Any point of view will be welcomed in discussion except those that contend that one race, sex, or sexual orientation is superior to another." Another professor in a Women's Studies program told her students, "Personally, I can't imagine why any woman would want to have a relationship with a man, but since some do, we have to try to respect them." It is evident that this doctrinaire feminism blocks the student's ability to evaluate fairly and reasonably the role of fathers in society.

### **Anti-family**

It is no wonder that our society has become anti-family. A new definition of the family is emerging out of court cases dealing with the availability of certain financial benefits to same-sex couples. Canadian feminist Justice L'Heureux opined that the word family may have different meanings. She said that the "traditional family is not the only family form and non-traditional family forms may equally advance true family values."

Her philosophy was adopted in 1997 by the NDP government of British Columbia. It insisted that certain books which advocate the normality of "samesex marriage" or "homosexual or lesbian sexual conduct" be allowed in public school libraries. It also amended the definition of spouse in the province's Family Relations Act to include "samesex" couples.

### **Child abuse**

The family structure is also undermined by the feminists' view of child abuse. They believe that it has reached epidemic proportions. They claim that sexual abuse is restricted to male dominance, a result of the structural social inequality between women and men.

Child abuse is an abomination and a manifestation of the darkness and sinfulness of the human heart. But feminist ideologues use child abuse as a lever to promote their own anti-family agenda. They have created the myth that the child is innocent and must always be believed. They have also defined child abuse so

broadly that it can mean almost anything. According to some of them, it includes spanking a child and even hugging and kissing by family members.

Yet these same feminists are anti-child. Australian feminist Germaine Greer, a high-profile figure in the women's movement, observes in her book *Sex and Destiny: The Politics of Human Fertility*, that the Western lifestyle is anti-child. She claims that women in the West do not refrain from childbirth because they are concerned about the population explosion or because they feel that they cannot afford children, but because they do not like children.

### **The media**

We also must not underestimate the powerful negative influence of tabloid television. Some talk shows thrive on the woes of dysfunctional families, the more sensational the better. Many people seem to want to hang their dirty laundry out in public as long as they can get themselves in the limelight. As Reinder Van Til describes it:

Every day brings a new parade of exhibitionists and a live audience to applaud their confessions and accusations, their pregnancies, their affairs, petty larcenies, sexual kinks, conspiracy theories, and blood feuds. The line waiting for the fifteen minutes of fame stretches around the corner.

### **Loss of purpose**

All these modern negative influences of our post-Christian pop culture have left many men uncertain about their role as husband and father. They question their sense of identity and lack a real sense of purpose in life. They no longer seem to know who they really are. This confusion about identity has put men under a great deal of psychological stress.

### **A description of fatherhood**

What is fatherhood? It is more than fathering a child. From the Biblical perspective, fatherhood is always seen within the context of marriage. At the very beginning, at the creation of the world, God instituted marriage as an exclusive life-long bonding of husband and wife. In the New Testament, marriage is proclaimed as a reflection of the relationship Christ has with His church. That's why the Scriptures call for marriage to be "held in honour among all" (Hebrews 13:4). Marriage is a vital institution which needs protection by the government and a strong defence by the church.

The antidote to disappearing fathers is a commitment to leadership within the family, the promotion of faithfulness within marriage and a responsible fatherhood. A father is more than a breadwinner. He has a vital role in family life. He is the head of the home and has been given the authority to guide the family in the way it should go. Children benefit from a father who knows his place given to him by God. As W. G. de Vries put it in his book *Marriage in Honour*,

According to the Bible the husband, as head of the family, must love his family in the same way that Christ loves the Church. This love demands authority, in the same way that Christ is Lord of His congregation - not as a tyrant, but as the One Who is in charge and in this way can keep the peace.

Fathers must be full-time Christians and give godly leadership, enforce truth in love, and be consistent in disciplining their children.

Our society needs fathers who take responsibility for their families. Responsible fatherhood is not possible without sacrifice and commitment. A father is the protector of his children as well as their model, helper, and corrector. This notion of responsibility is crucial to fatherhood. I think of my own father, who exemplified courage and fortitude during the war years, and was our model of integrity and godly leadership. He died in 1981, but his presence is still sorely missed by his children.

A father is not only the leader of the family but also its teacher. The teaching role of the father is particularly stressed in the Old Testament. For example, Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one" is one of the foundational teachings of the Old Testament Scriptures. Jewish boys were taught this passage by their fathers as soon as they could speak. During the Passover celebrations in the home, the son asked his father, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The father responded by giving an historical synopsis of God's miraculous dealings with Israel that led to the deliverance from Egyptian slavery. Christian fathers also make a commitment to teach their children - to give them godly direction - when their children are baptized. They are asked, "Do you sincerely promise to do all you can to teach these children, and to have them taught, this doctrine of salvation?"

Children are God's precious gifts. They are entrusted to the care of parents. Fathers should not be a stumbling block for their children. They should not leave it up to others to give their children direction. Modern life is hectic and today's work climate can be quite demanding. But material things can never replace a father's presence. Don't be an absent father. Give your children love, attention and time.

Dr. James Dobson once recalled a letter written by his father that was to change his life. He said that his father first congratulated him on his successful career, but then warned that all the success in the world would not compensate if his son failed at home. The spiritual welfare of his children was his most important responsibility and the only way to build their faith was to model it personally and then to stay on his knees in prayer. This cannot be done if a father puts all of his energy into his profession. Dr. Dobson remarked that he had never forgotten that profound advice.

The Lord calls men to faithfulness to Him and to their families. Fathers are needed who are committed to the Lord, who follow His way and aim to show the way to their family. Their commitment to the Lord will give them both identity and purpose. God calls fathers to take a godly leadership role in both family and church. It is a leadership expressed in servanthood.

## The fatherhood of God

What do we say to children whose fathers have miserably failed them? Some claim, "I can't have any respect for my father. He was abusive and I couldn't do anything right in his eyes. He always put me down." Others may feel that their fathers were too permissive and didn't discipline when it was needed.

Since we live in a fallen and broken world, there are no perfect fathers. When a father has morally failed, he must own up to it and seek healing and restoration in Christ. God will not despise a broken and a contrite heart (Psalm 51:17). Fathers have their faults and are fallible. Each father who is honest with himself will agree to this fact. But Jesus reminds us that even faulty fathers know how to give good things to their children (Luke 11:13).

Some believe that they can't call God their Father when their own fathers were such poor examples. This reasoning is used by feminists who want to change the language used for God, calling Him Mother or Parent instead of Father. But this is approaching the fatherhood of God from the wrong direction. The ideal of earthly fathers has been distorted by sin and human limitations. We may not project on to God the human father we have loved and missed, have wanted or resented. If we have an image of God patterned after human fathers, it may give us a sense of rebellion or bitterness. We may feel that God is not approachable because our own fathers were not approachable.

The fatherhood of God is not defined by human fathers, however, but finds its meaning in and through Jesus Christ. The Christian norm for the relationship of father to child is the dealings between God and Jesus; the love with which Jesus was loved. Jesus had a unique relationship with the Father who sent Him into the world. When Mary and Joseph found the boy Jesus in the temple and told Him that they had been anxiously searching for Him, Jesus replied, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49) Later in His ministry Jesus invited men and women to share in the life of His Father.

After we become children of God, we have the wonderful privilege of calling God Father. We call Him Father because Jesus taught us to do so. If men are going to return to responsible fatherhood, they must look to their heavenly Father and rely upon Him. Even Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by Himself; He can do only what He sees His Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does" (John 5:19f). God, not human fathers, is our model of loving fatherhood. He told Jesus, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). And Jesus declared, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Christ is the perfect image of the heavenly Father. We are to follow His example and walk in His steps (1 Peter 2:21).

## **Conclusion**

Fathers should not let themselves be bowled over by radical feminism. They need to return home and provide leadership and direction. If they don't, who will? The late president Lyndon Johnson said, "History and instinct tell us that a society that does not encourage responsible fatherhood will pay for its failure in future generations."

Johnson was right. Families need fathers who take responsibility and who refuse to abandon leadership in the home, church and society. Our society will collapse when fathers forsake their families. David Blankenhorn suggests that every American man should be requested to make the following pledge:

Many people today believe that fathers are unnecessary. I believe the opposite. I pledge to live my life according to the principle that every child deserves a father; that marriage is the pathway to an effective father; that part of being a good man means being a good father; and that America needs more good men.

I propose that Canadian men join Americans in making that pledge.

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