

The Disappearing Father

Some time before her death, the American comedienne 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." But the increasing absenteeism of fathers is not only a crucial social issue in the United States but also in Canada. Therefore, it should be a matter of grave concern for all of us. 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 have been working pushing men down. During the last hundred years traditional family values have been attacked in literature and the arts through a radical cultural revolution. Many writers lampooned and even ridiculed the authority of fathers, not realizing that they helped 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. And many men have lost their sense of identity and lack a real sense of purpose in life. They no longer seem to know who they really are. Weldon Hardenbrook, pastor of St. Peter and St. Paul Orthodox church, Santa Cruz, talks about the plague of missing fathers. This creates a male confused about his identity. And puts him under a great deal of psychological stress which ends up lashing out in frustration.

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 of the creation of the world God instituted marriage as an exclusive lifelong bonding of a husband and a 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 defense by the church.

The antidote to disappearing fathers is the promotion of faithfulness in marriage and responsible fatherhood. And responsible fatherhood is not possible without sacrifice and commitment. A father does have a vital role in family life. He is the protector of his children as well as their model, norm, helper, and corrector. I

think of my own father, an example of integrity and godly leadership, whose presence is still missed even though he died more than sixteen years ago. The notion of responsibility is crucial to the understanding of true fatherhood. Fathers are needed who are committed to Jesus Christ, who follow His way and aim to show their family the Way. Their commitment to Christ 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 servant-hood. David Blankenhorn suggests that every 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 effective fatherhood; that part of being a good man means being a good father; and that America needs more good men.

I suggest that Canadian men should join the American men in making that pledge.

Some may say: "I can't have any respect for my father. He was abusive and I couldn't do anything right in his eyes." Others feel that their fathers were too permissive and failed to discipline whenever necessary. Since we live in a fallen and broken world there are no perfect fathers. If 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). We realize that fathers can be faulty and fallible. Each father who is honest with himself will agree with this fact. But Jesus reminds us that even faulty fathers know how to give good things to their children (Luke 11:13). Some claim that they can't call God "Father" as their own fathers were such poor examples. But this is approaching the Fatherhood of God from the wrong direction. The ideal of earthly fatherhood has been distorted by sin and human limitations. We may not project onto 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. But the fatherhood of God is not defined by human fathers but by Jesus Christ. The Christian norm for the relationship of father and children is the dealings between God and Jesus; the love with which Jesus was loved. Jesus had a unique relationship with His Father Who had 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 have become children of God, we have the privilege of calling Him Father. We call God "Father" because Jesus taught us to do so. If men are going to return to responsible fatherhood, they must look at 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 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.

The American 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 the home, church and society. Our society will collapse when fathers abandon their families.