

The Christian Family

Isn't it amazing how many different responses can be triggered by the same word? For example, the word "family" can mean exactly the opposite to different people. For some people, "family" is the best word in the world. It represents security, comfort, hope, love and happiness. Family is the one place in the world where you can be yourself and feel just great.

For others, "family" is a painful word. It represents abuse and addiction and the break up of relationships. It serves as a reminder of anger, fear and sadness. It's the last place in the world you would want to be.

For still others, "family" is a political term dealing with legal definitions of marriage, strengthening traditional families or wondering what a traditional family ever was in the first place.

For our purposes it seems most appropriate to focus on "the Christian family" because that is what is created when two Christians marry and that is what is shattered when marriages of Christians break apart. When marriages break apart it ricochets through the relationships of everybody else that is involved. So, to make the most of marriage involves making the most of family.

For starters, how many times do you think our word "family" is used in the Bible? If you have a computer with a Bible program it doesn't take long to find out. Just list the word and click it on and you'll be given an immediate read on how many times the word appears in the 66 books of the Old and New Testament.

My computer says that "family" appears 177 times and that "families" appears another 109 times for a total of 286 different time in 278 different verses. That's a lot!

What may surprise you is that the Hebrew and Greek words originally used by the Bible authors really aren't quite the same as our word for family. In fact, if you insist on finding a word that means what we usually mean by an immediate family,

the total number of references drops to zero because when the Bible talks about families it uses a God-sized definition.

The usual Bible word for family really means "house" or "household". Sometimes that may be a household with parents and children but usually it is bigger than that. "House" in the Bible is closer to what we refer to as the extended family. It includes parents and children and grandparents and grandchildren and cousins and all the ancestors and descendants that are as yet unborn. Sometimes the Bible uses the word family to refer to the entire nation of Israel or even the entire human race. For example, Ephesians 3:15 refers to God the Father "from whom his whole family in heaven and earth derives its name." That description of family really is God-sized with God as the Father and everyone everywhere included in the family census.

What "family" means to most of us is a little more manageable. We usually think of family as shaped more like a circle than a cone. We talk about the family circle. Inside the circle are Mom, Dad, Brother or Sister and me. That's it. That's a family.

The Bible gives a somewhat different picture of a family. The Bible picture is more like a cone with God at the point and ever-increasing numbers of people included as the cone gets bigger.

In this context my family includes Charleen and me and our children and their children, but it also includes God, parents, grandparents, cousins, in-laws and other relatives.

What difference does this make? Actually, it makes a lot of difference. It means that each person is part of a family whether

never married, single, widowed, orphaned, divorced, young or old. Family is a lot bigger than the definition from the Internal Revenue Service.

It also means that God is the head of every

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family. He is the point of the cone. Psalm 68:5 says that God is a “father to the fatherless, a defender of widows.” I have often had that line quoted to me by those who have lost their father, telling me that they supernaturally experienced the fatherhood of God. They felt they were a part of God’s family.

When the Ten Commandments say, “Honor your father and your mother,” it’s not just talking about what little children should do. This is a life-long relationship. It is possible to express and exhibit honor for parents who, in fact, are no longer living. It’s saying that I have this broad God-sized view of what the family is all about.

But let’s narrow it down. What should Christian family life look like and feel like in our closer circle of immediate family? The true Christian family is a family that seeks to be God-centered. That means that everything in family life points to God and revolves around God.

Let me show you something really interesting. It’s found in Colossians chapter 3. Just above verse 18 in the New International Version of the Bible, there is a subheading that reads “Rules for Christian Households.” What follows are guidelines for how everyone in a first century household was to treat each other, including wives, husbands, fathers and even slaves and masters. But it’s helpful to read the previous lines in Colossians 3:17 as an introduction to how a Christian household can be God-centered: “. . . whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Let’s talk about that and try to understand it for a minute.

A God-centered home is not just a religious home. It is possible for families to go to church, give money to the poor, pray together before every meal, read the Bible together and still not be a God-centered family.

To be God-centered is to seek to center absolutely everything on Jesus Christ. “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” So it’s every word, every deed, everything that is done is focused upon Jesus Christ. It is thinking of everything in terms of him. The house is God’s house. The car is God’s car. Every

child belongs to God more than to Mom or Dad. This is more than religious ritual; this is everything in life.

How do you go about doing that? Begin with a 100% commitment to Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. Decide that Jesus Christ will be absolutely first in your life. Ask your whole family to do the same thing. If they won’t join you, do it without them.

Recently I heard a prayer that has repeatedly gone through my mind. A man was praying and he started out by saying, “Yes, Lord! Now what is the question?” That is like signing a contract that’s blank and letting God fill it in.

Try a mental exercise. Right now pick three specific things you do in your family, like driving the car, going to Burger King, celebrating birthdays or just sitting and watching television. Can you say that you can do that in the name of Jesus Christ?

Do you see what happens when Jesus Christ is at the center of family life? Every birthday party becomes a celebration of Jesus’ gift of life. Every ride in the car is to please Jesus. There is no place for sinful unkindness, greedy selfishness or other things that tend to hurt families and tear them apart. When Jesus is perceived as sitting at every meal, going on every vacation or listening to every conversation, the center of the family shifts from anyone or anything else to Jesus Christ himself.

This then becomes the Christian family that is shaped by God. It’s almost as if we were the clay on the potter’s wheel, spinning around and around and coming into exactly the shape God wants our family to be.

The primary way God shapes families to the way he wants them to be is through an emphasis on responsibilities not rights. If you looked ahead at the rest of Colossians 3 you would see that there is no mention of individual rights but lots of talk about responsibilities.

In other words, the best thing that you and I can do to help shape our families to be the way God wants them to be is to be responsible - - responsible to God and responsible to each other. That means that I don’t usually ask what others in the family will do for me. I ask what does God

want me to do? Sometimes he wants me to behave tenderly and compassionately. Sometimes he wants me to exercise tough love when I would rather hide. Always God wants me to think and act in ways that please Jesus Christ.

What do you think God would like to shape your family to become? Be careful not to idealize! Sometimes we imagine that other families are perfect families and we fall so far short that there is no point in trying to measure up.

Did you know that some of the models we see in television ads are not one person but several? There are hair models, face models, leg models, hand models. In a single ad you may see one woman's head and face but the shot of her hands is really showing the hands of a hand model. And the voice you hear may be yet another person. The truth is that nobody looks as good as that seemingly perfect person you see in the ad. You probably never want to see the hand model's face! Sadly, the result is that many people feel terrible about themselves because they don't look as good as what they see on TV. Except, nobody looks that good! Not even the models on TV!

Sometimes we do the same thing with families. We take pieces from many families and meld them into an unrealistic ideal. The standard becomes a perfect marriage with rich beautiful parents, godly children with straight teeth and a dog that barks in seven different languages or a parrot that quotes the Bible. But there are no perfect families! No one measures up to this silly standard.

Reality is that every family has problems. There are no exceptions. But that is not to say that every family is dysfunctional. Dysfunctional families are those that won't admit they have problems or won't do what they need to do to solve their problems.

Instead, here is what God would like every Christian family to look like.

First, there is a firm commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

And there is a realization that every family has ups and downs every day. The reality is that

the Christian family will face problems - - - everything from sickness to disability to unemployment to addiction to calamity to death and more. But every time an issue arises, this family turns to God for wisdom and help. This family uses every resource God makes available from prayer and the support of other Christians to counseling and intervention. In other words, this is a family that always allows God to shape their response to everything that happens.

Do they never speak angry words? Of course they do! But when something has been said or done that is wrong, they follow the Bible's call for repentance and forgiveness.

The Christian family is the context in which we all grow and learn and face agonies and ecstasies. We have the safety of strong relationships so that we can make mistakes. Jesus Christ and the Bible are so woven into family life that God is

the source of our strength; he is the one to whom we turn for guidance and help. The Christian family is the very best place for every person to become all that God wants him or her to be. Not perfect, but the best possible for God.

Will it always work? I wish I could say it always works, but I know that when I open the Bible at the very beginning, I find that God put a perfect couple into a perfect environment with every blessing that he knew that they needed, and for Adam and Eve it ended disastrously. God has given us human choice and we can use it for good or we can use it for sin.

There are husbands and wives who will choose sin. There are sons and daughters who will rebel. There are family members who will turn against God and against the family. That is the reality of human choice. However, blessed is the family that has given the best opportunity to each person that they could ever have to be all that God wants that person to be, whether they accept God's opportunity or not. And while it may be heartbreaking if a person makes a choice away from the best, it is a wonderful comfort to be able to say that opportunity was given in the name of

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Jesus Christ.

How long does all this take? Usually about a lifetime! You see, God is an artist, a sculptor, who spins our family around and around. We may become dizzy. He may touch us with his finger and change everything. He may even take the near masterpiece and smash it down and start all over again.

What we know for sure is that God is more committed to our families than we are. God loves each family member even more than we do. God has attached his name to each of our households and wants the very best. He will always give to us his very best.

I can't think of anything better than for every family to be a Christian family. And so it all comes down to a couple of very practical questions. What does God want to shape your family to be? What does God want me to do to make that shape take place? Am I willing to be God's agent to shape my family to be the best possible for God? Are you?

Lord, some of us are old and some of us are young, but almost every one of us has those whom we count as family. Tell us your special plan for each of our families. Protect us from trying to be what we are not. May we not seek some made-up ideal, but may we seek your best for each of our families. Use each of us to help our families become all that you want them to be. For Jesus sake, amen.

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
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