Fidelity to Family

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One contemporary view of the family argues that it exists for the benefit of society. Through a natural process of social change, we are told, the family is being relieved of its functions by educational, governmental, and economic institutions. It follows that the traditional family is no longer necessary or useful, but alternative family forms may serve society’s interests more effectively.

Scripture presents the family as God-ordained with its own integrity. It does not exist simply to facilitate society, nor does it serve to indulge the interests of individual members. The family components of marriage and parenthood receive great attention in the Bible, with their accompanying roles of husband, wife, parents, and children.

What is marriage? Is it a piece of paper, a negotiable partnership, a sexual union? The creation account in Genesis describes marriage as a one-flesh union (Genesis 2:24), a relationship which involves two people so closely that all aspects of their lives are united. Couples share everything: ways of thinking, emotions, bodies, commitments, legal rights, parents, friends, financial resources, work, and communication. There is no privacy since one person is open to all of the other (Genesis 2:25).

The Apostle Paul contends that the maintenance of the union must be a high priority. No other aspect of life may be permitted to become divisive—whether money, in-laws, children, leisure, time, career, or Christian ministry (1 Corinthians 7:32-34).

While nourishing the marriage requires lifelong attention, the partner should never become an object of worship. The Lord is the object of one’s faith and the motivation for loving one’s partner and continuing the marriage. All men and women are sinners, and none can inspire love and commitment continually. Relying upon one’s partner alone means that the relationship becomes demanding, possessive, even agonizing. It is not by coincidence that classic literature often associates such love relationships with tragedy and disaster.

The Lord God is a jealous God Who will tolerate no rivals, not even a marriage partner (Exodus 20:3-5). Our fidelity to marriage and family is based upon—and is secondary to—our allegiance to Him. For that reason this series of articles in the Cedarville TORCH begins with God.

Marriage was established by God before the fall, with built-in structure and authority. The offense that the husband’s authority creates today arises from the fact that it is seen in terms of assertiveness, dominance, and arbitrary power. It is noteworthy that when the New Testament addresses husbands and wives separately, all instruction regarding headship and submission is directed to the wife and not to the husband (Ephesians 5:22-24; Col. 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1-6). Any submission is to be voluntary on her part, and the husband is never commanded to make his wife
submit. She also has the responsibility to cultivate his headship rather than resenting it, competing against him, or bartering for equal rights.

The husband is to love his wife and honor her. The love is to be patterned after the sacrificial, unconditional love demonstrated by Christ. His redeeming work (Ephesians 5:25-27). It is a love that is realistic, aware of the spots and wrinkles, resolved to the point of overcoming bitterness, and sanctifying so that he facilitates her growth in holiness. The godly husband recognizes that in ill using or ignoring his wife he hurts himself; for the two are one (Ephesians 5:28-29). He may wish his own physical body were better looking, stronger or healthier, but he nourishes and cherishes that body as if it were the best body a man ever had. The man who so nourishes and cherishes his wife will give her all the motivation she needs to respect him and support his loving leadership.

The responsibility of the husband to honor his wife (1 Peter 3:7) includes treating her as a fellow-heir of God’s grace. In Peter’s day it would be a unique honor for a woman to be a co-inheritor with a man, receiving equal possession of the family property. Such an extraordinary distinction would place her in high public esteem, beyond the recognition accorded almost all other women. The most valuable inheritance the husband has is the grace of everlasting life, and his redeemed wife has received that new life in the same manner.

The husband also honors his wife by understanding that she is a weaker vessel because she is a woman. Viewing this statement through the lens of our culture leads to the conclusion that this is one of the most disrespectful and demeaning notions a husband can have towards his wife. A close examination of the biblical words, however, reveals that the statement in no way compliments or elevates the husband.

Both the husband and wife are weak; she is simply the weaker of the two. Her greater weakness is related to the place of her role as a woman. In the structure of marriage she submits herself to a fallible head, one who will make mistakes. Such a subjection makes her vulnerable to her husband’s flawed leadership. Life is full of these vulnerable submissions for both men and women, as they submit to governmental leaders, employers and pastors. Sinners in these positions of authority will make wrong and unwise decisions, even against the advice and warning of the “subjects.” Those who have submitted to that authority will then suffer the consequences. In marriage the vulnerability of the wife is greater, even though both the husband and wife are weak.

The point of Peter’s instruction is that the husband is to be aware of the risk his wife assumed when she submitted herself to his headship. He is to live with her in such a way as to reflect his sensitivity to her role with its accompanying liability. In so doing, he seeks her counsel and input for all aspects of family operation, and moves with the greatest of care if it is in opposition to her preferences. Thus, the husband honors his wife by understanding her weaker position in the marital union.

Marriage is the permanent component of the family, while parenthood is the temporary side. At the point of marriage, an individual leaves father and mother to be joined to his or her own partner in marriage. Marriage is the necessary prerequisite for parenthood in the plan of God (Psalm 128:1-4).

Marriage is to provide a secure and stable shelter in which children can grow. Parents become a caring team who provide strength for each child. Since a couple finds in their union the companionship, sexual fulfillment, and love that each seeks, their attitude towards the children is not one of demanding affection or gratitude, but rather giving love and direction in the way God parents His children (Hebrews 12:5-11).

The presence of two parents provides the child with close, continual contact with both sexes. The child observes and respects that union in order to mature from self-centeredness to communal living. If the marriage is a full union, then both parents bring up the child. The primary responsibility of the child is to obey and honor the parents (Ephesians 6:1-3), so as the child observes parents functioning as a one-flesh unit, equal obedience and honor are extended to both mother and father. Children will often exploit “cracks” in the union, even contributing to the destruction of the marriage which they wish to remain intact.

When addressing parents, Paul specifies the father as the parent who is ultimately responsible for child-rearing (Ephesians 6:4). This is another aspect of male headship in the home, but one which does not detract from the child’s obedience to or respect for the mother. New Testament writers assumed that their readers grew up in homes where the father was actively involved in parenting (1 Thessalonians 2:11; Hebrews 12:9).

Parents are entrusted by God with the responsibility of leading children into life; and as stewards, they help in the development of people made in God’s image. The challenge is to raise children so that they recognize their principal destiny to be serving the Lord in the home, the church, and society. They will hear messages to the contrary, even from well-meaning persons who will counsel them to believe they are free to set their own aims and occupations in life according to their own inclinations.

The authority of the parents is not rooted in society, based upon power, or a consequence of the child’s economic dependence upon adult providers. The parents’ authority is founded in Scripture (Deuteronomy 6:6-9), so the parents are not a law unto themselves but are merely teaching a set of standards which are independent of them and to which they also are subject. In the maturation process, the child is not moving from dependence to independence. Rather, as the child becomes increasingly independent of parents, he or she is to grow in dependence upon the Word of God. The goal of the parent is to bring the will of the child into submission to God.

Parents must adhere to the standards they set, while making it clear to their children that mom and dad also do things that are wrong and need correction. Then there is no false optimism leading parents to believe their children will not sin, nor is there pressure to assume ultimate responsibility for their children’s wrongdoings.

Corrective discipline will be a normal part of loving upbringing (Proverbs 13:24). The sin nature will be evident in the child’s words and deeds from birth (Psalm 58:3). Children often believe that freedom comes with unrestrained self-expression. Godly parents can demonstrate that doing what they want results in bondage, while submission to the authority of Scripture results in true liberty (Proverbs 22:15; Psalm 119:44-45; John 8:32,34).

When the parents’ marriage is unsatisfactory, one or both may seek fulfillment in the relationship with their children. All too often this results in a failure to respect the children’s marriage. Children are to be reared to be released for marriage and the establishment of their own homes, for which they are directly accountable to the Lord.

Families of every generation have been faced with the challenges of their own cultural and personal situations. Currently many families are struggling to survive financially—a dilemma which stresses the fabric of family life.

Middle-income parents find themselves faced with difficult financial decisions. For instance, should they have one wage earner and live in an area with poor schools and
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Third, the people who put God first have great vision for God. They see God everywhere and in every circumstance. Under house arrest the Apostle Paul wrote from Rome and referred to the chains that bound his feet, hands and neck as the "necklace" or "jewelry" of an ambassador for Christ (Ephesians 6:20). He saw Christ in his chains. And he proudly wore them as one would a necklace or fine piece of jewelry. Can we see God in our trials like that?

Peter states, "Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:12-13). Those who put God first can see God in their trials. They know His grand plan of the ages is being worked out through them.

Two days before my father passed away, I was standing by his bedside when he asked me to preach his funeral. He was dying of a rapid form of leukemia. For 32 years I had watched him energetically pastor five small churches, but now he appeared extremely weak and frail. His spirit was strong, however. And he had not lost a bit of his keen perception; he could tell that I was having difficulty accepting the idea of his death. Through blurred eyes I watched him as he quoted to me words I will never forget, words that Job had originally spoken to his foolish wife, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (Job 2:10). Those words burned themselves into my mind. The correct answer is "No!" But the point is, are we going to follow God only through good times? Or will we follow Him through the tough times, too?

My father could see God where I could not see Him. God was at work even in his leukemia and in his death.

The people who put God first have great vision of God in their lives. They see God at work everywhere. And they know "that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

The young man I referred to who made Christ first in his life began to evidence substantial changes. His wife returned for a brief visit and said, "Things have really changed for the better. I should have left home sooner." She missed the point. Even though he still dearly loved her, he said to her, "I have not changed to get you back. I have changed because that is what God wants me to do, whether you come back or not." Then she realized the changes were serious.

Two weeks later, on the very day the pretrial for divorce was scheduled, she also gave her life to Christ. She returned to her husband. They dedicated their baby to the Lord the next Sunday and were baptized a few weeks later. You will not find a couple happier in the Lord. If you ask them today what they are living for, you had better be ready for an hour lecture on making God first in your life.

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high crime, or become a dual wage-earner household in order to purchase a home in an area with good schools and low crime. Employment of the wife outside the home naturally diverts time and attention away from the children. The pursuit of buying the ideal home and the coveting engendered by the media can dominate the marriage in ways that do great harm.

Small families and high incomes have become the norm for the American family which, at the same time, is the most affluent household on earth. It is curious that the world's most well-to-do families appear to be living under such financial oppression. One cannot help but wonder if this is self-imposed.

If society is permitted to determine the alternatives from which the family must choose, then scriptural guidelines can become lost in the decision-making process. The obstacles faced by the Christian family should not be amplified to the extent of being bigger than the God it claims to serve.

Biblical norms for the family are not servant to the circumstances pressed on families by the culture. Commitment to godly marriage and the family is becoming one of the most effective ways to declare the gospel of God's grace to neighbors, co-workers, and classmates whose families are collapsing and who have nowhere else to turn for help.

Those who believe the biblical family is no longer necessary and useful contribute to the destruction of society. Those who practice biblical family values may be the only hope against its eventual collapse.

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