

Trouble in the Family

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"There's trouble in the family!" Such a disclosure whispered across the kitchen sink at the family reunion or announced by Aunt Lucy over the telephone fills us with sadness, fear and even a bit of shame. It is news we often try to keep within the family. Yes, there's trouble in the family, or to put it another way, the family is in trouble, in this society, in this century. Not just your family or my family, but the family as a unit. This announcement also fills us with sadness, fear and a bit of shame. But we do not keep it quiet. It is etched on the title pages of books and magazines. It is the subject of investigations by journalists and social scientists. It is bewailed by both preachers and politicians.

The concern seems well-placed because the symptoms of the trouble are plain to see. Divorce is above 25% on a national scale and in some parts of the country divorce decrees now outnumber marriage licenses. Child abuse, that skeleton in the human family's closet, is increasing at what pediatricians and social workers are calling epidemic rates. It is now classified as a major cause of death among children. The New York Police Department estimates that at any one time there are 25,000 teenaged runaways on the streets of Manhattan alone, a number which is added to by every city throughout the country. Drug abuse, alcoholism and suicide among teenagers continues to be a serious problem. These statistics are simply the more dramatic symptoms of the many tensions and pressures which are at work upon and within contemporary family life. Every family experiences some pressures and tensions. Many families are literally torn asunder. How could we not be fearful of what the future holds for the family in general and our own family in particular.

Concern about the family is deep and wide-spread and the proposed solutions are varied. The solution mentioned most vocally today is heard in the call to return to traditional family values. That term, "traditional family values," has become an important item on the political agenda. Political action groups like Moral Majority and Christian Voice, were the first to make a candidate's stance on "traditional family values" a sort of litmus test of political acceptability. So widespread has the concern become, that a candidate can no longer face the electorate without proving his/her devotion to and support for the family. The bipartisan rush of members of the last Congress to get on record in support of strong anti-drug measures before November's election is indictive of these politicians' reading of the national mood.

What are these "traditional family values" which seem to be so important? By and large it is a code name, which is calculated to elicit a positive, emotional response. It conjures up the image of a former time when the family was strong and life was good. It holds up the promise that we can bring back those good times if we return to these traditional family values. But just what

are they? What tradition of family life is being invoked? Whose family experience is held up as a model? Which values are essential to protect and preserve?

When we inquire about what tradition is being invoked, the answers run something like this: the Biblical tradition, the Judeo-Christian tradition, the American tradition. All of these titles are assumed to point to a single tradition of what families are supposed to be. But is that actually the case? The Bible illustrates several types of family structure. In fact, *The Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible* describes six different types of marriage and family structures found in the Bible.¹ The patriarchal model is certainly prominent, but we have to be careful what conclusions we draw from that. Polygamy also finds support in the Bible but few would want to re-establish that tradition. If polygamy is explained away by assigning it to an outdated Old Testament tradition, then we have to reckon with the fact that Paul held up celibacy as preferable to marriage. The point of this is that several types of family traditions are assumed and described in the Bible. None is put forth as the divinely created structure for all times and circumstances.

When we invoke the image of "traditional family values," we have to ask whose family is being imagined. Maybe we think of a Norman Rockwell picture of the extended family gathered around the Thanksgiving table. But that image, if it has any contact with reality, only occurs rarely and on special occasions. The extended family is a rarity and even the nuclear family is changing. The U.S. Census Bureau has had to change its practice of designating the husband as "head of household" and use instead the designation "married-couple household" because the family with a wage earning father and a non-wage earning mother has become a distinct minority in the 1980's. The 1980 census figures show married-couple households at 59%, single-parent households at 16%, and singles living alone at 21%. The 1980 census report includes two new types of households, an LTA (living together arrangement) household, and an POSSLQ (persons of opposite sex sharing living quarters) household, which together constitute 4%.

The types of families in our contemporary society are quite varied, and it makes a great deal of difference which of these images of the family one has in mind when we talk about "traditional family values." There was a bill submitted to the ninety-eighth Congress called "The Family Protection Act." Among its many provisions, it would have denied federal funds to school districts using materials which diminished or denied the "historically understood" role differences between the sexes. It would have changed the tax schedules to favor a family with a wage earning father and a non-wage earning mother. It would have severely restricted federal support for shelters which protect wives and children from abuse, and have limited the services that shelters could provide to runaways without parental approval. This bill, flying under the flag of "traditional family values," was obviously written with one particular type of family in mind and would have protected this type of family at the expense of other types of family. If we are to protect "traditional family values" we must consider whose family we want to protect.

Likewise, when we consider "traditional family values," we have to ask

which values we are trying to protect and promote. When we look at how families have functioned throughout history we can see many values which the family structure has protected and promoted. Changes in society have brought about changes in family functions and in family values.² There was a time when the most important function of the family was to insure the physical survival of the family members. It was important during frontier times for families to be independent, self-sufficient units which held a defensive position against all other groups. But in today's inter-dependent society it is not possible for a family to be truly self-sufficient. And a defensive attitude toward other families can destroy the community ties which are essential for survival in today's society.

It is often assumed by those who champion traditional family values that the hierarchical structure of the family is one of the values to be preserved. It is assumed that this structure is God-given and unchanging. But a closer reading of Jewish and Christian Scriptures shows, as was mentioned earlier, several types of family structure. What we see happening is that whatever family structure the culture provided was taken, humanized and redeemed. For example the "Covenant Code" in Exodus 21ff assumes the practice of polygamy but is concerned that, within that practice, wives be treated justly (c.f.21:7-11). The practice of Levirate marriage (Dt.25:5-10), which in its Canaanite origins had to do with inheritance and the continuation of the dead brother's line, became in Hebrew practice also a way to insure the just treatment of widows.³ Jewish law assumed the traditional structures of family life, but its focus on justice eventually led to the undermining of many of the traditional practices including polygamy.

This process is even more evident in the New Testament. The Christians of the first century used the marriage and family structures which were prevalent in the culture, the Roman culture. In that culture husbands were expected to dominate and wives were expected to submit to domination. A Roman son was under his father's control as long as he lived and a daughter escaped her father's control only by having that control, at marriage, turned over to her husband. The father could sell his children, banish them from the country or kill them in punishment for a misdeed. Most Roman fathers never exercised these rights and by the first century their rights had been limited by the government, nevertheless this was the traditional family structure of the first century. (The Jewish and Greek family structures were similar.) This is the traditional family structure against which the New Testament teachings about marriage and family must be read.

There was nothing "christian" in the structure. The Christian contribution to the family is seen in the command for husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself for it and for parents to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. The culturally conditioned family structure was assumed, but by insisting that every family member is equal before God, every family member is a child of God and family members are to love one another, new meaning was infused into the structures which eventually reformed and redeemed them.

It is important, then, to remember what tradition we are invoking, and

which type of family we want to help, and which values are worth protecting and preserving. What is essential for the family is not a particular type of authority structure hanging over it, but a particular quality of love at work in it. The New Testament has much to say about love, what it is, where we see it, what it does. The preserving and nurturing of this kind of love is a family value worth all our efforts. The problem with the "traditional family values" solution to the family's troubles is that it is primarily backward looking. We cannot solve the troubles of families in today's society by trying to return to the past. Families have to live in today's society with today's pressures and today's troubles.

In seeking to give a word of guidance and hope to families in preaching, in teaching, in counseling and in the life of the church, care must be taken to be true both to the resources of the Gospel and the reality of family life today. In today's society, it is not physical survival which the family provides for its members. It is emotional security. Most people today value the family as a place where we can always go when we have no place else to go, as a "haven in a heartless world"⁴ where one is accepted unconditionally. The intimacy of family relationships needs to be nourished and supported in our society which seems to grow more impersonal year by year.

Intimacy is certainly a value which is rooted in both our theological heritage and in our contemporary needs. It is based on the agape-love of God who knows us and loves us just as we are, without prior conditions. The greatest promise of family life is the promise of finding another human being who knows all about us and who loves us anyhow. It is to have a relationship with at least one person with whom we do not need to pretend. By the same token the greatest disappointment in family life is experienced when we fall short of this potential, when we do not know one another, when we lose touch, when we don't talk. We cannot feel fully loved and accepted unless we feel we are fully known and understood. No one has written more helpfully and with more practical guidance about developing and nourishing intimacy within the family than Howard and Charlotte Clinebell in their book *The Intimate Marriage*. They define intimacy as "creative closeness." There are many levels on which two people can know one another and can communicate with one another. The ways we know one another are more varied than most of us realize and should be used as a resource for strengthening intimacy rather than seen as a barrier to intimacy. "Many couples are surprised and stimulated by discovering that intimacy is like an instrument of many strings. There are more areas in which creative closeness can grow than most couples even suspect."⁵ The greatest promise that marriage and the family offers to us is the opportunity to develop a truly intimate relationship.

Another discussion of family values which takes seriously both our theological heritage and contemporary reality is found in Volume II of James Gustafson's book *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*. He devotes a major section of this book to the consideration of "Marriage and Family." He discusses family values using the theological concept of stewardship. "We are the stewards of each others lives in marriage and family. . . ."⁶ By relating marriage to stewardship, Gustafson intends to emphasize our accountability to one an-

other, and to God, for our family life and relationships. We are accountable to each other within the family, according to Gustafson, for material resources, for mutual love, for each other's development, for social and moral values, and for the institution of the family itself. To understand marriage and family in terms of stewardship or accountability prevents us from treating each other, within the family, merely as means to our own ends. It sets family life within the context of God's providence and sets our family responsibilities within the context of our response to God.

There is much within our contemporary society which works to undermine our sense of accountability to one another within the family relationship. Robert Bellah et al. have written about this in their study of contemporary American culture published under the title *Habits of the Heart*. One of the main themes of their book is the pervasiveness of individualism in American culture and the way individualism has become ingrained in the American character. One of the concerns of the book is to assess the extent to which individualism is causing the erosion of family ties as well as ties to the larger community. A person who illustrates this situation for them is a business executive and family man they call Brian Palmer. Brian's family life is based on personal satisfaction. "I just find that I get more satisfaction from family commitments," he says. "It makes me feel better about myself." Bellah worries that Brian and others like him no longer even have the language to talk about family ties or community responsibilities in any real or conclusive sense. If we can only explain our family commitments by appealing to how they make us feel better about ourselves, then we have only shown that our primary accountability is to the self and any accountability we might have to one another or to God is secondary at best. "On the whole, even the most secure, happily married of our respondents had difficulty when they sought language in which to articulate their reasons for commitments that went beyond the self."⁸ The church has a long tradition of "accountability" language: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and your neighbor as yourself." So the church is in a good position to provide this language for contemporary people and to teach family members to use and understand it.

The Church has a high stake in the health and well-being of families. The Church in all its manifestations, from traditionalist to avant-garde, has a responsibility to advocate, nourish and support stable, intimate, loving family relationships in which the commitment to care for one another is strong enough to span the vicissitudes and struggles of modern life.

J.C. Winn in his book *Family Therapy in Pastoral Ministry* says that the family should be the church's "major mission field."⁹ He cites three things which the church should do to strengthen families. (1) The church should renew its own self-concept as family of God. In so doing, congregations should find ways to become extended families for the families of the church, providing intergenerational contact and relationships, and giving the extra emotional and spiritual support that families need but often find missing in this society. The older folks provide a living memory for the younger folks and the younger folks provide a living hope for the older folks. The church as extended family becomes the support group for all the types and conditions of families within it.

(2) The church should recall its families to the true meaning and scope of Christian vocation. Everyday life, including family life, is the context in which we are called to serve and enjoy God. Just as the church as a family of families should be a model for family life, so the family as an extension of the church is a laboratory in which we learn experientially the meaning of faith, hope, love, joy, forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, and faithfulness. We are called to glorify and enjoy God in and through our family relationships.

(3) The church should be a catalyst for bringing together families of all types to assess the needs of families and to speak with a unified voice to the centers of power which influence family life today. The church has a special responsibility to give a voice to those families who are powerless to speak for themselves, especially the poor who more and more live in families composed of the elderly or of single mothers with small children.

Mainline churches shirk their responsibility if they leave the defense of the family, the shaping of family values and the solution of the family's problems to political action committees. If the political agenda of the religious right is based on a faulty memory of the tradition or a faulty assessment of the reality of family life or a faulty vision of what family life was meant to be, it is the responsibility of those of us with another memory and another assessment and another vision to provide a counter voice in the political arena.

There is trouble in the family today, serious trouble. It is our family and it is our trouble. What the family needs today in the midst of its trouble is some good news, some gospel, some hope for redemption. It is incumbent upon those of us who claim to know the gospel and to care for families that we find effective ways to proclaim the gospel to the family.

NOTES

¹O.J. Baab, "Marriage" in *The Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume III, pp. 278ff.

²Roger Meehl, *Society and Love: Ethical Problems of Family Life*, trans. James H. Farley (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 14.

³Baab, *op. cit.*

⁴Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

⁵Charlotte and Howard Clinebell, *The Intimate Marriage*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 23ff.

⁶James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective: Volume 2, Ethics and Theology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, c1981-c1984), p. 165.

⁷Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 8.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁹J.C. Winn, *Family Therapy in Pastoral Ministry*, (Harper and Row: San Francisco, 1982), pp. 13ff.