

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES



"Kids these days!" is a phrase I hear often, usually accompanied by a great sigh and a tone of exasperation. Equally familiar is the phrase "the breakdown of the family," a woeful situation attributed by some to the fact that women have gone to work outside the home, children watch too much television, and people in general lack a sense of morals and values. It is easy for us in the church to become caught up in this "ain't it awful" syndrome, but I believe there is a more positive and helpful way to approach the matter.

American author Carl Sandburg once wrote: "A baby is God's opinion that life should go on." God views life as good -very good. We know this from the story of creation in Genesis 1, in which God's response following each creative act was not unlike that of a person who, after a wonderful meal, smacks his or her lips and says: "Um, um, good!"

The Family-A Covenant Community

God envisioned that the human beings into whom the breath of life had been breathed would live in covenant and in community with one another. That was God's clear message to Abraham and Sarah, to Moses and the children of Israel, to the diverse people to whom the prophets addressed their message.

God also envisioned that those who received the covenant and commands from above would keep them in their hearts, recite them to their children, and talk about them wherever they went, both near and far (Deuteronomy 6). Needless to say, that did not always happen, and things began to fall apart. Many of the families about whom we read in the Hebrew Scriptures are, very clearly, not families we would seek to emulate. Incest, rape (Lot's daughters), greed (Ahab and Jezebel), sibling rivalry carried to extremes (Esau and Jacob), marital infidelity and soap-opera-type liaisons (David and Bathsheba) abound.

There is no question about it: Family life has always been complex and challenging, not something to be embarked upon by the faint-hearted. It is also evident that family life has to do with much more than neat, little family units composed of a father, mother, and two impeccably dressed, clean-cut looking children. Our neatly prescribed small world, which allow no room for families

that are not "traditional," such as blended, multi-racial, or single-person families, have lost sight of the God who sent Jesus to die for us all, because all are part of God's family.

God's Family

Together in the church we are called to be part of God's family. We are called to view all persons as our sisters and brothers and to seek to embrace all humankind as we go about the living of our daily lives. We forget that Jesus, in response to criticism that he had ignored his mother and brothers, said: "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? . . . Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:47-50). For Jesus, the concept of family was broad and far-reaching. For Jesus, the question "family" raised was: "Who are we willing to love?"

God's family is large and inclusive, valuing the gifts of both young and old, male and female. God's family system is such that we are urged to teach and admonish one another in a spirit of love, demonstrating respect toward all life. We are to train up children in the way they should go (Proverbs 22: 6), never forgetting that this awesome task of nurturing and teaching must be done with the awareness that the very ones we have been called to "train up" are the ones Jesus set before us as an example. "It is to such as these [little children] that the kingdom of God **belongs**" were Jesus' words. He went on to say: "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10: 13-16). What a challenging and humbling task has been set before us, both as members of biological families and as members of the family we call the church.

Who knows? Perhaps there would be some real value in taking more time to listen carefully to one another, to learn from the experience of others, to spend more time with those whom we identify as family, and less time leaving our families to rush off to workshops and seminars purporting to teach us how to "do" family life. Just a thought.

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