

The Christian Family

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Over the past forty or fifty years the Biblical view of the family has come under severe attack. What many of our parents and grandparents considered normative is looked upon today as a relic of the Christian past. Unfortunately even the Christian community has succumbed to these attacks. The fallout from such a radical change of view has proved devastating. In a recent report by the Conservative Social Justice Policy Group entitled, *Breakdown Britain*, chairman Iain Duncan Smith said, "Almost every social problem that we face comes down to family stability." This observation is consistent with God's word. The Bible teaches that the family is the basis of church and society. The decline of the family, therefore, inevitably will lead to the fall of the church and society as a whole. To remedy the situation, the Christian community must turn to the Bible and allow God, not modern culture, to regulate family life.

Why does God graciously and mercifully redeem a people to Himself? Primarily, to separate His children from the children of the world, and to instruct them in righteousness (see Titus 2:11-12). This is clearly seen in the Old Testament story of the exodus. God called Israel out of Egypt to serve and worship Him. He called them to be His special treasure, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. To equip them for such a high calling He gave His moral law, which was to set the standard for godly living. In the fifth commandment the people of God received instructions regulating family life. This law continues to regulate Christian families today, as is seen in its use by Paul in his New Testament letters to the Ephesians and Colossians.

There is much confusion in modern times about the make-up of the family. The fifth commandment begins with these words, "Honour your father and your mother..." Here the covenant family is defined. It consists of a father, a mother and children. This may seem basic but in today's culture this definition is important. Modern man has opened the door for individuals to define the family in whatever way they like. Yet, according to the Creator, the family unit is one man and one woman, united by marriage, together with their offspring. Those who love God and submit to His authority will accept this order and firmly defend it against all attacks.

God's Purpose for the Family

What is the purpose of the covenant family? Covenant families are to promote the glory of God by encouraging piety and devotion in the home, in the church, and in society. Godly homes provide an environment wherein love to God and love to neighbor is developed and nurtured. In this sense the covenant home is rightly called a seminary.

If the family is to fulfill this purpose each member must understand and fulfill his or her God ordained role.

Duties of Children

It is noteworthy that the first commandment regulating man's relationship with fellow man is given to children. This shows the significant place God has given to children in the covenant community. The primary duty of the child is to honour his or her parents. To honour means to give weight to or respect to those in positions of God ordained authority. According to the Westminster Larger Catechism the honour children owe their parents is "all due reverence in heart, word, and behaviour; prayer and thanksgiving for them; imitation of their virtues and graces; willing obedience to their lawful commands and counsels; due submission to their corrections..." Such an attitude of respect and submission is necessary for the covenant home to function properly.

Duties of Parents

The commandment also addresses fathers and mothers. The stability of the covenant home is dependent on the union of husband and wife. Therefore, the first duty of parents is to strengthen and enrich their own marriage. Children are called to honor their father and mother. For this to happen the marriage bond must remain intact. Here indirectly, and in the seventh commandment, the covenant community is called to protect the sanctity of marriage. Divorce, although permissible in cases of unfaithfulness and willful desertion, is to be avoided. "Holy marriage," observed John Murray, "is an indispensable means of conserving and promoting godly families and the nurture of faith; it is the institution for the propagation of godly life. When the proprieties which govern such marriages are desecrated, then the gates are flung open to the most violent of vices." (Principles of Conduct, p. 249) The parental unit is essential to the covenant family and therefore, must be protected.

Parents are in a position of authority and responsibility. They stand in the place of God before their children. What a sobering thought! For this reason they are to be honoured. Their objective, according to the prophet Malachi, is to rear godly offspring. This is achieved by instructing and training covenant children in the ways of God. Interestingly, just after Moses gave the Ten Commandments in the book of Deuteronomy he made the following statement to covenant parents, "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up." (Deut. 6:6-7) This passage shows the connection between the fifth commandment and the responsibility of parents to nurture their children according to God's law. Further proof of this is found in Paul's words to the Ephesians. (see Eph. 6:1-4)

The covenant family is not to be confused with a theological college lecture room. Parents should not be content with filling their child's mind with Biblical truth. No, discipleship encompasses much more than the communication of facts. Proper instruction is practical instruction. Godly parents desire the knowledge of God to produce heartfelt worship. Joy fills the heart of a godly father and mother when, like

King David, a child responds, “Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.” (Ps. 119:97) The objective of covenant nurture is to train a child to apply Christian thinking to all of life.

When does this covenant nurture begin? Should parents wait until a child reaches the age of accountability, whatever age that may be? Should parents restrain themselves from rearing their children in the training and admonition of the Lord until the child makes a clear and credible profession of faith? By all means, no! Christian parents are morally bound to train up their children from the very moment the child enters the world. Paul exhorted Timothy to “continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that *from childhood* you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” (2 Tim. 3:14-15) The Greek word translated ‘from childhood’ (*apo brephous*) actually means from infancy. Timothy was instructed from the moment he entered the world. Why? Because children are considered part of the covenant community.

Duties of the Church

In the light of this teaching on the covenant home, what can the church do to strengthen families?

First, Christian parents should be encouraged to build godly families. Parents of the world speak of children as a hindrance and a burden. Yet, Christians should view their children as blessings from God. Sure, parenting is difficult work, but it is also rewarding work. Christian fathers and mothers, you have the great privilege of introducing your children to a merciful and gracious God. Take this responsibility seriously and enjoy your children.

Second, elders should make it a priority to instruct the congregation about godly family life. The health and well being of the church depends on it. Many Christian families are in desperate need of instruction about the covenant home. The once common practice of family worship is greatly neglected. Elders, encourage your families to make their homes an environment wherein godliness is desired and promoted. When the Christian community takes seriously the role of the covenant family God is glorified and church and society are strengthened.