

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

KA10

GOD'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE FAMILY

The conviction of evangelicals is that the Bible is God's authoritative word on all matters with which it deals. It is particularly clear in its description of the origin of the family and in its definition of how families are to function according to the mind of God.

1. God-centred blueprint for the family

The idea of family and the concept of family structure did not emerge from the dark mists of evolutionary history, but came by revelation as part of the original creation. The family is not so much a social institution as a divinely-constructed pattern. The clear implications of Genesis 1-3 are that the family consisting of male and female in a marriage relationship rearing children in those family units is God's plan. In Jesus' debates with the religious leaders in the New Testament, he was concerned to reaffirm Genesis 1 as the divinely instituted pattern.

In the Ten Commandments, four laws deal with the family; three of them directly: 'Honour your father and mother', 'You shall not commit adultery', 'You shall not steal', and 'You shall not covet'. The fact that property (and hence theft) were family-oriented appears not only in all the law, but in the tenth commandment – to covet, whether property, wife, or servants of another was a sin against the neighbour's family. The family is clearly central to the biblical way of life, and it is the family *under* God which has this centrality. (*The Institutes of Biblical Law*. R.J. Rushdoony, P&R Publishing 1973, p159)

The *first* characteristic of the Biblical doctrine is that the family is viewed in terms of God-centred *function* and *origin*. The family is part of God's purpose for man, and it functions to the glory of God in its true form, as well as giving man his own self-realisation under God (Rushdoony, p163).

Genesis 1:27-30 shows clearly that the role of the married couple (with man as the head and woman as the helper) was to subdue the earth and exercise dominion over it. 'Man must bring to all creation God's law-order, exercising power over creation in the name of God.' (Rushdoony, p163) This role clearly involves responsibility and authority. He is responsible to God for the way this mandate is exercised and the call of God gives him an authority by delegation.

Authority is located to a significant degree in the family. The woman's role is seen as alongside the man in the same way as a prime minister might be alongside a king, as Joseph was alongside Pharaoh. It's not a subservient role but a supportive and substantial role. The best picture of this is found in Proverbs 31:10-31.

2. Family-centred blueprint for the earth

Genesis 1:27-30 implies that the family wasn't simply God's blueprint for the domestic world but for the whole world and its history. The first family was formed and then the development of all the communities in the world was to be based on this building block. The earth was created '*very good*' but it needed to be brought under the benevolent rule of God's wisdom. This government/ leadership was the particular calling of the man as husband and father. So, family life would radiate out from this original centre to dominate every community to be formed.

When the second Adam has finished his work and the restoration has taken place, the original blueprint will be established. There will be a new heaven and earth, pictured in Revelation as a garden paradise, and ruling over it are the last Adam and his bride. The new heaven and new earth will then at last be the *home of righteousness*.

3. Family-centred locus of authority

As communities form and cities and nations are established, certain forms of authority would need to be exercised over a collection of families. But, these nation states are not pictured in Scripture as having the power to take authority away from the family in order to make the State the head of each house. The State must not seize the power that belongs to the family; and yet we are currently living through a revolution in which the State is assuming authority for more and more areas of family life.

The State is assuming greater and greater control over education, welfare, health, sex education, family discipline and care of the elderly. It's not necessarily the fault of the State, but the State responds increasingly to the demands put upon it by the modern citizen. '*What's the government doing about it?*' is the constant cry. And the decibels of that cry will increase as the traditional family is undermined. As successive governments are under pressure to promise more and more in order to retain or regain power, the impetus is to fasten the State's grip on more and more areas of national life, thus spreading the dominion of the State, often at the expense of the family.

'Statist education and statist intervention in the life of the family leads progressively to the breakdown of the family. This is not surprising since the principle of authority is at stake in the family. The family is not only the first environment of the child, it is also his first school, where he receives his basic education; his first church, where he is taught his first and foundational lessons concerning God and life; his first state, where he learns the elements of law and order and obeys them; and his first vocation, where the child is given work to do, and responsibilities in terms of it.

Meredith has summarized the matter aptly, 'In the eyes of a small child, a parent stands in the place of God himself! For the parent is the child's provider, protector, lover, teacher and lawgiver.' (Rushdoony, p191).

'Hence it is that theologians through the centuries have taught obedience to civil magistrates, and to all duly constituted authorities, under the heading of the fifth commandment. It has been rightly seen how deeply involved all authority is in the authority of parents. The destruction of the family's position and authority is the destruction of all society and the introduction of anarchy.' (Rushdoony, p192)

'Therefore, it is imperative that a child be taught the habit of unquestioning obedience to his parents. For, until the young child develops, his parents stand to him in the place of God. And God holds them responsible for teaching and directing the child properly. (R.C. Meredith, *The Ten Commandments*, p35).

This whole process is now to be complicated by a *human rights mentality*. So far in our society the legal process has concentrated on preventing and punishing the abuse of power. The father and mother had the authority to smack their child, but they could be punished by the State if they abused that power. Now that we are into a rights-based legal framework, then children will be accorded rights by the State by which they will be able to take authority for themselves, or the State take that authority on their behalf. It's too early in the history of this to see where it will lead, but there are some worrying possibilities.

This 'rights mentality' is reflected in the official documents of large organisations, for example in Article 14 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

- Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion;
- Parties shall respect the rights and duties of the parents and, when applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child;
- Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

This may never happen, of course, but one day it is possible that it might be seen as contrary to the child's right of freedom of thought to be taught a religion as though it were true.

No one knows where the rights-based movement will take us; but there is a strong likelihood that it will lead to the undermining of parental authority. The emphasis of Scripture is on responsibility not on rights. It's the responsibility of parents to raise their children in such a way as not to provoke them to anger, but to nurture them in a knowledge of and relationship to the Lord.

4. Respect-centred emphasis in God's law

The principle enshrined in the Old Testament law is that God's people are to respect life and the source of life. This is a fundamental responsibility. Consider some of the laws of the covenant – for instance Leviticus 22:28; Deuteronomy 22:6-7. In connection with the latter law there is a promise of life. To honour and respect life as the precious thing it is, and to honour those who give us life is to increase our own chances of living long. This may well be the principle behind the fifth commandment. Our mother and father gave us life, we should honour the God who gave us that life and the people through whom it came to us, then we *may live long in the land*. The apostle to the Gentiles reiterates this in Ephesians 6 – *that you may enjoy long life on the earth*.

It's not only honouring parents because of their gift of life, but because of what they have developed in us. They have given us an inheritance that ought to be more than money, houses and land. It's easier to see how this would operate in a culture in which education, life-skills, health, survival, ethics, morals, and religious wisdom were all received primarily through the family. All these matters are, of course, distorted and clouded by the impact of sin. But the principle beneath them remains intact, and is to be restored within the orbit of the Christian family. Respect for the role of parents is therefore to be a central feature of the Christian family.

5. Church-centred pattern for family life

The implication of Ephesians 5:22-33 is that marriage is patterned on Christ's relationship to the church, and not vice versa. Paul is not picking up a helpful parallel illustration and using it to illuminate a truth. He's teaching that God created marriage on purpose to serve as an in-built mirror to a greater reality. This greater reality is the 'mystery' he refers to in verse 32. A mystery is a truth that is hidden until God reveals it. It may be there all the time, but the full meaning of something is obscured or hidden until God draws back the curtain.

So, the family, far from being an evolutionary convenience, is a divine masterpiece pointing to the deeper reality of the relationship between the heavenly bridegroom and his bride. Before God created marriage he had in mind the ultimate and eternal union between his Son and his daughter-in-law. Just as Adam would need a bride to complete his fullness, so the Lord Jesus as the mediator, as the second Adam would need a bride to complete his fullness. And at the end of Ephesians 1 that's exactly how the church is described – the fullness of him who fills all in all.

So, the Scripture gives this significance to marriage. Family life is not a human invention to help us cope with the dark in primeval times. There are fathers and mothers because God had it in his heart to be a loving parent to people. But more particularly, he is the father of that family which is in heaven and earth – the whole family of redeemed people.

Conclusion

It seems clear, therefore, that, according to the Bible, the well-being of humanity depends on the strength of the family. That will be true in a fallen world as well as in an unfallen one. The enemies

of the family are the enemies of society. Undermine the family and culture and human well-being is undermined.

Without the authority of the family, a society quickly moves into social anarchy. The source of the family's authority is God, and the immediate locale of the authority is the father or husband (1 Corinthians 11:1-15). The abdication by the father of his authority, or the denial of his authority, leads to the social anarchy described in Isaiah 3:12. Women rule over men; children gain undue freedom and power and become oppressors of their parents; the emasculated rulers in such a social order lead the people astray and destroy the fabric of society. The end result is social collapse and captivity (Isaiah 3:16-26), and a situation of ruin and danger for women, a time of 'reproach' or 'disgrace', in which the once independent and feminist women are humbled in their pride and seek the protection and safety of a man.

Some of the Family's Greatest Enemies

1. Secular political philosophy

Frederich Engels held that the monogamous family 'is based on the supremacy of the man, the express purpose being to produce children of undisputed paternity; such paternity is demanded because these children are later to come into their father's property as his natural heirs.' He went on to say, 'We are now approaching a social revolution in which the economic foundations of monogamy as they have existed hitherto will disappear just as surely as those of its complement prostitution. Monogamy arose from the concentration of considerable wealth in the hands of a single individual – a man – and from the need to bequeath this wealth to the children of that man and of no other... Having arisen then from economic causes, will monogamy then disappear when these causes disappear?... With the transfer of the means of production into common ownership, the single family ceases to be the economic unit of society.' (Frederich Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, New York International Publishers, 1964, p55, 67)

Thus, in a thoroughly socialist world the State becomes the father which takes care of all its children by taking property into public ownership and distributing goods to all its workers on the basis of equality.

Thus Margaret Allen (National Executive, Democratic Socialist Party, Australia) 'While socialists recognise the specific social, political and economic role that the family plays under capitalism, a socialist revolution would not 'abolish' the family as part of a transition to socialism. In a transitional period parts of the family system would still exist. However, once the needs currently provided by the family are provided by and for the whole community, the economic imperative of the family will disappear and the possibilities of different sorts of social relationships will emerge. By abolishing the compulsion to live in a particular way in a carefully-defined structure, socialism will provide the freedom for meaningful social groupings in which people will be brought together by the need for human interaction and cooperation.'

An example of how this philosophy works out in practice is found in the recent case of a 15-year old girl who visited her doctor, went to hospital, had an abortion, returned to school and then home, without her parents having any knowledge of the whole process. Her mother only discovered it when she stumbled across an entry in her daughter's diary. The State through its officials and institutions replaced the parents in the matter of a life-changing decision.

2. Darwinianism

This has undermined the family by presenting it as a primitive response to the cruel realities mankind had to face millennia ago. The violent primal father who exercised his brutal rule over his women and offspring dominated the primal horde. Gradually this state of affairs was civilised into what we see today. But the significance of the family owes more to accidents of history and human necessity than anything else. This perspective attacks the family's physical significance.

3. Freudianism

This philosophy has also contributed its mindset. To Freud the family can be explained in terms of primitive sexual and personality drives that could only be contained within a contrived set of structures. Beneath the surface are raging emotions and needs which are regulated by the imposition of a family structure. This perspective attacks the family's psychological significance.

4. Individualism

A recently-appearing weapon against the family has been the doctrine of individualism. The rights of the individual over everything else are becoming the touchstone for State legislation and action. Inherent in the traditional Christian view of the family was the notion of authority. Parental authority is the bedrock principle of Old and New Testaments in this regard. *Honour your father and mother* is a statement regarding the authority given to them by God. The State has removed more and more of this authority and taken it for itself in the cause of protecting of the rights of the individual.

The right of the mother to choose to kill an unborn child means that the father's rights and responsibilities have been all but removed in that area. The sexual revolution means that young people can engage in sexual activity with the connivance and backing of the State whether their parents approve or not. The right to have sex with anyone they choose is now accorded to children as young as fourteen and fifteen. The recent proposal to make the 'morning-after' abortion pill available to school nurses indicates the extent this has reached. The right of children to be brought up without physical punishment has become a contentious contemporary issue. It has already been banned in some European countries.

5. Feminism

Feminism is another philosophical movement that has had a major impact. Women now have the right to a life free of dependence on men. Women should be granted economic freedom from marriage if they choose. So, in a move hailed as protective of the family, the married persons'

allowance was abolished and the money given to those who care for children – usually mothers, of course. So, we have the highest rate of single mothers in Europe. The State has become the father. The State takes huge amounts of money from taxpayers in order to support people in a lifestyle which undermines marriage and the biblical family.

On top of this, there has been an undermining of the role of motherhood and home-making. If a woman doesn't have a job or a career she is subtly portrayed as second rate. She's chosen the second best, or has been forced into an inferior role. No one in their right mind, it is understood, would submit to the drudgery of domestic responsibilities by choice. Women must compete with men and show that they're equal if not superior in as many aspects of life as desirable; and the domestic world must not be allowed to undermine those aspirations. Women must not allow the slavery of the kitchen sink to keep them from mastery in the board room.

So, the State is beginning to arrange to take care of the children for large parts of the working week.

6. Genderism

One of the most startling developments of the last 30 years has been the progress made by groups campaigning for gay and lesbian rights, and more recently those arguing for legal rights for the subjects of gender-change.

For many centuries, the legal system of nations influenced by Christianity has stated there are certain core principles that make a marriage valid. 'There are three core elements to a legal marriage: It must be a union of (1) two people (2) of the opposite sex (3) who are not related.' The pressure throughout the Western world, at the moment, is to change the second of these principles. The homosexual pressure groups have managed to gain legal recognition for their sexual activity, protection from discrimination, and certain other rights, such as the right to adopt children. With the passing of the Civil Partnership Act, they are now within striking distance of the full rights and status once uniquely accorded to of marriage. The same applies to people who have changed gender.

As Jeff Jacoby of the Boston Globe wrote recently, 'No structure can stand for long when its bearing wall is removed. The bearing wall of marriage – its central and universal defining characteristic – is its heterosexuality. Knock that down, and what is left will become a ruin.'

7. Inseminationism

This is another extraordinary modern development facilitated by the advances in scientific technology related to fertilisation. We have artificial insemination by donor egg, by donor sperm, by donor egg and sperm. We have frozen embryos being implanted. A child can be born from a surrogate mother who is the birth parent, whilst the biological parents might be a husband and wife living together; or a husband who has used his sperm to impregnate an egg from a woman

other than his wife; or a wife who has had her egg impregnated by sperm from a man who is not her husband. OR, of course, the parents who will bring up the child born through the surrogate mother, might have used an embryo which neither of them helped to conceive. The child thus has a birth mother, two resident parents and two absent biological parents.

Trying to sort out what is biblically tolerable and what's ethically allowable, and who should be allowed to do what, is a jungle of complications. All this is about to become even more difficult if human cloning becomes a viable technology. The baby which is born will not have a mother or father, biologically speaking, only a grand-mother and grand-father.

These technologies, helpful though the knowledge they bring may be, are playing havoc with the concept of family. It is no longer a straightforward question to ask: 'Who is my Mum and Dad?' What impact all this will eventually have on personal identity is impossible to calculate.

8. Consumerism

This matter is more difficult to describe because it issues from demographic predictions and they are notoriously fickle. Demographic predictions are often falsified by changes in society. So dire prophecies like, 'if these trends continue Manchester United will be in the 3rd division in ten years time' are proved untrue by how things turn out.

Nevertheless, we would be stupid to ignore demographics, the problem of which has recently been highlighted by the dramatic increase in the incidence of sexually-transmitted diseases and by the decrease in the birth rate in the Western World. The fact that 28% of girls who had been treated for Chlamydia were coming back for new treatments within six months reveals a pattern of promiscuity among young women which is staggering, even among girls who are technically under age. Sexual intercourse is now a matter of lifestyle choice, and is becoming part of weekend entertainment, or casual encounter.

We live in a society in which people are living longer. In order, to replenish our population and ensure that there are sufficient young people to provide for our pensioners and supply a workforce capable of holding the infrastructure of our society together, we need about 2.1 children from each woman capable of bearing children. Recent birth rates in the UK have been as low as 1.6, and in some European countries, such as Spain and Greece the rates have been even lower. Unless demographic trends turn around then it could lead to serious consequences for the future of our culture. Mary Hughes in *Banner of Truth* expressed it like this: 'Britain is therefore fostering a culture in which those in the best position to have children are not having them, and those who are having children have neither the support nor maturity necessary to do the best job possible.'

That leaves the church!

- Remember that the gospel was first preached to a pagan culture in which all sorts of Greek and Roman practices dominated society. The Christian view of and commitment to

marriage was as revolutionary then as it is now: *'Do all things without murmurings and disputes, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you are seen as lights in the world, holding up the word of life; that I may have something to boast in the day of Christ, that I didn't run in vain nor labour in vain.'* Philippians 2:14-16 (World English Bible)

- The church is *the* place where God's pattern for true relationships is to be worked out. The church in its marriages and in its church life is to be an exhibition stand in a fallen world of what God can do.
- Elders are to set the example of what Christian marriages should look like so that the congregation can respect their elders and see what it means for a man to manage his own household well and have his children live in respect for his lifestyle (*1 Timothy 3 & Titus 1*)
- Each church should make regular attempts to support its families through teaching and pastoral work. Often, elders are left to try to pick up pieces when it's too late. Just as Paul had a special set of principles to teach different sections of the church, so should those who have the care of feeding the sheep.
- Churches might consider having a youth and families pastor, not just a young man who does youth work. What the youth work attempts in a fellowship should really be an extension of what's being done in the home.
- God can make family relationships into an immense source of blessing for his world. Although he's pleased to save many from outside the church and use them for his glory; it's also true that some of his most useful instruments have been forged in godly homes. B.B. Warfield took a special interest in the life of the great preacher Jonathan Edwards. He traced the details of *1,394 of Jonathan Edwards' descendants. What he found verifies Psalm 112:2. Of Edwards' known descendants, there were 13 college presidents, 65 college professors, 30 judges, 100 lawyers, 60 physicians, 75 army and navy officers, 100 pastors, 60 authors of prominence, 3 United States senators, 80 public servants including governors and ministers to foreign countries, and one vice-president of the United States.*

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