

## What is a Family?

The Bible affirms the necessity of maintaining the sanctity of marriage. "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Hebrews 13:4).

In reference to this text, 17th century English Puritan theologian John Owen defined marriage as "a lawful conjunction of one man and one woman, by their just and full consent, into an indissoluble union (whereby they become one flesh), for the procreation of children, and mutual assistance, divine and human." Owen notes that the legitimate and orderly continuation of the human race, and whatever is praiseworthy and useful in all societies, economical, ecclesiastical, or political, depends on stable marriages.

At the 1953 International Conference for Reformed Faith and Action, which was held in Montpellier, France, the importance of the marriage-based family was reaffirmed. Dr. Stanford Reid asserted that fundamental to human society is the family. He noted that both the Church and the State are based on the family by virtue of the fact that the members of the state and of the Church are primarily members of the family. He warned that if the family disintegrates or fails to fulfill its proper functions, its decline will have great and very serious repercussions upon the other social spheres.

### Under attack

But if it is so important how can we explain what is happening to the family? Hardly any observer of American society today is not painfully aware of the great strain family life is facing. We see its disintegration with all its dire consequences. We fear its loss. Without a family we have no way of identifying ourselves. Through the family we get to know who we are now, how we got that way, and what we are expected to become.

As an institution, the modern family has lost much of its legal, religious and social meaning. Furthermore, marriage has lost its support even among some of the religious faithful. In some denominations, pastors avoid preaching and teaching about marriage and the family for fear of offending parishioners. Marriage is also quietly losing its place in language. With the growing plurality of intimate relationships, people tend to speak more about "relationships" and "intimate partners" than about husbands and wives.

Moreover, some of the so-called elites believe that support for marriage and family is synonymous with far-right political religious views. The need for the very existence of a marriage-based family is disputed. Anne Roiphe argues in her book *Married: A Fine Predicament* that we cannot say that conventional marriage is necessary for the stability or the success of the individual child, "Marriage

needs another defense if it's to remain a part of our lives." She claims that marriage is not the only way to be respectable these days and social power is possessed by those who mock the rules. She points to rock stars, rap stars, and movie stars, who mock the traditional rules without any serious consequences for their careers.

Strenuous efforts are also made to abolish as many practical differences as possible between marriage and other sexual relationships. The ultimate goal is to open marriage to all sexual partners who have been excluded. Kevin Bourassa and Joe Varnell, a gay Ontario couple, challenged their government's marriage law in their book *Just Married: Gay Marriage and the Expansion of Human Rights*.

One obvious consequence of the breakdown of the family is the high frequency of divorce. In our time divorce is no longer seen as something abnormal. It has become socially accepted. But a society that begins to believe in divorce as socially acceptable is beginning to disbelieve in marriage. Many children are now growing up in a culture of divorce. They witness marital failure and breakdown in their own families and in the families of friends, neighbors and relatives. There are no painless divorces. Divorce is always a profession of failure and disillusionment.

What lies at the heart of the breakdown of the family are not only unbridled individualism and the cult of self and self-fulfillment to be achieved at all cost, it is the spiritual and moral bankruptcy of our society. Biblical revelation and the idea of God-given moral standards are challenged as irrelevant. Individual freedom is enthroned. Men and women are the ultimate measure of all things. They decide whether the family is a social construct or a purely human convenience. The moral question still is: How should we live? The obvious answer for Christians is: We should live in harmony with the teaching of Scripture. We are called not to be conformed to the patterns of the world but to be re-formed by the renewal of our mind so that we will be able to discern God's will for our lives (Rom. 12:1-2).

### **The Creation Order**

According to Scripture, a marriage-based family is not a human invention. God as Creator and Father precedes all families, tribes and nations of the earth. The Creator had a blue print in mind for the family. In God's eyes the family is the cradle of civilization and fosters the development of society. The apostle Paul affirms: "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and earth derives its name." The family-tie from the first was an act of God. He instituted it in the Garden of Eden when he gave Eve to Adam and blessed them.

There is no other human relationship that is the equivalent to marriage. The family is based upon monogamous marriage, which through natural procreation

was to ensure the continuation of the human race. Marriage is more than an intense emotional feeling and experience of love. God created male and female for each other. In marriage, therefore, there is a distinct difference between the two sexes. Without it there can't be a marriage. The creation account clearly states, "A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen.2:24). Marriage then, is a bond between a man and a woman who promise to remain faithful to each other for their whole life (Rom. 7:1-4; 1 Cor.7: 39).

The family had an important role in the life of Jesus. The incarnate Son of God was raised by a family. The Gospel of Matthew begins with the report of the birth of Christ with a genealogy of His family. Jesus' first miracle was performed at a wedding, where He turned water into wine. He celebrated with the newlyweds. He placed an extraordinary emphasis on the institution of the family. He often dealt with its nature and obligations. For example, when the Pharisees questioned Jesus about His view on divorce, He expounded with candor and thoroughness God's blueprint for marriage. He appealed to Genesis 2 as God's intentions for marriage before it became marred by sin (Matt. 19:3-9). In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus used the family setting to illustrate the Gospel of grace and forgiveness. His last thought upon the cross for His mother was for her to have a home. The Biblical message is beyond dispute. The integrity of the family, as the core institution of social and national life must be reverently guarded and stringently secured. In other words, so-called trial marriages and same sex unions are simply ungodly. They are violations of the creation order.

## **Covenant**

The sins of our culture have also impacted the church and the family. They too are exposed to "values" of the outside world via the tube. Christians claim to believe what God says in His Word, but the gap between the Biblical view of the family and our view for the family is growing. Closely tied to the disintegration of the Christian view of marriage and family is the decline of the covenant concept. Even in Christian circles individualism has taken its toll. The emphasis began to be placed on the individual and the individual's faith and conversion. The true covenant character of the family became to be ignored. But a family is not merely a group of individuals living together under the same roof. The key note in Biblical literature for the family is the three-way mutual responsibility – father, mother, and children.

Marriage is a covenantal relationship, which is most holy and precious in God's sight. That's why a Christian may not marry a non-Christian. This is against the will of the Lord; a transgression of the command: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14). The covenantal relationship with God is not limited to the individual. It is a relationship based upon the covenant of grace. The family relationship, therefore, is not only a physical but also a spiritual entity. The supreme example of this relationship is exhibited in the family. Children, we are

told, are "a heritage of the Lord" (Ps. 127:3). Calvin comments that, "every family of the pious ought to be a church." John Cotton, the 17th century New England Puritan, saw the church composed of families rather than individuals. He said, "The faith of the parent doth bring the Children and household of a Christian, even now in the days of the New Testament, under a covenant of salvation, as well as the faith of Abraham brought his household of old under the same covenant."

In the family setting we eat, live, and suffer together. We are joyful together and grieve together. We also pray, give thanks, sing, and praise together. When the family is understood as a covenant relationship, parents will have a new sense of obligation to their children, for they realize that their children have been entrusted to their care by the Lord, and must be trained "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." God's covenant and His Word are their guides. They will take seriously the promises they made when their children were baptized. Repeatedly the Bible urges parents to instruct their children in the faith (Cf. Ps.78).

## **Love**

What is the norm for the family? I have heard it said, "We stay together as long as love lasts." In other words, "If I find someone else to love, I'll leave."

But marriage is for better and worse, until death does part husband and wife. The norm of marriage is not sexual interest, nor even procreation. "True marriage is not possible without love," writes W.G. De Vries in *Marriage in Honour*. "The foundation of every marriage is that husband and wife, joined together in true love, assist each other faithfully in all things belonging to the temporal and eternal life." The Puritan Wadworth advised no one to marry any person for any reason "unless they can have real cordial love to them; for God strictly commands mutual love in this relation." Consequently, even if a marriage remains childless, it is still a valid marriage. In our time when so many revisionists seek to impose a variety of family styles on our society, this should be kept in mind. A marriage is still a union of husband and wife even though there may not be any children for one reason or another. That's why many Christians prefer to talk about marriage-based families and cannot recognize any other partnership arrangement as valid.

Stanford Reid rightly points out that a family is more than marriage since it includes within its membership children who are bound to the parents not only by blood but also by love. This love is not a sentimental or a mere erotic feeling for another person. It will not use people for egocentric and self-serving ends. It flows from God's love. God's love for us is the norm and origin for all genuine love (cf. John 3:16). In marriage we submit to the will of our Heavenly Father in joyful obedience. When we love the Lord, we obey His commands. Jesus said, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love"(John 15:10). And "this is my command: Love each other"(John 15:17). Within the context of the family, it is

this self-sacrificial love which parents have for each other in marriage which is pleasing unto the Lord.

## **The Family and the State**

Marriage is not defined by the state. According to the creation order, the family as a sovereign institution is prior to the state with its own rules. The function of the state is to protect the rights, the dignity, and the sanctity of the family.

With the rise of the welfare-nanny state, the relationship of the family to the state has been radically changed. Policy experts believe that the State knows better than families on how society should unfold. Hence, families are told to yield to the political, economic, and "moral" directions of the State. Since Canadian law and policy is rapidly moving away from an implicit Christian tradition to a postmodern-secular one, the role of the family and the rights of the family members are being redefined.

The once implicit rights of parents to raise their children according to their own beliefs and convictions, and free from the undue intervention of the state, have become obscured. The state now takes an evermore active role in line with the children's rights as defined by the United Nations Conventions of the Rights of the Child. Furthermore, Canada's Charter of Rights doesn't even protect the rights of the family. In her booklet *Family Autonomy and the Charter of Rights: Protecting Parental Liberty in a Child-Centred Legal System* Cindy Silver points out that by deleting express reference to the family, the Charter of Rights removed from plain view the grounds for constitutional protection of parental and family rights. "This omission," she says, "has contributed significantly to the demise of family autonomy and the devaluing of the family in law and legislation."

The courts have undermined the democratic process in Canada. They have imposed upon the state – while the federal parliament and provincial legislatures remained silent – immoral policies that pro-family Canadians cannot, in good conscience, accept. For example, in 1990 the Province of Ontario gave job benefits, bereavement leave, and insurance benefits to civil servants' homosexual partners. "Starting today," the *Toronto Star*, (January 1, 1990) boasted, "the term 'spouse'...has been extended to include [heterosexual] couples who are cohabiting...or homosexual relationships."

## **Conclusion**

I pray that we will see a turnaround in the negative trends which have impacted the family unit for the last four decades. The welfare of our society depends on the health and well being of this vital institution. Is there still hope for the family? There is, of course.

With God all things are possible. But we must do our part by making sure that the family is given a proper foundation, not on the shifting sands of economic, social or therapeutic needs, but on its relationship to the eternal God and His Word. The psalmist said, "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain" (Ps. 127:1). We must also turn away from extreme individualism and go back to the doctrine of the covenant, the foundation of the Biblical concept of the family.