

First Family

Biblical or Bourgeois?

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I remember one incident with our eldest adopted son, Sergei, who is Russian. His mother and father died in a house fire when he was five. After the fire his other half-brothers and half-sisters were farmed out to various orphanages. As he is HIV positive, Sergei was not admitted anywhere. A local doctor took pity on him allowing him to live in the children's wing of the city hospital. He came to us when he was seven

Sergei came to stay with us initially for the summer so he could attend our children's camp (Sandra and I were childless at that that point, couldn't make up our minds if we wanted children or not and had no intention of adopting anyone). After the summer Sergei stayed on into the fall, fall turned into winter and eventually he joined the family.

At this time, our "family" was fairly fluid with many different people living in our quarters at various times. The supper table was always an eclectic mix of whoever was in the area at the time and most of the ladies at the corps had a far better idea of what food supplies might be in our cupboards or fridge at any given time than either myself or Sandra. "Church activities" often took place at "home" and "family days" were usually spent at "church" (defined as whatever building we had managed to rent at that time). We had no beds in the house, only pull-out couches in order to maximize sleeping spaces. Every "family" meal became a sacrament in the truest sense.

One day on a train trip from Moscow down to Rostov, Sergei was drawing and decided to sketch a picture of his family. He drew a big house with about 25 windows in it and in each window he drew a face. When queried on what he had drawn, he explained that this was his family and proceeded to point to each face and name the person it represented – each one a different member of the corps. He wasn't being trying to be clever or profound, he was describing his reality.

Recently I was in a prayer group with some other officers. One of the younger couples, not long out of Training College and expecting their first child, shared some needs from their corps then finished with a request for prayer for the impending birth of their first child. *"Of course, after the birth, the baby will become our first priority, before our ministry."*

This clarification, or declaration, was accepted, with an understanding nodding of heads and general encouragement from everyone present, myself excepted.

Why did this innocuous and seemingly normal comment catch me? After all, nothing was said that was not in keeping with conventional wisdom in evangelical circles regarding the place and function of the home and family. First God, second my family, then my ministry - this is the triumverate of priorities that most of us subscribe to. It was certainly taught to me when I was in officer training and was modelled to me in the evangelicalism in which I was birthed and grew-up. Dr. Dobson's books and video were everywhere it seemed and he did a pretty good job in focusing most of us on the family.

Taking our first doctrine seriously and looking hard at what little the Bible actually says concerning the nuclear-family unit will almost certainly raise some questions. Jesus, for example, makes three direct references to the nuclear family unit and none of them would encourage my young officer friend much – Matthew 10:34-39; Matthew 12:46-50; Luke 9:57-62. A cruise through the Old Testament is be even bleaker – one can scarcely find one nuclear family unit that would not be described as dysfunctional by today's (evangelical) terms.

Jesus' life and teaching tell us clearly that marriage and family now take a back set to the *"universal proclamation of God's salvation and the formation of a new "first family"- a world-wide kingdom-building company, in which membership depends not at all on bloodlines, but on faith in the Messiah."** He demands that his disciples place marriage and family second to their allegiance to

him and his kingdom and his mission.

“For the Christian, church is First Family. The biological family, though still valuable and esteemed, is Second Family. Husbands, wives, sons and daughters are brothers and sisters in the church first and most importantly – secondly they are spouses, parents, or siblings to one another.” (Rodney Clapp)

The point is that the “God-then-family-then-ministry” paradigm likely owes more to our cultural values than it does to Kingdom principles (and to be specific, western, middle-class, predominantly white cultural values). We have romanticized to the point of idolatry, the “traditional family” when in truth Jesus tells us that the order is God followed by mission. Everything else, be it family, home, work or whatever, finds its meaning and place within these imperatives.

Somewhere along the line, around the mid 1950’s I reckon, North American society came up with an idealized version of the nuclear family, an idealization that closely reflected the values of most Christians. As secular culture became increasingly hostile to the Judeo-Christian worldview, the family became the bulwark against “the world”. As Christian values gradually lost their influence over virtually every area of public life and culture, we concentrated efforts into protecting the family. This worked as theologically we encouraged an individualized faith which, while “evangelical” in deed, was privatized and compartmentalized in kind.

Some excerpts from evangelical writings on the importance of family:

*“A Christian home should be an ... oasis far from the maddening throng and godless currents and pressures... Only through the family can we hope to achieve security, a sense of well-being and belonging... the last bastion against depersonalization and dehumanization... the basic institution which undergirds all else... If the family fails, then all other institutions of society will fail.”**

This exaltation of the family unit has extended to encompass the home as well. We came to see our houses as fortresses to protect the sanctity of our families, places to retreat to after work or study, to shut out the pernicious influences and incessant needs of a sinful and broken world and recoup our strength and nurture our families.

A safe place where we jealously guard our “private time” and our “personal space”.

My first appointment as an officer was in Gitwinksihlkw, Northern British Columbia and this is where my doubts really took off. The Nisga’a people came from a tribal/clan tradition where children were historically raised in lodges according to tribe (Eagle, Raven, Wolf or Killer Whale) which was determined matriarchally. The tribal unit was predominant – as family and home - and not the nuclear/biological unit. This has changed over the years and the Nisga’a now live in houses in a semblance of biological family units but the reality is that children were very much communally raised. Although our appointment only lasted 10 months, I never did figure out who most of the children belonged to biologically.

My education continued in Russia. Multi-generational families, little concern for privacy, virtually no concept of personal space, hospitality as a way of life and not an extra effort, all these and more were hallmarks of Eastern-Oriental home and family life and indigenous to Russia (and indigenous to Jesus, a first-century, Palestinian Jew). My cultural assumptions on family and home were challenged at every level.

I came to realize that there are actually many different ways to “do” family, many uses for the home and that the norm that I grew up with and which was presented as the biblical ideal is not necessarily that at all. Not to say it is a bad model, just that it is actually the minority model within the context of the whole world. Certainly it carries no particular Biblical authority as an ideal.

Are we missing something that God wants us to reconsider? What if, instead of trying to save our families and our homes and in the process losing them (divorce rates, incest rates, youth delinquency rates etc. are pretty much similar across the board regardless of whether the family is Christian or not, thereby validating Christ’s words in Matthew 10:39) we would be willing to lose them for the sake of mission, for the cause of Christ?

When was the last time most of us even invited someone home for a meal from the corps on a Sunday? What if the borders of our family were not rigid but fluid, allowing the inclusion of others, not simply as guests but as...family?

What if our homes were changed from fortresses into hospitals and mission centres? I would estimate that there are literally thousands of Salvationists (officers included) in Canada who have a spare bedroom in their house. At the very least most of us have far more space in our

homes than is considered normal (and decent) in most countries and cultures in the world. What about sharing that space? What about seeing your home as a mission centre? Comrade officers – why do you think our houses are called “quarters”? If every evangelical Christian living in Toronto took in one homeless person – the homeless problem would be solved.

What if our children and our houses turned out to be God’s secret weapon for impacting our communities and reaching the lost? What if...?

It seems to be what God had in mind.

** Both quote references are from Ven Leeuwen’s Book (see below)*

If you are interested in thinking this through further I would encourage a look at Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen’s book: Gender & Grace, Love, Work and Parenting in a Changing World, IVP, 1990. A read through Michel Quoist’s prayer poem: Lord, why did you tell me to love? will also, as Sergei says, *rock your world*.