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### THE FAMILY IDEAL

By David Phillips

What do we mean by the term family? Most of us would probably think first of the nuclear family, father, mother and children. There is good evidence that this has been the fundamental unit of British society for hundreds of years. Today however the term not only refers to a wide range of situations but for many people the ideal is also no longer aspired to. Furthermore, in the Bible the concept of a family is much broader. Israel it seems was divided into tribes, clans and households but in places such as Joshua 7 the household seems to be much larger than just one nuclear family and indeed the term house can refer to the whole people of Israel or all the descendants living and dead of one particular individual. Whilst in the Old Testament 'household' is sometimes translated into English as family it is not really equivalent.

Similarly, although we encounter the word family (*patria*) in the New Testament the word household (*oikos*) is still more prominent.

Therefore, in speaking about families we need to beware of simply assuming that the Bible is speaking about nuclear families

Whatever the nature of a household in the Bible there is a fundamental unit of human society which has existed from the beginning: "*A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh*". Thus the Christian ideal of marriage, which was established at creation and upheld by the Lord Jesus Christ is of one man, one woman, for life. It was in this relationship that Adam and Eve bore children and that is likewise what we see as the ideal established by God.

Yet in the Old Testament at least the waters seem to be somewhat muddied. The most obvious example of this is the practice of polygamy. Many of the 'heroes' of the Old Testament were polygamists. We can see clearly with Jacob and David for example the problem which this created for family life and yet it is never condemned. Indeed God makes specific provision in the law for a particular polygamous situation (Deut 21.15).

Likewise we have as Christians a strong sense of the sanctity of marriage and that it is the only permissible setting for sexual union, and yet the Old Testament also permits the breaking of this sanctity in a particular case, where a widow is left childless.

What seems to hang over the Old Testament teaching and practice is the command of God given to Adam and Eve and repeated to Noah to fill the earth and subdue it. With this command in view it is possible to see part of the reason why childlessness was so unwelcome, because it makes it impossible to fulfil the command. In addition we can perhaps appreciate why, for example, polygamy was not forbidden.

The Old Testament provides us with lots of examples of marriage and family life but almost always what we see seems to fall short of the ideal of Genesis 2. Instead we see human relationship marred by the fall of Genesis 3 and echoes of the consequent breakdown of the first family recorded in Genesis 4. By contrast the New Testament gives us few practical examples, but more teaching.

The coming of Christ seems to change things in two particular respects. First, instead of the mess of Old Testament families and the accommodation to human sin found, for example, in the

acceptance of divorce, the New Testament sets before us the ideal. Indeed it is Jesus who supremely upholds the ideal and emphasises that in the creation of Adam and Eve and their union what God established was good. The call is that we no longer live by law but by grace and therefore we aspire, as disciples of Christ, to the ideal.

Polygamy provides an example of this. It was common in the Old Testament though by the time of Christ it was unusual in Jewish society. There is no command against it in the New Testament yet the teaching of Jesus, re-iterated by Paul, makes it plain that this was not God's purpose from the beginning. Therefore, since Christians are to seek to live by the ideal the Christian minister is to model the ideal and when the qualifications for ministry are set out it is stated explicitly that they should be the husband of but one wife. In the same vein when addressing the immorality at Corinth Paul sets out the ideal in the context of the dangers, that each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband, that is monogamy since it is exclusive on both sides (1 Cor 7.2)

A similar dynamic can be seen in relation to divorce and remarriage. In the Old Testament law divorce and remarriage are permitted but Jesus takes us back to the ideal of Genesis 2 and asserts "what God has joined together, let not man divide". On this basis the early Christians, whilst admitting the possibility of divorce, did not accept re-marriage as part of the pattern of discipleship. The Church of England until only very recently sought to uphold the ideal both in its ministry (clergy were not permitted to be remarried) and in its public services (the marriage service could not be used).

The second way in which the coming of Christ seems to change things is that the command to fill the earth and subdue it subsides into the background. Indeed there are grounds for thinking that most habitable areas of the world had been inhabited by this time, although by no means as densely as today. As the purposes of God in the Old Testament had unfolded, one family, that of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had by the grace of God become the particular people of God. But a mystery remained, how through this family all the nations would be blessed as the Lord had promised. The mystery was revealed in the coming of Christ and as a consequence the great command is in effect to fill the earth with the sound of the gospel, or more specifically to make disciples of all nations.

This change of focus has an important impact on the family - marriage is no longer so important. In the Old Testament marriage and the bearing of children is fundamental to the purpose of God and childlessness in particular is seen as problematic. But in the New Testament neither Jesus nor Paul were married and Paul spells out the implication of the new focus. Paul indeed says that it is better to remain unmarried (1 Cor 7) though he by no means insists on this. The point is apparently not ideological, but practical. Faced with the uncertainties of life and the command to proclaim the gospel Paul envisages that marriage can be a burden and in his own situation it would have been. It is hard to see how he could have engaged in his itinerant ministry if he were married or had children. Peter by contrast was married but he does not seem to have travelled as much as Paul and on occasion his wife apparently travelled with him (1 Cor 9.5). Paul even seems to hint that he would have a right to be accompanied by a wife, at the cost to the churches.

### **Summary**

What we see therefore is that the Old Testament on marriage and children has slipped slightly into the background not because they are no longer important, but because the gospel is more so. At the same time the accommodation made to human weakness in the Old Testament law is replaced by the idealism that springs from the gospel that by grace we should seek to live up to the ideal which God established at the beginning.

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