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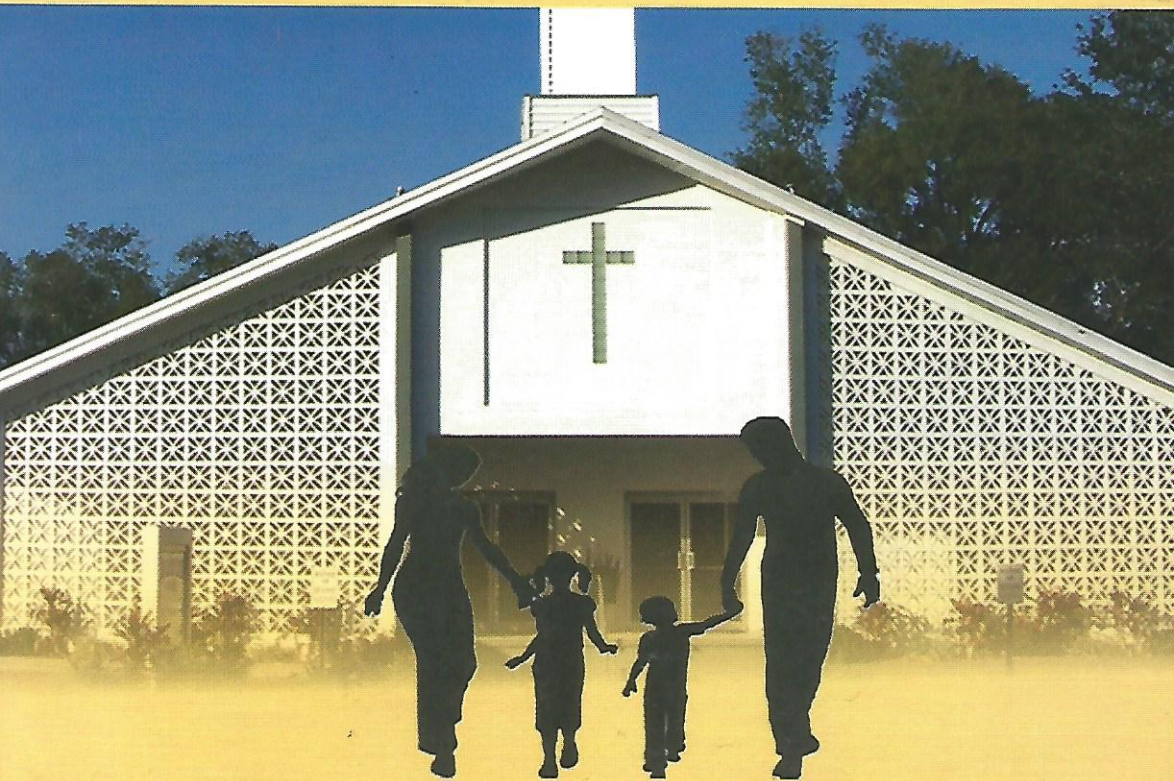
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The Development of Children in their Families and Communities

Glenn Miles[1]

Biblical child development

Jesus himself 'grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him' (Luke 2:40). The account of his childhood ends with the statement that 'Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men' (Luke 2:52). So Jesus developed mentally (wisdom), physically (stature), in favour with God (spiritually) and in favour with men (socially). If this is how a perfect human being developed, then every human being should follow the same pattern. If any one of these areas of human growth and development is neglected, then the individual involved will be damaged.

Family cultures and communities

The extended interdependent family structure in the Bible has far more in common with stable rural families in developing countries than with fragmenting nuclear families in more developed countries. Hebrew families were located within a larger 'house'. These houses were united

by marriage and kinship (and adoption) to form clans; several clans constituted a tribe; the confederation of tribes made up Israel. An interdependent Hebrew household consisted of between 50 and 100 people. In contrast, the average nuclear family in more developed countries today is made up of three or four people. Relatives may be many miles away, with tenuous or non-existent economic ties. The family tends to be a unit of consumption rather than a unit of production. These trends in more developed countries are also apparent in bigger cities in developing countries. Families are separated from their extended families as they migrate to the cities and, in many cases, husbands look for work in the city apart from their families, which leads to even further fragmentation of the family.

In a world witnessing the increasing disintegration of family life, Christians have sometimes attempted to preserve the family structure found in Scripture without necessarily separating what is cultural from what is biblical. This can lead to a false idealism about what families are really like. Scripture does not present a particularly 'rosy' picture of the family. There is fratricide, rape, incest, adultery and murder as well as love and loyalty - both within households and beyond them.

In the Old Testament, as in many communities today, houses, clans or tribes were economic, social and political units. Whole households, including children, worked together on the land. Marriages were arranged, as they are in many parts of the developing world today, and marriage was a covenant between two families - not just between two individuals. A 'bride price' was paid to seal the covenant (Gen. 34:12; 1 Sam. 18:25). Arranged marriages were one way of successfully uniting dynasties, provided that the parents were loving and concerned primarily with the welfare of their children. Both then and now, however, arranged marriages can be dominated by the extended family. Parents sometimes make all the decisions without involving their children, and the choice of partner may be made primarily on financial grounds. In some cultures, when dowries are not paid it is considered the right of the family to abuse the spouse. In extreme cases, for example in India, this has led to severe 'dowry' burnings, in which paraffin is thrown on women and they are set alight to punish them and their families for not coming up with sufficient money.

Another model found in developing countries is the patriarchal marriage, characterized by dominion and control over women and children. Neither women nor children are consulted in decisions that affect them. Although historically and geographically the church has not distanced itself from this as it might have done, this model stands in contrast to the traditions of Judaeo–Christian understandings of marriage (that is, as an institution created by God for the union of man and woman, to be characterized by mutual submission, respect and service). Marriage is a covenantal relationship. Marriage and family life are important to God. Christian parents are called to listen to and respect their children, just as children are called to listen to and respect their parents.

What, then, arc some of the reasons for this apparent disintegration of family life? Marxists blamed worsening economic conditions and decreased welfare support, but changes in cultural values - the new individualism and its expressions in divorce, out-of-wedlock births, single parenting and careerism - must also be considered. The emphasis is on the needs of the individual rather than the group in postmodern society. As a result, even the marriage commitment is seen as tenuous. If one of the partners feels that his or her needs are not being fulfilled, they feel free to end the partnership. Marriage no longer offers security for the couple or for the children.

In more developed countries, many of the economic, political and social functions of the family have been taken over by the state, banks and schools, Public and private worlds have become more separate.

While some conservatives have felt that the phenomenon of women working outside of the home has in itself led to a breakdown in the family (thereby holding women responsible), others believe the family crisis follows from the fact that men's commitment to housework and childcare has not kept pace with this (putting the responsibility onto men).

The 'globalization' of many nations means that they are also inheriting many of the problems of more developed countries. The shift to the city means that many families cannot move as clans, but

only in nuclear families. Competition rather than interdependence can then become the familial and cultural norm.

Conflict/war situations can have a devastating effect on family life. Families can be separated for extended and indefinite periods. There can also be loss of life and injury that contribute to the stresses.

Political ideologies can have profound effects on the family. In Cambodia during the Pol Pot era, the family rice pot was broken as a symbol that the new regime would do away with the need for the family. The Angkor (the new regime) would provide everything.

In many cultures in developing countries it is considered an obligation for a son or daughter to earn an income for their ageing parents. This may mean moving to the city and sending part of the money home. While in many cases this employment is honourable, sometimes it may still be acceptable for children to go into prostitution - as their obligation to their parents is judged to be more important than the 'morality' or safety of the employment.

There are many explanations for the breakdown of the family, and it probably results from a combination of different factors. However, as Christians we also recognize the role of personal choice and personal sin as well as corporate sin.

What is God's concern for families in each society? What would God have us promote, discourage, protect, challenge?

What does Scripture say about families?

The 'family' can be an institution in which God's grace is experienced and where people find nurture and healing, thereby growing as persons in their individuality, in their social relations and in their relations with God (Barton, 1993). However, 'the family' can become perverted by sin as people are disloyal, compete for power and neglect responsibilities.

Even in the context of a society that was made up of extended interdependent family units, Jesus emphasized his relationship with his heavenly Father (Luke 2:41-52) over that with his parents, and he described the disciples as his 'mother and brothers' over his own family (Mark 3:34-35). Later on, Jesus says that those who love father or mother

more than Jesus are not worthy of him (Matt. 10:37). When one potential disciple was ready to follow Jesus, but first asked to bury his father, Jesus' response was blunt and harsh (Luke 9:57-60). At the foot of the cross (John 19:25-27), Jesus says to Mary 'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple he loved he says, 'Here is your mother.' These passages could point to the idea that the new family of God takes precedence over the biological family.

In a world where many children have a father who is absent because of divorce, war or simply excessive work demands, the discovery of God as a heavenly Father, perfect and reliable unlike any human parent, can be healing and liberating (see McClung, 1985). Men still, however, need to be encouraged to take their responsibility for their children seriously. It has been suggested that God sent angels to ensure that Joseph took his responsibility in fathering Jesus seriously and did not abandon Mary as he might have done. Tom Beardshaw of Care for the Family has suggested that God himself 'went to some trouble to make sure there was no risk of the breakdown of the marriage of Joseph and Mary, thus ensuring that there were two parents'.

Thomas Aquinas (Pope, 1994) described how children are made in part in the image of their parents and therefore naturally belong to and are valued by them. But they are also made in the image of God and belong to and are valued by him. He uses the Ephesians 5 analogy between fathers and the sacrificial love of Christ. This love is steadfast and unbreakable, reinforcing the long-term commitment of fathers and husbands to their children and wives.

Paul describes the church as a family. The New Testament church met in households. Christian hospitality was like welcoming near and distant relatives. Those baptized, according to Paul, have been adopted by God (Rom. 8:15-17; Gal. 3:26-4:7). Their siblings are other Christians. Their inheritance is the community of believers (Mark 10:28-31). In a culture where the family took precedence over all other relationships, the New Testament church was to reach out to the Gentiles, to the unlovely and even to enemies. Clapp (1993) suggests that 'Paradoxically, a family is enriched when it is decentered, relativized, recognized as less than an absolute'. The Christian family is therefore not a safe haven apart from the world, but a powerful witness into the

world. Even vulnerable families need to learn the responsibility (but also the joy) of reaching out in hospitality rather than focusing on the fears associated with a 'bunker' self-preservation mentality.

Nevertheless, it may be important, theologically, not to reduce religion to matters of family life. A danger exists in theological terms, that the worship of God might be supplanted by devotion to the 'family,' that God might become a 'household God' and no more.

What is the importance of parenting?

The Population Council's Families in Focus (Bruce, Lloyd and Leonard, 1995) recorded that the number of female-headed households has risen significantly in almost every country in the world since the mid-1970s. Marital dissolution occurs for 40-60 per cent of women in their forties in several countries including the Dominican Republic, Ghana, Indonesia and Senegal. The divorce rate was 55 per cent in the United States in 1990, and divorce rates have doubled since 1970 in the UK, Canada, France and Germany. One per cent of births are out of wedlock in Japan, compared to 33 per cent in northern Europe, 70 per cent in Botswana and 27 per cent in Kenya.

The secular views of the 1960s and 1970s in more developed countries considered that more divorce, out-of-wedlock births, step families and single parents did not mean that families were declining. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, research has indicated that divorce and single parenthood do have negative consequences for both children and women, and that the family structure is important for the development of children.

A study in the US (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994) concluded that children growing up outside of biological, two-parent families were twice as likely to do poorly in school, twice as likely to be single parents themselves, and one-and-a-half times more likely to experience long-term unemployment. The results did not depend on race, education or age.

Furthermore, this study also showed that stepfamilies had no advantage over single parents. Both were less successful in raising children than intact, biologically-related families-even though the average income of stepfathers is higher than that of intact families.

This fact challenges the idea that family income is more important to the well-being of the child than family structure.

Parenting, and by implication lack of it, is the 'single largest variable implicated in childhood illness and accidents, teenage pregnancy and substance misuse; truancy, school disruption and under-achievement; child abuse; unemployability; juvenile crime and mental illness' (Hoghughi, 1997). It has therefore been described as 'the most important public issue facing ... society'.

However, although a reasonable consensus exists about 'bad parenting', secular experts cannot agree about the opposite, 'particularly in a diverse and rapidly changing society'. Christians, on the other hand, do have some scriptural guidance on the role of parents and the role of the church in supporting the family.

Fathers make a vital contribution to the cognitive and emotional well-being of their children (Snarey, 1993). However, studies suggest that the single most important family trend in the US is the growing absence of fathers from their children (Blankenhorn, 1995). Nearly 30 per cent of children under the age of eighteen do not live with their fathers, and nearly 50 per cent of children under eighteen will spend several years without their fathers present in the home. Fathers that leave the family are also generally unwilling to contribute to the child's financial costs. A study in Chile found that 42 per cent of fathers were not contributing financially after the child's sixth birthday (Sachs, 1994).

Scripture presents parenting in the context of marriage. This does not mean that in ministry we ignore those who are parenting out of the context of a marriage relationship, but it does mean that we value the relationship between parenting and marriage - especially within the church. The church also needs to address individualism and find ways to stop men from drifting away from families and parenthood.

The church's role in underpinning and supporting parents is vital. The church must support parents and families so that they in turn are better able to support children. 'God himself trusted His own Son to humankind as a vulnerable child, requiring that Son to be nurtured by a frail but able family and community, symbolically provid(ing) a model of trust and responsibility ... ' (Viva Network, 1997).

In the Old Testament, while children were entirely subject to the authority of the head of the household and counted legally as his property, 'there was much greater concern with the responsibility of the father for his children than with his rights over them' (Deut. 21:18-21; 24:16; 2 Kgs. 14:5-6) (Wright, 1997). Parental responsibility to teach children the truth about God and godly living was vital. Proverbs 6:20 encourages children to keep their father's commands and not to forsake their mother's teaching. Proverbs 22:6 talks about the responsibility of parents to create a desire for spiritual things in children from a young age. The 'Shema', the Hebrew confession of faith, was to be impressed on children 'when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up' (Deut. 6:4-9).

In the early church, parents were encouraged to 'bring [children] up in the training and instruction of the Lord' (Eph. 6:1-4), and fathers were encouraged not to 'embitter your children, or they will become discouraged' (Col. 3:21). These instructions follow instructions to the children to obey their parents. Since Paul's letters were written to be read aloud to the whole church to which they were sent, the fact that he addressed parents and children is very significant. Firstly, he assumes that children belonged to the community of the church and that they would be present at the church gathering when his letters were read. Secondly, he encourages mutual responsibilities for parents and children. This was a challenge to the common assumption at that time that the parental role carried with it unlimited authority over the children of the family.

Although parenting does require sacrifices, 'loving your neighbour as yourself' is key (Browning, 1999). 'Love as equal regard' provides a balance between modern individualism and the older ethics of extreme duty and self-sacrifice. This understanding of love is especially important for mothers and wives who have 'disproportionately carried the burden of enacting self-sacrificial models of Christian love'.

Who are the widows and orphans?
Different cultures and societies have different family structures. While children can most benefit from being in a two-parent family, this is not always possible. Both the old and New Testaments mention the

responsibility to orphans / the fatherless. Being an orphan in ancient times meant deprivation of support, loss of legal standing and becoming vulnerable to those who would exploit the weak. God is the defender of the fatherless (Deut. 10:18), and the covenant community is encouraged to be similarly compassionate (Exod. 22:25-27). The early church maintained a concern for orphans. James 1:27 describes a 'pure and faultless' religion as characterized by those who 'look after orphans and widows'.

The difficulty for the church today is that there are so many children who do not fit neatly into the two-parent family structure. Children may be separated from one or both parents through war, disaster, accident or the ill health of a parent. Some countries will have culturally appropriate ways of absorbing orphans - for example, into the extended family or into a monastery. In other situations, the loss of life may be so great (due to war, disaster and HIV / AIDS) that the community has limited capacity to absorb children who do not have both parents. In the case of children in situations of war/conflict, tracing parents of children and vice versa is vital.

Sometimes children are brought up by only one parent because of divorce, desertion, domestic violence or unwed motherhood. Although we are not to be patronizing or prejudicial towards the one-parent family, we need to find out their needs by asking them and then take responsibility as a church to support them. Similarly, orphans living as 'child-headed households' will need the love and support of adults, but they may not need adults to take over all responsibilities. They, too, should be asked what they feel that they need, and the assumption should not be that they are incapable and incompetent.

Where a marriage is fragile, if the church is able to support and strengthen the marriage it may enable relationships to be restored and prevent divorce and family breakdown. Similarly, where parent-child relationships are strained, supporting parents in a loving community may prevent child abuse and intergenerational violence.

It is essential that the church ministering to lone parents and their children understand how they got into the situation, because the issues that they face will be so different in differing circumstances. There may

be violence and abuse to deal with, or widowhood, desertion or promiscuity. Appropriate responses require understanding, and there are no simple solutions. It is also important not to overlook lone fathers. Mostly widowers, these men are usually excluded from women's informal networks (a vital coping strategy for most single mothers).

Conclusion

We began with exploring the context of the child by looking at Jesus, and here we will end as well. He was born a vulnerable child into a vulnerable family, part of a vulnerable community, and yet he grew to become everything God wanted him to be, assured of God's love for him. The church has a responsibility to provider a supportive and caring 'family' for all children, whether or not they have a biological family, and as those with a special burden for children we need to encourage this support and care.

Questions to Consider

Read the story of Jesus' birth, considering how God trusted Mary and Joseph with his own Son (Luke 1:26-38; 46-49; 2:1-7). 'God himself trusted His own Son to (Mary and Joseph) as a vulnerable child, requiring that Son to be nurtured by a frail but able family and community symbolically providing a model of trust and responsibility.... (Viva Network, 1997).

1. What can we learn about the importance of parental responsibilities?

2. What can we learn about Mary and Joseph's devotion to God?

3. What can we learn about how we should respect parents and involve them in child-care practice?

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