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Not just another whim.
The Family: God's Idea
By Edgar R. Lee

The family is God's idea! Genesis, the first book of the Bible, reminds us that God created Adam and Eve, a heterosexual couple, and purposefully brought them together. In that setting, God also established a covenant to bond husbands and wives and provide a stable home for their children. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24*). So important is this covenant that Jesus himself quoted it and further insisted on the permanence of the marriage relationship, "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matthew 19:5,6). These passages are the fountainhead of the biblical understanding of the family.

Jesus and His Family

God's plan for the family is remarkably illustrated in the life of Jesus. We thrill at the wonderful adventures of Mary and Joseph as the angels announce His arrival. Shepherds and Magi add wonderful color. Insane King Herod throws in an element of danger. In the midst of this flurry of events, the Son of God becomes incarnate in an infant. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" is the way John described it (John 1:14). While the Incarnation is the foreground story in these events, the background story, often overlooked, is the creation of a family to receive and rear God's Son!

The angel Gabriel began his work by assuring Mary, a peasant girl, that she would be "with child" by the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). Note, however, that Mary was already "pledged to be married to a man named Joseph" (Luke 1:27). "Pledged" to the Jews of that time meant a legal marriage that lacked only the formal marriage ceremony followed by sexual consummation. Such a marriage contract could be broken only by a formal act of divorce. That was exactly what Joseph, troubled by his fiancée's embarrassing pregnancy, had in mind (Matthew 1:19). Nothing less than assurance by an angel of the Lord that Mary's pregnancy was "from the Holy Spirit" convinced Joseph promptly to take "Mary home as his wife" (Matthew 1:18-25). Not only did God work a miracle in the virginal conception of His Son, He also performed miracles to create a family for His Son.

Though delivered in a stable, Jesus came to loving parents ready to cut the umbilical cord, wash Him, feed Him, change His diapers, provide for Him, and protect Him from the dangers of life. By the visit of the Magi, Joseph and Mary had arranged a house for Him (Matthew 2:9-12). Sensitive to their religious duties under the Jewish Law, they presented Him at the temple (Luke 2:21-24, 39). When Herod dispatched troops to kill all the Bethlehem infants, they fled with Him to Egypt, perhaps sustained by the Magi's gifts (Matthew 2:13-18). Only after Herod's death did they safely return and move to Nazareth (Matthew 2:19-23). It was under the protection and tutelage of His parents and in company with His brothers and sisters that, "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52).

It is easy to assume that Joseph and Mary, as simple peasants without benefit of extensive formal education, were, therefore, crude and unintelligent. However, the biblical text indicates spiritual and intellectual depth. Despite her youth, Mary demonstrated great insight and sensitivity in her encounters with the angel. Her song, the Magnificat, speaks of intelligence and prophetic gifting (Luke 1 :46-55). Joseph was a man sufficiently attuned to God for an angel to speak through dreams and move him to timely action on behalf of his family (Matthew 1:20,21; 2:13,19). There is no doubt that God put His Son in the hands of an able and responsible couple who would provide the family life He would require.

Godly they may have been, but Jesus' family was not perfect. They experienced many of the struggles of modern families. Joseph appears to have died before Jesus began His ministry, so Mary probably had been a widow, a single mother, for several years. There may have been more than a little sibling rivalry among her growing children, "For even his own brothers did not believe in him" (John 7:5). Mary, with good intentions and not without providential purpose, certainly manipulated Jesus at Cana to change the water into wine. "Dear woman, why do you involve me? ...My time has not yet come" was Jesus' protest—before cooperatively effecting the sign. On one occasion, undoubtedly disturbed by the crowds and the opposition of the teachers of the Law, Jesus' family actually went to take charge of Him declaring that He was out of His mind (Mark 3:21; cf. 3:31; Matthew 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21). Theirs was a very normal family, yet a very responsible family deeply committed to fulfilling the law of God.

The Role of the Family

What implicitly was modeled in the family of Jesus is explicitly taught elsewhere in the New Testament. The "household codes" of Paul's letter to the Ephesians (5:22-6:9) support the values we have already noted. The core of the family is to be a heterosexual couple, husband and wife. Children will normally round out the family unit (which in biblical days usually included extended family as well). Each member of the family comes in for special attention. Husbands are to love their wives with a self-sacrificing love, "just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (5 :25). Imagine an anxious and embarrassed Joseph loving an obviously pregnant Mary when snide comments may have suggested he was not sufficiently self-controlled in the betrothal period, or worse, that he had been cuckolded! Wives, secure in their husbands' love, are commanded to "submit" to their husbands "as to the Lord" (5:22). Children, in turn, are to "obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (6: 1), reminiscent of Jesus' going down to Nazareth obedient to His own parents (Luke 2:51). Finally, there is a special word to fathers, "Do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training (*paideia*) and instruction (*nouthesia*) of the Lord" (6:4). Paul's later injunctions in the Pastoral Letters emphasize the importance of careful family oversight for church leaders (1 Timothy 3:4).

Christian parents, therefore, must grow into stable and mature believers who sacrificially love each other and their children and who take responsibility for the *paideia* and *nouthesia*. Of the two words, *paideia* probably has the more general sense of "training" or "education" while *nouthesia* has the sense of "verbal admonition" or "correction." How significant that long before modern child psychology, the apostle enjoined domineering fathers (and mothers) not to exasperate (*parorgizo* "to make angry" or "to make resentful") their children." Vigorous but

thoughtful and prayerful parental involvement is presupposed! The divine assignment for all parents is nothing less than to produce a family environment in which their children, like Jesus, can grow "in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52).

The Christian handbook for family nurture, certainly not to exclude wise selection of other materials, is always the Bible. Paul declared the Scriptures to be "God-breathed" and "useful for teaching, rebuking, and training (*paideia*) in righteousness..." (2 Timothy 3:16,17). Always marching to the beat of a different drummer, Christian parents root their values firmly in God's Word. They will also take the necessary steps to protect their children from mindless indoctrination in the values of this world. Otherwise, MTV and a host of smutty soaps with their constant barrage of sexual innuendo and demeaning banter are their teachers.

While family life is the norm for most Christians, we must always make room for those who currently do not have spouses or children: orphans, the never married, the divorced, widows and widowers, the childless. Rather than being hurt by family language and family-centered events which inadvertently exclude them, these believers are to be warmly included in the larger family of God (Galatians 6:10). Jesus and Paul were single and often away from family members, yet they were drawn into the homes and fellowship of God's great family of believers.

All human families and churches are intended to be, in some measure, earthly representations of the life of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. May we in fellowship with one another humbly and obediently "kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name" (Ephesians 3:14,15).

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Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.