

Family: More Than a Cultural Phenomenon

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In the recent conference on the ‘Complementarity of Man and Woman,’ Pope Francis made the following statement about the importance of the traditional family: “The family is the foundation of co-existence and a remedy against social fragmentation. Children have a right to grow up in a family with a father and a mother capable of creating a suitable environment for the child’s development and emotional maturity” (*Catholic Herald*). In this post-modern world in which the loudest voices usually determine the cultural narrative, it is refreshing to hear someone who is regarded as a leader of one of the world’s largest religious bodies defend the concept of the family structure as described in the Bible, with emphasis upon the fact that the nuclear family was designed by God. This design was intended to provide a structure in which the propagation of the human race would be facilitated, and an understanding of God’s character and nature would be illustrated and passed on to each succeeding generation. The traditional family unit, therefore, is more than the consequence of evolutionary social interaction or merely a cultural phenomenon. It is a spiritual entity, designed by God, with intrinsic value and purpose.

Biblical Origins

The biblical foundation of the family is first described in the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:27-28: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it’” (NIV). In spite of Adam and Eve’s rebellion, this mandate has not been revoked. Further evidence of the divine institution of the family unit is described in Genesis 2:23-24, with the emphasis upon the statement that “they will become one flesh.” As husband and wife they would, in complementary fashion, reflect the glory of God. The oneness

that they would share would include a physical oneness manifested in their sexual intimacy, an emotional oneness that would be displayed in their love for each other, and a spiritual oneness that would have a disposition for a relationship with the Spirit by which they were created. Ideally as husband and wife sharing a total and complete integration of body, soul, and spirit, while including the presence of God in this relationship, they would illustrate the Trinitarian nature of the Godhead. Though certainly never perfect, the Christian marriage relationship aspires to the fulfillment of this reflection of God's make-up and character today.

There are two important dynamics, however, in the creation account that give insight into the spiritual integrity of the marriage relationship and the resulting family unit. The first is the truth that human beings are created in the *Imago Dei* or the "Image of God." That means that every living human being bears some of the characteristics and attributes of the Creator. This understanding separates Judeo-Christianity from all other worldviews and religions in that it ascribes value to the human race. By virtue of the fact that humans bear the attributes of the Creator, humans become both representatives of the Creator within the created order and reflections of the Creator in society itself. Male and female complement one another in fulfilling these functions, both within the marriage relationship as well as individually within the human race.

The second important dynamic is that as male and female reproduce, they serve to fulfill the mandate to fill the earth with the human race that bears the image of God, thus increasing the rule of God and the knowledge of God throughout creation by their existence. Because every life reveals another component of the magnitude of God's infinite nature, every child that is born increases the revelation of God's character in a small, yet unique fashion. Every life is, therefore, precious. It is apparent from the very next verses in Genesis that God's intention for the

multiplying of the human race is fulfilled in the marriage relationship and the ensuing development of the family structure. After creating Eve, the Genesis 2 account records the following in verses 23-24: “The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called “woman,” for she was taken out of man.’ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (NIV). Historic orthodox Christianity has affirmed the implication that this statement speaks to the formation of the institution of the marriage relationship.

It is within this established relationship between Adam and Eve that the Genesis account proceeds to describe the formation of the first family. After the tragic circumstances related in the story of Cain and Abel, the birth of Seth and subsequently the birth of Enosh resulted in the desired development of God’s intent for the family. There was a “calling on the name of the Lord” by the members of that family. The spiritual integrity of the family unit was affirmed. The Old Testament narrative continues to develop the theme of family. It is Abraham’s family and the descendants of Isaac and Jacob (Israel) which become the foundational institution for the nation of Israel through which God’s plan of redemption is ultimately fulfilled in the advent of the Lord Jesus Christ, who was born, though miraculously, into a traditional family.

The New Testament further develops the concept of the sacredness of the family by describing the Godly or Christ-centered home. Ephesians 5:21 summarizes the Christian family with the words, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (NIV). It is apparent that the family which centers itself in the gospel is one that reflects the Trinitarian nature of the Godhead. As God’s nature is one being, functioning in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so the family that practices submission is a unit in which father, mother, and child(children) reflect the nature of the Trinity in which there is mutual respect, communication, submission, intention,

purpose and love. The family unit is “spiritual,” therefore, in that it is an earthly manifestation and illustration of the nature of God. In a world that is fallen as a consequence of sin, seldom is there a family unit that even begins to approach an accurate reflection of the Godhead, but by the operation of God’s grace in the lives of the members of a family unit, a family can aspire to the image that God would have the institution display.

It is through the marriage relationship that the family unit is established, and it is through the ensuing multiplication that the earth is filled with humans who bear the characteristics and attributes of God. Each and every life is unique and reflects a different characteristic of God’s attributes and nature. An infinite God can never be fully reflected no matter how many individual human lives are created to do so. Any attempt, therefore, to undermine the creation of human life in the context of the family structure is an affront to the creation mandate to fill the earth with those who bear God’s image.

Progressive Views

Modern society, however, simply regards traditional marriage and the family as a consequence of the evolutionary process. It is considered to be just one step on the way to a more progressive idea of human relationships. It is difficult to fathom where this so-called progress may ultimately direct the culture, and it is troubling to observe the rapidity of the changes. Dr. Paul Kengor, Grove City College professor, points out that the progressive agenda is seemingly unstoppable as he writes:

Just 20 years ago, it was unthinkable that an overwhelming consensus of progressives/liberals would compel everyone, including conscientious objectors invoking their sacred First Amendment religious freedoms, to forcibly pay for others’ contraception, sterilization services, and drugs that

induce abortions.... Well, here we are, 2014, and the unfathomable is now the unwavering position of liberals/progressives (Death's Progress: Part 2).

Fueled by a naturalistic worldview, elites in society have fashioned cultural truth *via* language to suit their own purposes. In many instances these narratives undermine the sanctity of life and the family in which life is ultimately created. While an attack on life in the womb has been one of the primary targets of progressive post-modern thinking, so also has been traditional marriage, and also at a very rapid pace. Currently 35 states have legalized same-sex marriage while 15 states have bans against same-sex unions (gaymarriage.procon.org).

In November of 2014 the Sixth Circuit Federal Court, in a 2-1 decision, affirmed a measure limiting marriage to one man and one woman in the four states of its federal jurisdiction, Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee. The decision sent shock waves throughout the nation in light of the fact that this is the first federal court ruling against same-sex marriage after the U. S. Supreme Court's 2013 *Windsor* decision, striking down the federal government's Defense of Marriage Act [DOMA]. As pointed out by Albert Mohler:

In his fourth argument, Judge (Jeffrey S.) Sutton argued that the biological basis of natural marriage, based in the complementarian nature of the male-female union, is a natural and lawful concern of the state. The state is within its proper domain in defining and limiting marriage to the uniquely procreative union of a man and a woman. A society has the right, he stated, to establish ground rules for marriage 'and most especially a need to create stable family units for the planned and unplanned creation of children' ("Defense of Marriage").

Judge Jeffrey S. Sutton has eloquently articulated the traditional and historic understanding that marriage is important because it is within that relationship that children are created and nurtured. As Mohler goes on to state, “Judge Sutton’s opinion is a triumph of constitutional argument and the defense of common sense” (“Defense of Marriage”). It is likely that this decision will ultimately be appealed to the Supreme Court and the decision rendered may not be consistent with an adherence to biblical values or even common sense, but rather the dictate of judicial tyranny.

Contemporary culture abounds with philosophies and movements that stand in blatant opposition to traditional family structure as well as to the normality of procreation. Efforts have been realized on both ends of life’s spectrum to terminate life or eliminate it all together. The pro-choice movement, as referenced above, has been relentless in convincing society that the embryo is merely a mass of cells that is subject simply to the private concern and determination of the woman in whose womb the cells reside. The twentieth-century birth control advocate Margaret Sanger founded the American Birth Control League which later became the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, an organization which today is the primary abortion provider in the United States (Live Action Web site). On the other end of life’s continuum, advocates, such as Derek Humphry and right-to-die supporters, have long petitioned for the legal process that permits physicians to assist in terminating the lives of those who are afflicted with incurable disease. Life itself is under attack by these advocates.

The acceptance of same-sex marriage by the millennial generation further erodes the concept of traditional family, one function of which is to procreate and birth living souls who bear the image of God. In post-modern society where tolerance is the primary virtue, few traditional marriage advocates are able to convincingly contest the narrative that has been

embraced by Hollywood, the news media, the university and public school system, and by many politicians, that same-sex marriage does not undermine traditional marriage. The reality seems to be, however, that if same-sex marriage is embraced by a society, then traditional marriage is without the intrinsic characteristics with which it was intended and any moral values that accompany that institution are superseded by individual autonomy.

Dr. Robert A. J. Gagnon, professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, is regarded as one of the leading conservative spokespersons in advocating for traditional marriage. In a recent article titled “An Open Letter to a Young Ministry Leader: Should Christians Oppose ‘Gay Marriage’?” Gagnon writes:

‘Gay marriage’ will also further erode the institution of marriage since in eliminating a male-female requirement, it does away with any rational and natural basis for opposing other immoral (though less severe) practices, such as adult-committed forms of polyamory and incest. In increasing the incidence of homosexual practice in the population, ‘gay marriage’ will have the effect of making heterosexual marriage more ‘open’ and impermanent and less monogamous and long term than it already is. Rather than influencing homosexual relationships to resemble married heterosexual bonds (only a small percentage of the homosexual population will get ‘married’), ‘gay marriage’ will further escalate the deterioration of heterosexual marital unions and indeed decrease further the marriage rate. ‘Gay marriage’ will result in more youth entering a homosexual life which, in turn, will lead especially among males to an increase in sexually transmitted infections and (ironically) mental health problems arising from disease, non-monogamy, and high relational turnovers.

Gagnon is convinced that the contemporary evangelical Christian sub-culture has too easily embraced the societal narrative regarding same-sex marriage. The popularity of contemporary millennial authors, such as Matthew Vines, has provided young evangelicals with a sympathetic argument for, and tolerance of, same-sex marriage. Emotion and sentiment have been substituted for intellectual and biblical arguments as well as the fear of being characterized as a bigot or fanatic because of opposition to same-sex behavior.

Throughout recent history there also have been individuals and organizations that have advocated for population control. Often this advocacy functions in conjunction with an extreme environmentalism. One of the first well-known population control advocates was Thomas Malthus, an eighteenth-century cleric and scholar whose famous writing, An Essay of the Principle of Population, has created considerable controversy and debate. Malthus stated: “The power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man” (chpt. 1). Though the position expressed by Malthus was no doubt well intentioned, the impetus of his thinking has spurred others to endorse various measures of population control. For example, David Attenborough, the patron for the UK-based population control advocacy group Population Matters, recently stated that “humans are a plague on the earth” (Population Matters Web site). The organization’s mission statement includes: “We support human rights, particularly women’s equality and reproductive rights, and oppose all discrimination or coercion. We advocate a rights-based approach to family planning provision” (Population Matters Web site). This organization obviously does not recognize the family as the unit in which offspring bear the image of God, but rather their objective is to limit the family unit, and the number of offspring to that which, in their estimation, the environment can sustain.

Governments also have participated in forced population control. The People's Republic of China since 1979 has had a "one-child policy" designed to address economic and environmental problems in that nation. The policy has resulted in a disproportionate number of males to females, thus making the possibility of marriage impossible for a large number of Chinese males (Yardley "One-Child Policy").

In the United States, John Holdren, who is best known for his belief that "abortion should be compulsory" (Ecoscience 837) has articulated his belief that "a world government should determine the proper population of each region and enforce that level by any means necessary" (Ecoscience 942). Holdren has been appointed by President Obama as Science Czar and is one of the President's chief advisors on issues of science and the environment.

Perhaps the greatest destructor of family life in the United States has been the welfare system. Through government entitlement programs many inner-city poor have become reliant upon government programs for assistance. The unintended consequence has been the creation of a dependent underclass in which many have abandoned family structure and personal responsibility. Recent statistics indicate that 72% of African-American children are born out of wedlock (PolitiFact Web site). Without a stable home environment children often fail to learn how to deal with authority and many times become involved in gang behavior and drug addiction. The homicide rate in many American cities surpasses the American death rate on the foreign battlefields of Afghanistan or Iraq (Pew Research Web site). As popular news commentator Bill O'Reilly has pointed out, "The reason there is so much violence and chaos in the black precincts is the disintegration of the African-American family" (Fox News Web site/O'Reilly).

With so much emphasis within contemporary culture on the destruction of life and policies that seemingly regulate population growth by promoting abortion and prohibiting or destroying the creation of families through governmental policies, it is apparent that this assault on the family and the resulting children which it produces is more than happenstance. The Apostle Paul in Ephesians 6:12 wrote, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (NIV). Because the design of the family is one that encompasses a component of spirituality, the assault against the family and the sacred life that it produces is one that has spiritual origins.

Spiritual Opposition

One of the most convincing proofs that the family is a “spiritual entity” is the attack launched by the Devil against the family structure and its purpose. As stated in allegorical reference to Satan as “the thief” by Jesus himself in John 10:10: “The thief (Satan) comes only to steal, kill, and destroy” (NIV). It is evident that throughout scripture Satan is identified as the “spiritual enemy” of God whose intent is to undermine the glory of God. What better way to undermine God’s glory than to engage in activities that divide and subvert the institution which illustrates God’s nature? Jesus described the methodology of Satan in John 8:44: “He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (NIV). It is apparent that in the very first assault on human kind, Satan attempted, by lying, to divide husband and wife. Jesus referred to Satan as a murderer, and the evidence of this continued activity is manifest in an attack on the sacredness of life which bears the very image of God. This assault has continued throughout human history and is most evident in modern Western culture with the acceptance of

the false narrative that there no longer exists a “traditional family,” and that human beings are nothing more than the consequence of eons of evolutionary progress. Many within contemporary society have fallen for the lies of Satan. The Bible explains society’s eagerness to embrace these false narratives with the description in Ephesians 4:18 of those who have never entered into a relationship with the Lord Jesus, asserting that “they are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts” (NIV).

The following experience vividly relates the nature of the spiritual assault on traditional biblical values that relate to the sacredness of life. A few years ago this author was commissioned by a local mainline church judicatory to be a representative at the annual denominational gathering at which policy is legislated. This well-known church denominational assembly convened with several thousand in attendance and hundreds of commissioned delegates. One of the issues considered focused on church-school educational curriculum for teenagers. The debate centered on whether the curriculum materials would endorse an abstinence position in regard to pre-marital intimacy, or promote a more progressive position in which premarital sex is acceptable in some circumstances as is terminating an unwanted pregnancy that might be the consequence of that activity.

A delegate from the same judicatory spoke publicly before a plenary session in favor of an abstinence perspective and opposed including material in the curriculum that would advocate for any termination of a pregnancy. During the next plenary session, the delegate, a young mother, went to the restroom. While in the restroom stall, at least two individuals stood outside the stall partition and threatened her verbally, indicating that if she were to speak publicly again in opposition to abortion or a “women’s choice,” that “she would be very sorry.” The aggressors

disappeared before the young delegate could exit and determine just who had threatened her. Such behavior at a national church event authenticates the spiritual nature of the issues that surround the importance of the family and the sacredness of life. Even at a “Christian” event, the assault on those who hold to traditional biblical values are manifest and take on a spiritual dimension.

Resisting the Attack

If the issue of the attack on the traditional family is one with a spiritual dimension, then those who would address this crisis must also do so from a spiritual perspective. In proposing solutions to the dilemma, it is essential to keep two factors in mind. The first factor is that in fighting a spiritual battle, one must rely upon spiritual weapons. II Corinthians 10:4 states, “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds” (NIV). In contemporary culture, one of the most potent weapons determining the values that a society may embrace is political power. Those who would seek to battle against the demise of the family and the destruction of human life should never dismiss themselves from the political arena. The warrior for conservative issues of social justice may experience frustration, but like William Wilberforce, British abolitionist, persistence may ultimately lead to a new consensus in society.

Perhaps the most powerful weapon that is utilized in American culture to influence societal values is the media. Those who would seek to defend the traditional characteristics and spiritual integrity of the family must engage the media in constructive fashion. The Ron Luce/Teen Mania Ministries approach of cultural confrontation may not be the most effective. The organization’s financial demise may be due in part to the failure of that philosophy (Zylstra). A more effective approach might be the kind fashioned by VeggieTales creator Phil Vischer.

After the success of VeggieTales, Vischer has launched a new effort with the creation of What's in the Bible?, an ecclesiastical smorgasbord of instruction ranging from standard Sunday School fare like Noah and the ark to considerably less well-trodden territory like the 313 A.D. Edict of Milan, taught by, of all things, puppets” (Bashan). Rather than retreating from media, Vischer has established an example of utilizing the media to strengthen family and Christian values within the culture.

Politics and media are weapons of the world, however, and it is clear that there are other more powerful resources that are available to the Christian who seeks to defend the sacredness of the family structure. The apostle Paul instructs his followers in Romans 12:1-2 that Christians are to engage in “mind renewal”:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will (NIV).

Mind renewal occurs as an individual offers him/herself to Christ. A person accomplishes this by confessing faith in Jesus—Romans 10:9: “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (NIV). The most effective way to defend family values is to persuade people within the culture that they need the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. As people accept God’s gift of grace, they offer themselves as living sacrifices to God, and their minds begin the process of transformation which results in mind renewal, a transformation that will ultimately allow the Believer to gain an appreciation for the values of the Bible. The proclamation of the gospel message, therefore, is a primary weapon in addressing the demise of the family structure and affirming its spiritual integrity.

The message of the gospel must always be accompanied by prayer. Too often in the Christian sub-culture, the focus seems to be directed in stirring up passion toward those who hold to different perspectives on the issues of abortion, same-sex behavior, or any of the ethical issues that surround the preservation of the sanctity of life. It is very easy to become infuriated by the rhetoric of an individual like gay-activist Dan Savage (Oppenheimer). It is another thing to pray for him. Prayer accompanied by friendship and the proclamation of the gospel can initiate mind renewal in the life of the most ardent opponent of biblical values. One of the better known examples of the success of such an approach is illustrated in the relationship of Christian and conservative commentator Cal Thomas, and Democratic party strategist Bob Beckel. Thomas' long-time friendship with Beckel, resulted in Beckel becoming a Christian, and initiating a process of "transformation of the mind" that has enabled the two of them to share many similar values and views. Rather than hostility toward those who hold differing opinions, prayer and gentle persuasion can serve as powerful weapons to turn the tide toward the preservation of the spiritual nature of the family structure.

There is a second factor in addressing the issue of defending family values and that has to do with gifting. The Apostle Paul also wrote in I Corinthians 12:4, "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them" (NIV). It must be clearly understood that within the Christian community not all are gifted with the same abilities. This is especially true when it comes to engaging the principalities and powers that seek to undermine the family structure. In the Old Testament, the gift of prophecy was manifested in the confrontation of the culture by a public denunciation of the nation's unfaithfulness to God and its failure to keep God's commandments. There were few individuals who possessed this gift. The same is true in modern society. Though many aspire to be prophetic, only a few individuals have the ability to publicly

denounce the practices of the culture in an effective fashion. There are other, much more effective gifts, however. The gift of preaching the good news of the gospel is an ability that is possessed by many in almost every Christian community. The gift of teaching is an essential ability that can be utilized to convey biblical truth to a younger generation. The gift of generosity can impact those organizations that engage in legitimate prophetic ministry. Some have the gift of mercy and can participate in ministry that declares the importance of biblical truths through action. It is important for those who would defend the sacred nature of the family to assess the gift that he/she may possess and then to develop that utilization of the gift in the most effective way possible.

Anne (not her real name) has had a concern about the undermining of family values in the African-American community for years. She has attended conferences that address the issue, she has even attempted to write articles for publication, but without success. Having had little encouragement in actually doing something to solve the problem, she envisioned starting a group home for African-American women who found themselves in crisis situations. Her goal was not just to provide a place for them to live in safety, but to emerge them in a learning environment that valued children, parents, and family. In perusing this vision, she recognized that her gift was in fund-raising and encouragement. She was able to inspire many others to contribute not only resources but to volunteer their time and their gifts to make the vision a reality. The recognition and exercise of her individual gifts is making a difference in her community.

Conclusion

The family is more than just a cultural phenomenon. It is a spiritual unit designed by God to fulfill the creation mandate. Part of that mandate is to procreate and produce lives that bear the image of God. There are many within society, however, who advocate the ending of life, and

promote institutions and governmental programs that destroy the family unit or reduce its ability to fulfill the creation ordinance. As described in the Bible, powers of evil would gladly undermine the sacredness of the family and destroy its ultimate purpose, but within the Christian community there are those who are knowledgeable about the issues and gifted with the spiritual abilities to engage the enemy.

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