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## THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

Ten years ago, our radio ministry assembled a series of interviews called “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” It was based on the old Gospel song written in 1907 that contemplated a family reunion in heaven:

*I was standing by my window  
On one cold and cloudy day  
When I saw that hearse come rolling  
For to carry my mother away*

*Will the circle be unbroken  
By and by, Lord, by and by  
There's a better home a-waiting  
In the sky, Lord, in the sky.*

These words very much express the heart of every godly parent. We desire generational continuity in the faith. There is no greater joy than to hear that our children are walking in the truth! Every time we read 3 John 4 as Christian parents, we want to say “Amen!” So, for these interviews, I sought out ordinary Christian fathers who had raised families in the 1970s and whose children were all walking with the Lord three decades later.

When I asked my own father to share some of his thoughts on this series of programs, his response surprised me. He suggested that I interview one of the leaders of the large Christian family ministries. Unwittingly, it seems, my father shared with me the “secret” of success for a Christian family—humility. He really felt that others had more important things to say about parenting and family life than he did. Looking back, I can see that I was raised in a rather obscure, unpretentious, pious, and humble family. I recall my early years with fondness, largely for this reason. Of course, my parents were not perfect, but I consider it nothing short of the grace of God that I was so privileged to be raised by Ralph and Carol Swanson in the 1960s and 1970s. I know that they still pray for their children and grandchildren every day, and I can tell you that God has answered those prayers.

Consider all that stands against us, as we attempt to build our families. We are all born with a sin problem that affects each of our children. There is no parent without sin; Christian parents included. The things that destroy the family are more prevalent in society today than they were 200 years ago. The entire spirit of the age blows like a hurricane against family integration, family relationships, and family solidarity. Now more than ever, no family will make it short of the grace of God.

We cannot make it without the wisdom of the Word of God. Too many books on child raising and family life rely upon psychological studies, bad theology, personal experience, helpful suggestions, and

the like. When parents have relied too heavily on these books, many have seen terrible results, even a generational wandering from the Christian faith. It is possible to lead your family badly. If a father fell asleep at the wheel or made some other poor choice while driving his family down a highway, the results could be catastrophic. It is definitely possible to blow it, and many have. There are many ways to go wrong. Ignoring God's wisdom in His Word or displacing it with human wisdom is the first mistake. For these important reasons, we want to stick very close to biblical language and biblical principle as we describe the biblical family.

## The Biblical Household

The Bible affirms the household, or the family, as the basic social unit. Marriage is highly encouraged, and warnings are issued for those who unwisely delay it.

“But if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” (1 Cor. 7:9)

“Therefore I desire that the younger widows marry, bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully. For some have already turned aside after Satan.” (1 Tim. 5:14-15)

The above passages clearly frown on the undue delay of marriage, which is important for the millennial generation to note. There are ditches on both sides of this road. An over-emphasis on singleness can become a doctrine of demons (1 Tim. 4:1-3), according to the same Apostle who recommended singleness during times of crisis.

“Now concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy. I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress—that it is good for a man to remain as he is.” (1 Cor. 7:25-26)

Somehow, in the history of the Church somebody missed the phrase “the present distress,” and the doctrine of demons emerged over the centuries. However, from creation onward, God instituted marriage as the way that humans should live their lives. Jesus Christ noted exceptions to the rule in three cases: those born eunuchs, those who are forcibly made eunuchs (usually by tyrannical governments), and those who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:10-12). Then He added, “He who is able to accept it, let him accept it.”

Here, Jesus does not refer to the modern metrosexual who delays marriage and glorifies singleness and perpetual adolescent immaturity. Of course, this lifestyle must include free indulgence in pornography and fornication. Meanwhile, Christian kids grow up in this same social system of extended adolescence in their schools and church groups, while desperately trying to avoid as much fornication as possible. Pornography addictions for young men exceed 80%, and the problem is often worse for professing Christians. Dragging pornography addictions into marriage has proven disastrous, so these Christian young men are even less prepared for marriage than ever before. According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 80% of evangelical unmarried persons confess to having committed fornication, compared to 88% of the rest of the population.<sup>7</sup>

When a secular writer from CNN grappled with these statistics, he ended the article with the question, “So what should a Christian parent or youth pastor do? How do they convince more young Christians to wait until marriage, or should they stop even trying?”<sup>8</sup> The Christian “True Love Waits” campaigns have proven themselves unable to stand against the social systems into which these young people are tossed. Unless we recover a full-orbed discipleship approach for our youth that prepares them for work and marriage, our Chris-

tian youth will hardly be salvaged from this bleak milieu.

The answer that few people today really want to accept is that found in 1 Corinthians 7:9 and 1 Timothy 5:14-15 (above). Somehow, it is considered odd and even immoral for a 16, 17, or 18-year-old man or woman to desire marriage. The alternative offered by the world is fifteen years of serial fornicating relationships, but real Christians and practical Christians would find this completely unacceptable. We prefer the wisdom of Scripture to the wisdom of this world. "It is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Cor. 7:9).

Granted, each man and woman has individual gifting and a unique calling and nobody is recommending a one-size-fits-all approach to marriage and singleness. Nevertheless, the spite for marriage and family has done immeasurable damage to the Christian Church in the West.

Our Lord Jesus affirmed the creation mandate in his teaching when He said, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt. 19:4b-6).

The single life apart from the covenant family and church is more the way of Cain (who wandered as a vagabond east of Eden) than the way of Christ. Notice that I include the covenant church family as a place where the celibate may still find his or her identity. What we do not read here in the words of the Lord is, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his college apartment and the single life until he is 35 years old at which point he may or may not be joined to his wife." The world's social conditioning weans our young singles from the family ethos. Occasionally, we caution our young people about the alternate worldviews they will encounter at secular and Christian college campuses, but they should be equally

aware of the alternate *social views* as well.

The Biblical household then is formed when a young man leaves his parents' household and cleaves to his wife, and they form another household. As the young man lived in day-to-day covenant family relationship before marriage, the hope is that he was growing in selflessness and the fruits of the spirit in relationship to those with whom he lived. The life of the vagabond configured by the modern social system, apart from covenant family and church is rooted in an existentialism in which self becomes preeminent.

## Marriage

“They are no longer two but one flesh.”

Here we discover a “great mystery” (Eph. 5:32). Christian theology and sociology involves mystery, and if you are a Christian you need to get used to operating within the realm of mystery. Failure to handle this mystery rightly has led to a wrong view of the family and the Church over the centuries, particularly in America where individualism is king. The superficial view sees the two people as separate only because the two are separated by spatial distance. The text does not indicate that the two are one in spirit, but one in flesh, and flesh is understood materially. The oneness is more ultimate than the individual two-ness.

Those pastors and Christian authors who have a hard time seeing the oneness of marriage will use words like “leader” to describe the husband’s role. The Bible does not use this word because the Scriptures think covenantally. Instead, the word preferred by the inspired writers is “head.”

“For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body.” (Eph. 5:23)

Be careful with doctrinal teachings that treat the husband as merely a “leader.” To be the head of a body is much different from being a manager of a company or a leader of a military troop. The

difference is seen in the covenantal nature of the family and church that God has hard-wired into these institutions. The difference between a leader and a head of a body is seen in the organic connection. A leader is not organically connected to his troops as “one flesh,” as is Christ with His Church and the husband with his wife.

Modern individualism has led to both feminism and a warped view of male leadership and pagan patriarchalism. With feminism, the woman pulls away from the oneness by competing for “leadership” in the home. Competition should be completely irrelevant in true oneness. How does the torso of a body compete with the head? The pagan patriarchalist likewise ignores this oneness, failing to recognize the woman as bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. He sees no complementation, only competition and something else to subjugate.

A clearer understanding of this headship will lead to many profound implications for the family. For example, the head will be less likely to beat on his own body, as a leader might with the troops. Moreover, the head will take responsibility for the body, while looking out for the body’s best interest. The head will claim the body’s problems for his own, and be willing to sacrifice for it. The body finds it impossible to be the head, and the head finds it impossible to take the place of the body. When one or the other ceases to function, the entire unit becomes incapacitated. They both serve in complementary roles, and neither can deprecate the other without sustaining damage to itself.

This unity is something that really does exist, and it is a unity that must be increasingly realized, cultivated, and acted upon. The unity is an ontological fact, whether people recognize it or not. Recognizing and appreciating the unity will better sustain and nurture it. Failing to recognize and nurture the unity will often yield disastrous consequences. Covenantal thinking in marriage is crucial. Before