

THEOLOGY OF THE FAMILY

Surely, if God has revealed Himself supremely and completely in His son Jesus Christ, then God in Christ offers to us the model, the standard, the pattern for living the Christian life in our family. And how does do this? By revealing to us how He relates to persons. The purpose that I have in this chapter is to share an understand of how to relate better to one another from the way God relates to persons. This should help to give a pastor insight into some of the areas to be addressed in preaching, seminars, and other considerations toward having an effective family ministry. At the risk of looking at some things from a bit different angle, and a more thorough perspective, I share the following.

I. A Theology of Relationships

All Christians have a theology, a set of beliefs about God. Particularly, pastors ought to have a theology about God and the interrelationship of doctrine and many practical applications to family life.

Theology ought not have a negative connotation for we are really talking about doctrine, for God commands us to have sound doctrine. Certainly sound doctrine is basic and essential and at the heart of the Christian faith is also right relationships. This begins with our relationship with God and extending to our relationship with people. The Apostle John made it clear that a correct profession of faith in God must be balanced with a proper relationship with others or else the profession is false and meaningless. (See I John 4:20.)

A person's theology includes many aspects: doctrinal truth, worship of God, emotional responses, morality, personal decisions, and it must also include the dimension of relationships. The nature and character of God should tell us this. It is so often in the area of relationship that families are plague with heartache, tragedy, division and strife. If newly saved persons would know early on, after salvation, how to better relate to family members, many could be spared divorce at the worst and family heartache at the least. Our churches would be much stronger for we would have victorious families who are truly disciples and ready to become reproducers.

God, the Creator of Relationships

The God of the Bible is a God who relates and not one who is distant, aloof, and disinterested in us.

1. In the beginning when God created Adam He recognized that something was missing, so Eve was created to complement Adam's social nature and personal need.
2. Adam was created in the image of God which was relational. (Gen. 1:26.)
3. From the beginning when God sought Adam in the Garden of Eden all the way to His sending His Son to call us to fellowship with Him, God has been and is a God of relationships with and among His people.
4. Man needed relationships. Therefore, God brought the first family into being. The family reflects the social nature of God. We need each other because God made us that way.
5. Soon sin muddied the waters of human experience. The first family had its share of problems, pain, hardship, and alienation. God set about to be a redeemer of relationships. This is the story of the remainder of the Bible. An eventual results of God's redemptive plan for the human race was the Christian family.
6. When God redeems us from sin through Christ's provision on the Cross, His loving actions includes transforming our relationships with others, especially our families. The family, being the basic institution and foundation of all society, needs the correction of Biblical truth.

God: The Criterion for Family Relationships

God's plan for the salvation of sinners includes not only their individual salvation but also their relationships with others. To do this, God set forth Himself as the criterion, the standard, the model, the pattern for relationships including those in the family. No one lives unto himself or dies unto himself for all of us are a part of a family and have an impact on that relationship.

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God's plan was to do this in revealing Himself fully in His Son Jesus Christ. (See John 1:1-14; II Corinthians 5:19; Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:1-3.) When we notice how Christ lived, acted, and related to others, we are seeing how our God behaves toward others. He is giving us a pattern for us to understand and to follow. (See Ephesians 5:1,2.)

A thorough study of the Epistles would help us to understand that the Biblical writers were keenly aware of this and often gave instructions regarding Christian behavior by using Christ as the model.

1. Paul used the following method for showing the proper Christian behavior. As Christ . . . so should we. The measuring rod was "*according to Christ Jesus*" (Romans 15:5). Several illustrations are found in Paul's writings. A familiar one is in Ephesians 5:21. The servanthood model of Jesus is set forth as the criterion for both wives and husbands to follow. Notice specifically verse 25: "*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it.*"
2. Relational virtues are urged upon Christ's followers using Christ's nature and behavior as the model: forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32), love and sacrifice (Ephesians 5:2,25), servanthood (Ephesians 5:22), responsibility, since head means source and thus responsible for (Ephesians 5:23), nourishing and cherishing (Ephesians 5:29), welcoming and accepting (Romans 15:7).

God is our pacesetter and standard for behavior in relating to others. God, our heavenly Father, as revealed in Christ is our example for behavior in all our personal relationships. Paul wrote that we are to be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love as Christ loved us. (See Ephesians 5:1,2.)

II. How God Relates to Persons

How God relates to person ought to be a challenge to us individually, to our families, and to our churches.

God relates in a variety of ways depending upon the persons involved, the needs, and the circumstances in each situation. There are some definite patterns set forth in Scripture that are important for us to briefly examine for they will help us to formulate ministry as we build families in a Biblical way.

When God Relates to Persons He loves Unconditionally.

He loved the Israelite nation when they behaved at their worst. Exodus 34:6-7 indicates that God is compassionate, gracious, and abounds in love and in faithfulness. God maintains love to thousands and forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin (See Numbers 14:17-19.) The prophecy of Hosea is full of reminders that God's love for His people is an unconditional love. In spirit of Israel's adulterous ways God will take her back to Himself in love and compassion. (Hosea 2:19.) God truly loved Israel regardless of her failures. Read Hosea 11:1-11 for an inside look into the heart of God. Jeremiah also spoke of God's love as everlasting. (See Jeremiah 31:3.)

The ministry of the Lord Jesus is replete with unconditional love as expressed toward many kinds of people in a wide variety of circumstances. Think of the way He redemptively treated the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11, and the way He opened up and accepted the immoral Samaritan woman as found in John 4:4-42. Christ restored fellowship to Peter who denied Him three times (John 21:15-19.) God the Father demonstrated that love by giving Christ to die while we were yet sinners, undone, and enemies in our minds.

God does not command us to clean up our act before He will love us. He does not say that when we are good enough, then we will have earned His love. God is love and expects us to exemplify unconditional love in our relationships as well.

Families who learn to practice God's love will learn how to love one another unconditionally. This will be evident in words, actions, and attitudes. It will be seen in the little things that make up daily living.

God's unconditional love will set limits and establish standards yet will not be withheld when those limits and standards are ignored or failure takes place. Such love penetrates the rebellion and disobedience with understanding and guidance working for correction and growth.

When God Judges, He Does so Redemptively.

Because of the character and nature of God He does not ignore sin but deals with it seriously. God is judge of His people (Genesis 18:25; Hebrews 10:30.) , but His

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judgment always has a redemptive end in view. God evaluates our behavior and describes it for what it is, good or bad, right or wrong, but He does so because He wants the best for us. God's judgments are always good.

Christ's death is primarily Biblical evidence that God judges us redemptively. The Bible teaches us that Jesus' death on the cross was God's once for all judgment upon our sins, the purpose of which was to bring us to God. (Read I Peter 3:18.) There was no compromise with sin for God dealt with it justly. God dealt with sin seriously but with the objective of bringing us back into right relationship with Him.

Families that practice God's love will follow the Heavenly Father's example in using correction with a redemptive purpose in view. Parents who do not follow such a pattern will tend to embitter their children causing them to become discouraged and possibly rebel. (See Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21.)

A pastor's pulpit ministry, manner of life, and pattern through his own home relationships can have a great impact upon the people God puts under his care.

God Relates to Persons by Communicating Openly and Honestly.

From the beginning of Genesis to the end of the Bible, God communicated with His people openly and honestly. (Note Hebrews 1:3; Hebrews 1:2.) It is God, who cannot lie, who promised salvation in Christ. (Titus 1:2.) ?? God has not left us guessing about His will, desires, purposes, or plans. He has fully manifested His heart to us so that we can know His concerns for us and for our relationships.

The family should be the one place where you can trust people to say what they mean and mean what they say. God's example of revealing Himself is applicable to family conversation -- open and honest communication.

A pastor also sets an example of openness and honesty by having no -- hidden agendas, half-truths, vague statements, secretive intentions, assumed messages, outright falsehoods, or mind reading expectations. And what should be true about a pastor ought to be true in regard to the family.

I am confident that a pastor's conduct in person and ministry goes a long way toward showing families what their relationships ought to be. This is especially true when he tells them he desires his life and ministry to be an example.

God Accepts Persons by Grace and Not Merit.

God is kind and loving and relates to us on the basis of His own mercy and not on the basis of our personal righteousness. (Titus 3:4, 5.) He saves us by grace alone and not by works and accepts us as we are and not as He would want us to be.

Families practicing God's love will grace one another in family relationships. This will mean an active acceptance that is felt. There is an old saying, "Home is where they have to take you in." You do not earn your way into the family's front door. Each member is a vital part of the family regardless of present or past behavior. (See the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-31.) The father had every right to reject his wayward son who had already claimed his inheritance, signifying his independence from the family, but the father graced him back into the family circle.

Many families operate on the basis of merit. Children or spouses feel approved if they are good enough or have fulfilled a certain expected standard. The condition of merit always leaves us guessing whether we are really accepted, prized, or approved. Relating on the basis of grace leaves no doubt that we are accepted, warts or not. The amazing thing about grace is that it is a powerful motivator to put forth our best effort and work at our best behavior.

Pastors need to understand how to grace their people or to affirm them in such a way that they feel acceptance and approval. This very need must be addressed as to how it relates in the church relationships and especially in the home.

God is Not Only a Truthworthy God, He Is Also a Trusting God.

Even when we are faithless, He will abide faithful. (See II Timothy 2:13.) Faith and trust are closely related words. Therefore, God trusts His children by giving them the freedom to grow and mature. There are many things that God will not do for us. He expects us to take care of our basic responsibilities in day-to-day living. He will not do our duties for us. God trusts us to be responsible persons to

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the extent of our natural strength and ability and at the level of our present maturity.

We should related in a positive way in the home as we extend to our children faith, trust and expectation that they will endeavor to do right. In the same way, the pastor ought to give the church attenders a sense of confidence that they can do right, and that he has a whole hearted expectation that they will do right. Positive affirming comments can go a long way to bring positive responses. We help others to feel compelled to live up to God's expectations because they sense He trusts them to do so. Distrust engenders a negative response while trust motivates us to do our best.

Maybe as pastors we have not helped our families in their mutual relationships of trust because we have not given them an understanding of such trust, affirming and approving relationships. Could this possibly be a problem to many? Is this something that we pastors ought to address?

God Listens to Us in Our Needs in a Non-judgmental Way.

All through the Bible we are told that God is a good listener. God hears because He is compassionate (Exodus 22:27). Countless are the promises to encourage us to pray because God is a prayer answering God who listens to our heart cry.

The gospels clearly teach us that Jesus listened to those who approached Him. Even a random reading of any of the Gospel stories shows Jesus listening to people with a non-judgmental attitude. He expressed interest in people's concerns. He eagerly sought to answer their questions. He responded to their requests. His own behavior matched James' advice to be quick to hear and slow to speak (See James 1:19.)

A pastor's ministry to his people must also mirror Christ's example. The family needs to practice God's love in non-judgmental attention. Correction and direction must be given, but not forming the habit of responding to family members in condemnation and judgment. We will find others tuning us out completely if they feel that their comments will be judged.

Non-judgmental attention allows another to express his or her true feelings or beliefs in an atmosphere of freedom. We do not have to condone what others say,

think, feel, or do when we listen respectfully. Some of our unanswered prayers indicate that God may not agree with the wisdom of our requests. God nevertheless hears us out without condemning us. God's NO is often His best answer for us. Yet He continues to listen to us as a loving and concerned Heavenly Father. Praise God for this.

When God Relates to People He Extends Forgiveness and Reconciliation Toward Ruptured Relationships.

The reconciliation that we have in Christ ought to be a pattern for willingness to be reconciled with family and others in our daily relationships. Knowing forgiveness and reconciliation with God is extremely important. God has given to us a ministry of reconciliation that ought to be exercised in the home. (See II Corinthians 5:17-20.)

Harsh words, broken promises, rage and anger and resulting bitterness are often found in the family. All families know something about ruptured relationships. The Bible offers God's reconciling forgiveness as the motivating pattern for dealing with such difficult problems. We are urged to be kind, tenderhearted and forgiving as God is in Christ. (See Ephesians 4:32.)

Families practicing God's love will patiently learn how to forgive one another and be reconciled to one another when relationships become frayed and broken. God told Hosea that if he could forgive Israel's unfaithfulness, then the prophet could forgive his unfaithful wife, Gomer, and take her back. (See Hosea 3:1.) Hosea responded in forgiveness that was motivated by God's example of forgiveness to Israel as a nation.

God Relates to People With Affirmation, Encouragement and Strength.

There are many examples of God affirming people for great tasks. Such is the case when God changed Abram's name (exalted father) to Abraham (meaning the father of a multitude) as God established His covenant with him. If we had the time to study God's call of many of the leaders of the people in Old Testament times we would see God's encouragement and affirmation as given to them.

In similar manner, Jesus encouraged various ones. Peter is just one of many

who stands out as a person who Christ ministered to in a special way. All of John chapters 13 through 17 are full of words of affirmation and encouragement.

God is the great encourager of His people. Who can forget His charge to Moses, Joshua, or to King David, or Solomon as they took leadership over Israel.

Families who practiced God's love also encourage, affirm, and strengthen one another. One primary way in doing this is to build the right kind of self-esteem, self-worth, and a positive self-image.

III. Christ is the Supreme Teacher and Model

We have been looking at how God is the criterion for family relationships and that how God relates to persons is an example for us to follow. Christians take the position that God revealed Himself supremely in His Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore Christ, our Savior, ought to be our supreme teacher and model for all relationships, including the family.

A Christian family should follow what Jesus Christ said and how He lived. The gospel stories offer us rich resources for developing a model of interpersonal relationships in the family.

The following are examples from Jesus' life which illustrate how to relate to one another in the family:`

1. The call of Matthew, a despised tax collector (Matthew 9:9-13) portrays His non-judgmental acceptance.
2. Jesus' blessing the children (Matthew 19:13-15) affirms the high value of children.
3. The raising of Jairus's daughter (Luke 8:40-56) reveals compassion for hurting parents.
4. The story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) describes the importance of forgiveness, acceptance, and the restoration of damaged family relationships.

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5. The wedding feast in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11) depicts the importance of joy and celebration in family life.
6. The account of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples (John 13:1-17) dramatizes the theme of servanthood that Paul later applied to husband and wife relationships. (Ephesians 5:21-33.)

Questions for Consideration:

1. From above -- what are some major themes for preaching and teaching that are evident to you as a pastor that you feel are extremely needed among families today?
 2. What truths do you think are foundational for strong family relationships?
 3. Do you feel that some of the above mention examples from the God the Father and Christ, the Son are paramount as models for molding family life? If so, how do you think you would use such truths?
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Assignment:

Work on three messages minimum from the materials in this chapter and how you would relate it to help families. (This could be at least major and secondary points.) Or possibly work on a longer series that you would use in a retreat for your families or at least the spouses.

A Strategy For Solutions for Family Problems and Relationships.

1. There needs to be an awareness of the problem. Lift your eyes and see what is really going on in your home. Do you know when and how family members are hurting? Are you aware of possible causes and contributing factors? Example: Until Marge and Phil were able to see that they were engaged in a power struggle for family leadership they were not able to understand why they argued so much.

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2. Families struggling with problems and facing crisis need to know where and how to begin resolving their difficulties. Insights are needed as to possible ways to effect resolution. Various alternatives need to be spelled out and thoroughly discussed in a family meeting. Families need to be given Biblical truth and methods to bring about change.

3. Solutions in families facing problems and crises call for new relational skills. Communications workshops using such techniques as role-playing have proven helpful to many families. If old skills don't work, the why go on using them? Example: Clark and Sandy decided to take a parenting course and they learned new skills in listening and the use of "I" messages rather than "you" messages. Later they studied parenting by grace and found Bible answers to problems in disciplining their children.

4. Any strategy for solutions calls for family members to remain teachable and flexible. Without this growth and constructive change will not likely take place. If you already think that you have all the answers meaningful family solutions will rarely be agreed upon.

5. Solutions call for cooperation with involved family members. Teamwork is vital in family life when relationship problems or crises are being faced. An attitude of let's work this out together rather than we are going to do this my way whether anyone likes it or not will go much further toward a constructive solution.

6. A Christian strategy for solutions requires discovering insights and strength through spiritual growth. Families practicing God's love not only desire to solve their problems and cope with crises constructively but will envision difficult times as opportunities to grow in the Lord. Spiritual growth is the key to finding the most meaningful solutions to family problems and crises

7. Families who practice God's love will strive to find solutions within the family as well as from outside resources. There must be firm confidence in God's power for redemptive change.

POTENTIAL PROGRAMS OF FAMILY MINISTRY

The church can do something to enrich Christian family life! No matter how small the church or how limited the church may be, there are several ideas that can be implemented, many of them which are nearly cost-free. Surveys have proven that churches of thousands and some with less than fifty can benefit from a definite program to meet needs of today's families.

Many churches are now engaged in meaningful ministries to families. It is largely the result of vision, desire, willingness, and determination to implement some of the many creative ideas that are shared in many books today. (Note the text for this course --

The reader, as a pastor, needs to look to the Lord for creative ideas to initiate in his congregation. Meaningful family enrichment ministry will flow out of much prayer and imaginative consideration as the Holy Spirit will lay a burden of direction upon the pastor's heart.

I will give various suggestions in this chapter, but much more can be found in the text as given above, and every pastor will need to seek God's mind and direction for the known will of God for his people. (James 1:5-8.)

I. Education and Prevention

At the heart of all family ministry needs is the prevention-through-education theme. The objective is to equip people with skills necessary to help them work their way through current and anticipated problems.

Many Christian can solve their own problems when they are given solid, clear, Biblical, practical instruction. Most of us learn by doing, not just being told. Too often we pastors think that since we told them that ought to care for it all. We did cover that you know!

When Will it Work?

Some of the church enrichment ministry will adapt well to the Sunday School, Sunday preaching services or midweek service time frame. Others may more appropriately be offered on a weekend format. And there are special speakers who

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can be brought in for a week of services with special emphasis on family needs.

1. Content, convenience, and identification of the target group will doubtless influence the time choice.

2. Length of time and concentration of the courses will vary and will help to determine the time schedule.

3. The concentrated time frame for marriage renewal, for example, is excellent because people can focus intently on an issue in their families and have take the time to work toward change in a positive way.

4. The once-a-week meeting has the advantage of lag time for absorption of the materials and for practical implementation. But it also has the disadvantage in that so often teaching comes so slowly that there is little impact toward real change.

5. The overall goal and group to be ministered to will determine the format and timetable.

What Ministries are Needed?

I. Marriage Enrichment:

There are many enrichment formats currently in use. In fact, among some evangelical groups this kind of ministry is much more a part of the total church ministry than is usually found among fundamentalists. Even the Roman Catholic's have made the Marriage Encounter movement popular. This movement is now under the sponsorship of several religious and secular groups as well. Probably it is well received because it does not have a Bible based content.

Purpose: Most Bible based marriage enrichment programs seek to increase intimacy, deepen mutual and self-understanding, and fit biblical goals of marriage and interpersonal relationships into the couple's lives.

Schedule: The schedule is probably as varied as the content. One popular approach is the weekend retreat setting, usually in a motel or lodge of some sort.

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Some hold the same kind of meetings at the church with the families farming out their children for the duration so they can give undivided attention to the goals at hand. The chief advantages are a lack of outside distractions and an intense focus on the couple's relationship.

Other schedules might call for class times to be regular Sunday or midweek service times for the church, with assignments given for study between sessions. Home work diligently completed can greatly enhance the goals of the pastor.

Factors to be considered:

1. It should primarily be billed as enrichment, and not therapy. The purpose is to educate and encouragement improvement, not to give remedial care.
2. Couples who are in serious marital trouble will likely not benefit from the experience. Their unresolved problems are so fragile that the enrichment experience may serve to draw matters to a crisis point rather than to resolve them. It depends upon their maturity, willingness, and determination to change.
3. Marriage enrichment studies, how ever held, should be voluntary. Some couples or individuals will feel uncomfortable in this setting and will not come for they see it as a threat. Some must have separate counseling instead.
4. Guard against a critical attitude toward those who do not attend. Couples should who do not participate should not be made to feel inferior.
5. Long-range follow-up is not only desirable, but often a must. Whether a weekend retreat or a course of several months' duration, the idea is to arrange a periodic follow-up on a sustained basis. The effects will be longer lasting if the Biblical principles are reinforce periodically. Having monthly meetings for group discussion could be organized for ongoing encouragement.
6. In the final analysis change must take place on an individual basis, with growth in attitudes, values, emotions and spiritual perspectives taking place in the heart.
7. It is difficult to bring about significant change in a large group setting. Couples have a tendency to get deeply ingrained in sinful habits of interaction and unconsciously try to keep things the way they are. While the efforts for marriage

enrichment are all valid, leadership must keep in mind to have realistic expectations and realize that it will not take the place of helping families in their homes as well.

II. Parent Training:

Single parents or dual parenting programs are needed in the local church. While many such programs abound in this country the diversity of ideas have produced some confusion. Most are not based on Biblical principles and truth. The approaches range from those purely psychological and humanistic to those that are strongly Bible based. Many today lean heavily on James Dobson, Bruce Narramore and others who have written best sellers, and/or have radio ministries.

Christian parenting is the study most likely to be offered in the curriculum of churches today. The advantage of week night offerings is that parents from the community are able to participate. Schools and other public agencies are more likely to be supportive if they are convinced of the quality of the course.

Ideas for offering courses.

1. One approach is to break the parental offerings into three separate areas. The first focus on parenting the child from birth to age six.
2. The second covers parenting of children in grades one through six and the third is for parents of adolescents.
3. Each session could be two to four meetings, or it could be a course of study that extends over many months in the Bible study class during the Sunday School hour.
4. Another possibility is to offer a three hour course for each one of the above categories and do so over a period of time so parents with children in more than one grouping could attend. Also the Bible study hour on Sunday morning could be so organized to make it possible for parents to receive the most benefit possible.

-- *Dr. Edward Watke Jr.*