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Basic Family Concepts

INTRODUCTION

To say that the family is in a state of deterioration in Western culture is anticlimactic. Many have said it. Many are saying it. And the family continues to fall apart. In spite of the multitude of books, seminars, and experts, husbands and wives are still alienating themselves from each other, parents from children, and children from parents. Unfortunately, what many fail to realize is that the problem is not simply the Western family, but Western life. While millions are being spent

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on more programs, better methods, and clearer training for parents, the real problem is often unaddressed. The way we Westerners live—the things we think are important, the attitudes we have toward life, the very structure of our home life—renders ineffective much of the good advice we hear.

One example will suffice. While many Christian parents are wondering whether the music their teens listen to is suitable listening, and sometimes arguing about volume and forbidding this or that tape, few modern parents ever consider that today's music industry, including the Christian music industry, has virtually destroyed certain Christian values. Silence. The sheer noise (even nice-sounding noise) in many homes today would have driven many of our great-grandparents out to the pastures for a quiet walk. Worship. Where, in all the hullabaloo of Christian music today and the idolizing of favorite groups and the scrambling for each new tape and the bickering over how loud to play it, is the reverent sense of God? And how many thousand-dollar music systems (which are not worth a nickel in heaven) have silenced the voices of families singing simple but heartfelt praise to God?

The point is simple. There are many homes which can never be wholesome until some radical changes take place in the home structure. It would be foolish to try to build a house in a swamp on straw bales. And it is just as foolish to think we can build godly homes on the values commonly accepted in Western culture. If in Christian homes we find straw bales in the foundation, we cannot correct the problem by hiring some interior decorator to counsel us on paint. The foundation needs help first.

This chapter is about foundational things. From the Scriptures we want to see just what God intended the family to be. We want to look at concepts which are

basic to the family as a social unit. And later we want to look at some of the straw bales which our culture is pressuring us to use in our homes, and which we must reject if we are to have wholesome families.

THE SOCIAL UNIT

“And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up” (Deuteronomy 6:6, 7).

“A wise son maketh a glad father: but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother. He that gathereth in summer is a wise son: but he that sleepeth in harvest is a son that causeth shame” (Proverbs 10:1, 5).

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother. And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:1, 2, 4).

From these and similar Scriptures, we can easily see that God intended the family to be the most basic social unit of society. It is the place where such activities as visiting, eating, instruction, work, and play have their center. God intended that we interact with family members more than with anyone else. And having ordained the home to be the primary place of social interaction, God laid down guidelines for proper interaction.

As a social unit, however, the family in Western culture is seriously deficient. Those who want to work go to the corporation. Those who want to learn go to school. Those who want to play go to the park or the recreation

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center. Those who want to eat go to McDonalds. Visiting takes place only in snatches. Many Christian families find it strange to have the whole family home for an evening. Monday night is practice. Tuesday night is a ball game. Wednesday night is prayer meeting (for some). Thursday night is office cleaning (second job). Friday night a social is planned. . . . Run, run, run! Such social chaos was virtually unheard of for the family 100 years ago. And so, fathers must be told to do things with their children. Parents need to plan a “family night” or “quality time” because as a social unit, the family is falling apart.

Some of the pressures of overactivity will be discussed more later, but for now, let’s note that every child and every adult needs wholesome family interaction.

The Family Should Work Together

Obviously the job scene is changing in our modernized society. The family farm is no longer the norm. Many men who grew up with a farming background have gone to other jobs, such as self-employment in construction. In some ways, this is good—it still provides opportunities for fathers to work with sons. But it has its dangers as well—if the father operates his business at the pace of many American or European contractors, he easily becomes so engulfed in his work that he interacts little with his family. The answer, in other words, is not simply in starting a family business, but in valuing family interaction.

Where the father can work with his family, he should. Where he cannot work with his family in his occupation, he should keep that occupation from swallowing all of his working energy and plan work at home with his family in his off time. Gardening is an excellent off-time

work project. Where this is impossible, other projects can be chosen. It is good for children to see their parents work. It is good for parents to show their children how to work and to demonstrate the qualities of a good worker. It is good for families to figure out work-related problems, divide up responsibilities, and share the rewards of hard work.

The Family Should Eat and Talk Together

Schedule clashing and hurriedness seem to have converged on the family table in an all-out effort today to stamp out family meals. It is true that some schedule conflicts cannot be avoided, especially as older teens begin to interact more in the adult world. It is also true, however, that much of the meal disruption today is simply the result of overinvolvement. Many of the activities that call for family members at mealtime are good activities. And it is not wrong to be busy, but something basic is wrong when the unhurried family meal is the rare exception. And something basic must be done about it.

In evaluating activities which keep the family apart at mealtime, it is well to consider the difference between service activities and self-serving activities.

Service activities are love's responses to the needs of others. People who are serious in their commitment to Jesus Christ will often find themselves busy in service activities. Jesus found mealtime with His disciples being cut out by such activities, and He took steps for relief. "And he said unto them, Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat" (Mark 6:31).

Self-serving activities, on the other hand, are things we do primarily for our own enjoyment, pleasure, or