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## RETHINKING PARENTHOOD: Biblical Foundations of the Family

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### SYNOPSIS

As Christian parents, we want to model Christlike character in our daily lives. We want to influence our children so that they will do the same. Often, however, we are unsure how to go about doing this. We also want to have an influence for Christ and His kingdom, in and through the lives of our children. A significant problem related to this has to do with the confusion and controversy over what it means to be a parent that exists in our society, and within the church over how to best fulfill our responsibilities in this important role. Followers of Christ should see themselves as stewards of their children, acting for their good on God's behalf. In this way, parents can make use of the wisdom of God rather than contemporary culture as they seek to love their children and encourage their growth as persons and followers of Christ.

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There are deep problems related to the family life of Christians in contemporary America. The rate of divorce among those who claim to be "born-again" Christians is the same as that of those who do not claim to be followers of Christ. In recent times, there have been other disturbing trends regarding children in Christian families. There is a troubling level of lying to parents, teachers, and peers, cheating, sexual activity, use of both illegal drugs and alcohol, and other morally dubious beliefs and behaviors.<sup>1</sup> While there are positive trends as well, related to a commitment to social justice, the common good, and serving the poor, if we are concerned about the overall character of our kids, then we have work to do.

There are many reasons to be concerned about these issues, but one central reason is the connection between family life and faith. Sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox addresses this:

*The family revolution of the last four decades has not been kind to American religion...The growing secularization of American life...is certainly due, in part, to changes in the larger culture. It owes something, as well, to the theological and moral lassitude of many churches in*

*the face of those changes. But a large portion derives from the declining strength and integrity of the family. The recent history of American religion illuminates a sociological law: The fortunes of American religion rise and fall with the fortunes of the intact, married family.<sup>2</sup>*

The strength of the family and the strength of the church are intertwined. When Christian parents strengthen the bonds among the members of their families, they are also strengthening the bonds of the present and future Christian community of faith.

The problems should not be blamed on a lack of available resources. A search for “Christian parenting books” on Amazon results in 6,155 hits. There are books about Christian parenting emphasizing grace, forming the heart of our kids, using love and logic, applying biblical principles to family life, and many other strategies designed to support Christian parents. There are many Christian ministries whose purpose is to support the marriages and families of followers of Christ. Many local churches offer classes, retreats, and conferences as well. Some of these resources are very good, while others are lacking in a variety of ways. But something essential is often ignored. We need to have a solid grasp of *what it means* to be a parent if we want to excel in this role. Our understanding of what a parent is and what the goal of parenthood should be will inform our practice of parenting, whether we realize it or not. Given this, it is essential that we examine our beliefs about parenthood, and seek to understand it in a way that is informed by sound biblical, theological, and philosophical reflection. This is especially true given the current confusion and controversy that surrounds how we ought to conceive of parenthood and the family, and the variety of views about parenthood that are being advocated.

When considering the foundations of parenthood, our focus is on the grounds of rights and responsibilities of parents. There are many different ways of thinking about the basis of parenthood.

## **BIOLOGY**

The biological ties between parent and child historically have been the foundation of much of our thinking about the family. Wealth, property, and even political power have been and continue to be passed through family bloodlines. People continue to talk about biological parents as the “real” parents of adopted children. Such talk is mistaken, however. Whether the focus is the genetic connection between a parent and child, or the gestational relationship between mother and child, it seems clear that a biological relationship is not necessary for being a parent.

First, consider a passage in Matthew 12. Jesus has healed a man who was blind and unable to talk. After a dispute with the Pharisees over this healing, Jesus points out that what we say reveals who we are, and He rebukes them. Then, in Matthew 12:46–50 (ESV), Jesus continues teaching the crowds and is told that His mother and brothers are there and wish to speak to Him. He replies with a question: “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” He then reaches a hand out to His disciples, and says, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” This proclamation was deeply countercultural in the

social context of Jesus. A person's immediate family and kinship group were central to his identity in the Mediterranean world during New Testament times.<sup>3</sup> For the listeners, these statements by Jesus would have seemed outlandish.

This passage illustrates an emphasis in the teachings of Jesus in which family ties from a kingdom perspective are primarily moral and spiritual ties and that such moral and spiritual ties can trump biological ones.<sup>4</sup> Jesus does assign a caretaker for His biological mother during the crucifixion, so the point is not that such ties are irrelevant. The point is that we must be very careful that the deliverances of our own culture do not become our bible when thinking about any issue, including issues related to the family. And it looks as if Jesus is stating that biological connections between family members are not the most significant or defining feature of family relationships.

Second, adoptive parents and stepparents can be parents in the fullest sense of the word, possessing all of the same rights and responsibilities as parents who are biologically related to their children. And the relationships they have with their children can be just as deep, significant, and fulfilling. This underscores the point that people may be parents even if no biological connection exists because the essential goods of parenthood do not include biology. The most important components of parenthood are its social, moral, and relational aspects. The biological connection, while not necessarily unimportant, is of secondary importance when compared to these other goods that potentially exist in the parent-child relationship.

### CAUSATION

Though similar to the biological account in some ways, the focus of the causal account is on our moral responsibilities for the consequences of our actions, rather than the biological connections.<sup>5</sup> The emphasis is parental obligations rather than parental rights.

In everyday life and commonsense moral thinking, we generally believe that being causally responsible for harm to another person means that one is also morally responsible for that harm. For example, if I damage my neighbor's house, say by hitting a baseball through one of her windows, then I have the moral obligation to pay for the damage that I caused. Even if this was an accident, given that I knew that playing baseball near her house entailed the risk that such damage would occur, I am still responsible. The breaking of the window was a reasonably foreseeable consequence of my actions, and in light of this, I am obligated to pay for the damage.

By the same reasoning, on the causal account of parental obligations, those who are responsible for the existence of a child have obligations to that child. This applies to situations in which sexual intercourse is voluntary, of course. Just as I would not be morally responsible for the damage done to my neighbor's house if someone threatened to hurt me unless I hit a ball through the window, by the same token, victims of rape do not thereby incur obligations to raise and care for a child (after it is born) if a pregnancy occurs in such a situation. There may be other reasons for thinking that such an individual has some responsibility for the child that is created. Perhaps the victim of nonconsensual intercourse who decides to take on the responsibility for the child is engaging in a morally heroic action. My point is that the causal account does not have

this implication. Children without parents are vulnerable to a variety of harms, and on the causal account, the obligation to prevent such harms from occurring initially falls on the individuals responsible for the child's existence.

Many philosophers have not been convinced by the causal view. Some advocate what has been called a "new ideology of the family," in which the basis of parenthood is neither natural nor causal, but rather it is social.

### SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

A view that is becoming more prominent does not take parenthood to be tied in any morally significant way to either biology or causal-moral responsibility. Rather, on this view, one becomes a parent by some combination of consent and social agreement.

An extreme example of this view comes from Shulamith Firestone's book, *The Dialectic of Sex*.<sup>6</sup> Firestone contends that the biological family is unjust, and envisions a future in which women are freed from the tyranny of reproductive biology. She believes that the bonds that exist between family members, including parents and children, are mere social constructs. In its place, Firestone suggests replacing the biological family with households. A household would consist of about ten people who sign a contract binding them together for an agreed on minimum time. The length of time would be that which is needed for children to enjoy the benefits provided by a stable home to develop. At the end of the contract, the group could renew it, some could transfer out, others could transfer in, or the household could be disbanded.

Firestone envisions that there could someday be "free sexuality" in these households, which could include adult-child sex. Nonsexual friendships would also be a thing of the past. A stipulated percentage of each household would be children, though it would not matter if the children were the offspring of adult members of the household, adopted, or created via reproductive technologies. Childbearing would no longer be the task of women, with technology such as artificial wombs. In the early years of a child's life, when the physical dependence of children is greatest, childrearing duties would be evenly shared by all members of the household.

For Firestone, this system provides several benefits. Both adults and children would have more freedom. In fact, children could choose to transfer from one household to another if they were unhappy or unsatisfied in their current situation. According to Firestone, the result of all of this would be that the relationships that last would be based on love alone.

From a Christian perspective, there is much in such a proposal that is troubling. Apart from a variety of issues related to rational consent, it seems that in such a setting selfishness rather than love might more likely be the order of the day.

Many views that include the claim that the family is a social construct are less extreme. What all such views have in common is the claim that parental rights and obligations are not founded in biology or some natural relationship, but rather a social agreement between the state and an individual that designates that person as the parent. One advocate of this type of view does believe that we should give biological parents the "right of first refusal" to be the parents of a particular child. This is because

there is a tendency for emotional connections to exist between biological parents and their offspring. Nevertheless, the social contract is the primary source of parental rights and obligations.<sup>7</sup>

In her book, *The Fragmenting Family*, contemporary philosopher Brenda Almond criticizes the new ideology of the family.<sup>8</sup> She observes that language is being used in ways that reflect and reinforce the ideology. “Partner” is substituted for “husband” and “wife.” “Mother” and “father” are replaced with “parent” or “caregiver.” These new terms are preferable for advocates of a gender-neutral view of parenthood and the new ideology of the family in general because they do not refer to biological ties and reflect the view that parenthood is purely a matter of choice. Almond’s book is worth reading for those who want to think more deeply about the moral, political, and social issues concerning the family.

I contend that honesty, intimacy, mutual affection, and love are the most significant features of a good parent-child relationship. Children who have a family characterized by these traits will likely be well equipped for life as adults, regardless of whether or not those who help them accomplish these tasks are their biological parents. Nevertheless, there are important issues related to the biological connection between parents and their children worth considering. Biology does not in and of itself make one a parent, but there is value to the biological connection between parents and children.<sup>9</sup> This fact poses a problem for those who advocate for a new ideology of the family.

### **A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF PARENTING**

We have seen that there are different ways to acquire parental rights and obligations, and that significant controversy surrounds these questions. But how should parents think of themselves once they become parents?

Parents should see themselves as *stewards* of their children. Most Christians are familiar with the concept of stewardship as it relates to money and material possessions. We know that our money and possessions do not really belong to us, but rather that God owns all and entrusts these things to us as stewards. This same concept is the primary way in which parents should see themselves. That is, parents should act as stewards of their children. A steward is a caretaker, someone who cares for something that does not belong to her, or in this form of stewardship someone. As parents, we are responsible for how we manage that which God entrusts to us—our children. The authority we have is borrowed and temporary. We must acknowledge that our children are ultimately God’s, and that as they mature, we will transfer more authority to them, giving them the freedom to govern their own lives as they are able to do so. Parents should seek to carry out their stewardship in the wise, loving, and compassionate ways of God. We will hope, work, and pray for God’s best for our children, and for God’s best for the world through our children.

It is important that we understand what God’s best is so that we do not merely accept the received “wisdom” of our culture and let that inform our hopes and goals for our children. In John 10, Jesus says that He is our good shepherd. He has come to give us an abundant life (v. 10). The world often tells us that the abundant life is one of

comfort, pleasure, financial success, and the like. But what sort of abundance did Jesus come to give? The Greek word for abundant is *perissos*, which is a term that refers to a life that is superior, extraordinary, excellent, and remarkable. There is a similar biblical term that I think best captures what parents should desire for their children—*shalom*.

The Hebrew term “shalom” is usually translated into English as “peace,” but a better translation is “wholeness.”<sup>10</sup> Shalom also signifies tranquility, harmony, safety, well-being, welfare, contentment, health, and integrity.<sup>11</sup> Any parent who is seeking to be a wise and faithful steward in his role as a parent desires all of these things for his children. Shalom is also a compassionate state. It includes a longing for others to have the same wholeness, and it motivates one to serve others with this in mind. It not only includes personal peace and wholeness but also interpersonal peace. It is a trait of relationships, families, and communities. It is a gift of God, but it is a gift that we can help to bring about in the world (Rom. 1:20). Followers of Christ should seek to exemplify it in their hearts, churches, and in what we are focusing on here—families.

If parents act as stewards, then they will not approach their children primarily as problems to solve or things to control, but as persons to appreciate and love. Of course parents will face many problems, and they will sometimes need to exercise control over their children, but these will not be the primary ways of relating to their children. Martin Marty discusses these ideas in his book, *The Mystery of the Child*:

*The provision of care for children will proceed on a radically revised and improved basis if instead of seeing the child first as a problem faced with a complex of problems, we see her as a mystery surrounded by mystery. The need to deal with problems will, of course, be pressing in the case of every child, but if this need dominates the thoughts and actions of those who provide care, much of the wonder and joy of relating to children will be shrouded or even lost.<sup>12</sup>*

A problem-oriented approach is standard for many parents, at least in the United States, as a result of a deep pragmatic tradition in American thought and culture. A good parent will be practical, no doubt, but a problem exists when parents see children themselves as problems to be solved.

Part of what makes a child a mystery is that she is a person. The stewardship approach to parenthood will focus on the personhood of the child rather than the problems she poses or the problems she faces. Much Christian teaching and writing on parenting ignores what Marty calls the mystery of the child. Often the focus is instead on getting the child to do and be what the parents want her to do and be. There is a place for this as parents seek to encourage and help their children become and be followers of Christ. However, if the primary aim of parenting is to gain control over the child, making life easier for the parent, then something is wrong. Ultimately, seeking to control a child’s beliefs and behavior becomes impossible, as they grow and develop into adulthood. The parent who acts as a steward will seek to prepare the child to make wise choices and have true beliefs, all the while recognizing that ultimately as she matures, the child is responsible for the person she is, and that she becomes.

Parents can work, hope, pray, and love their children, hoping they enter into shalom as they relate to God in love and obedience and seek to love their neighbors as themselves. However, as in other cases of stewardship, the role often changes and ultimately ends. As children grow, parenthood is different. Dealing with a child at the age of five, fifteen, twenty-five, and forty-five is different. This seems obvious, but all of these stages require different types of parental stewardship. Given the demands of parenthood, it is encouraging to know that the grace and wisdom of God are available to all who seek to fulfill this important task of being faithful stewards for the sake of Christ and his kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 For a detailed examination of this, see Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *Right from Wrong* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994). For some more recent statistics see the website of The Barna Group (<http://www.barna.org>). See also <http://www.religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/09/27/why-young-christians-arent-waiting-anymore>.
- 2 W. Bradford Wilcox, "As the Family Goes," *First Things* (May 2007). From <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/04/as-the-family-goes-14>.
- 3 Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 117–48.
- 4 On this, see Matthew 10:34–39 and Luke 12:49–53.
- 5 James Lindemann Nelson, "Parental Obligations and the Ethics of Surrogacy: A Causal Perspective," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 5 (1991): 49–61.
- 6 Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: William and Morrow, 1970), 8, 233, 256–74.
- 7 Stephen Scales, "Intergenerational Justice and Parenting," *Social Theory and Practice* 28 (2002): 667–77.
- 8 Brenda Almond, *The Fragmenting Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 9 For a fruitful and thoughtful discussion of this, see J. David Velleman, "Family History," *Philosophical Papers* 34 (2005): 357–78. Available online at <http://philpapers.org/rec/VELFH>.
- 10 Kelly James Clark and Anne Poortenga, *The Story of Ethics* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 24–25.
- 11 David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), 39, 107, 200–201, 328, 440. A study of this word's appearances in the Bible, and its prominence in the New Testament, by examining the references to it in this book, would be very fruitful.
- 12 Martin E. Marty, *The Mystery of the Child* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1.
- 13 For more on stewardship and its practical applications, see my *Wise Stewards: Philosophical Foundations of Christian Parenting* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2009). For a secular treatment of parental stewardship, see William B. Irvine's *Doing Right by Children* (Saint Paul: Paragon House, 2001).