

SUNDAY ARTICLE

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The Ordinary Christian Family

Tedd Tripp

One of my adult sons recently commented to me that the traditional family is toast. I understand what he meant. The ordinary Christian family is nearly extinct.

Contemporary culture is redefining family – gay marriage, a range of creative living arrangements, and the pressure to accept polygamy are all assaults on the Christian family.

The notion that parents, whose love produced children, should live together in marriage, working together to provide a godly home and stability for their children, has all but vanished as a cultural ideal.

The ordinary Christian family is simply ordinary Christian people, living in the ordinary circumstances of life, out of the extraordinary grace of the gospel.

*ordinary Christian people
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And this is not just two-parent families. There are scores of single parents who are honouring God in their homes and many grandparents who are valiantly raising their grandchildren.

I have a daughter-in-law who was blessed with a mom who, as a single mother, raised three children who are now Christian adults raising their own children.

She continually reminded her children of the biblical norms for family: “If you had a dad, he would be doing this, but since you don’t, I am.” In the absence of a husband, she taught her children to understand the role of a husband and father in the family.

FAMILY DYNAMICS

Ephesians 5 describes the ordinary Christian family. Husbands are called to exercise loving leadership.

In 1 Thessalonians 2, Paul uses fatherhood as a metaphor for pastoral ministry. He reminds them of his toil

and hardship, how he preached by day and worked by night so he would not be a burden to them. This is a wonderful window into godly leadership. Paul laid down his life as a living sacrifice.

Godly authority is not seen in making servants of others. Godly authority is seen in serving, in laying down one’s life as a living sacrifice.

Ephesians 5 has an equally compelling picture of the wife. Just as the church submits to Christ, the wife lives under the leadership of her husband. She helps him to be a successful leader of the family.

It is no easy thing to subordinate one’s life to the leadership of another, but Ephesians 5 represents it as an ordinary calling for a wife. Ultimately, a wife entrusts herself to God, looking to God to bring blessing to her as she lives under her husband’s authority.

Similarly, God promises in Ephesians 6 that it will go well with the child who honours and obeys his parents. Wise parents present the necessity of obedience in win-some ways.

They encourage their children by saying that the reason for obeying is because God has given authority to parents. Obedience is not because of parental demands, but the will of God for children.

In the context of obedience, things go well with children. God blesses their obedience. It is beautiful when children and young people embrace the truth that God’s ways are good.

It has been my joy to see grandsons and granddaughters, ordinary children and teens, who enjoy their parents and who embrace having authorities who love them enough to wisely provide boundaries.

I smiled recently while watching an interaction at our table.

Teenage boy: “Dad, may I have some coffee?”

Dad: “Sure.”

Preteen boy: “Can I have some?”

Dad: “No, son, I don’t think so.”

Preteen boy: “That’s not fair; he gets to have coffee.”

Dad: “Son, I don’t have to be fair; I have to be wise.”

It was a pleasant interchange that passed quickly. I smiled because the younger boy accepted his dad’s judgment without complaint. He has learned to joyfully accept his father’s authority. Someday he, too, will be a kind and wise authority.

Once the relationship dynamics are in proper biblical order, there are three callings for the family: The family is a school of theology, a school of social relationship, and a school for understanding the gospel.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

God's call for ordinary living is summed up in the two tables of the law:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’” (Mark 12:30-31).

Loving God and loving others is a good description of the ordinary Christian family.

The family as a school of theology is the first table of the law. The family is the place for being mesmerized by the wonder of who God is and for instilling in children a profound sense of the glory of God.

The psalmist puts it like this: “One generation shall commend your works to another” (Psalm 145:4). What does this look like? What do you talk about as one generation commending God to the next?

Psalm 145 tells us. It means meditating on the glorious splendour of God's majesty; speaking of God's majestic deeds; declaring His greatness; pouring out the fame of His abundant goodness; singing of His righteousness; speaking of the glory of His kingdom; talking of His kindness; speaking His praise (145:4-20).

Love for God is instilled as we meditate on His glory and goodness. Children cannot be brought to delight in God in a conceptual vacuum. And if parents are to show their children God's glory, they, too, must be dazzled by God.

The family is a school of theology.

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP

Loving others is the second table of the law. This also is family business. Family life affords marvellous opportunities to show the love of Christ to others. Why?

Because family living provides the greatest occasions for relational conflict.

James 4 addresses social conflict with the perceptive questions: “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not your passions that are at war within you?” (4:1).

We typically look outside of ourselves for the reason for conflicts – “he makes me so mad”; “she laughed at my mistakes.” James turns the tables on us. He says that relational conflicts come from desires that battle in our hearts. Our passions and desire produce conflicts.

The family is the place to gain insight into the desires that wage war within and bring us into conflict with others. It is the place to identify the ugliness of self-love.

Family living provides the opportunity to learn the excellence of sacrificial love for others. It is an excellent place to learn to truly seek the interests of others.

Family conflicts are not unwanted interruptions to the business of life. They are a vital part of learning to live in love.

Family is a place for loving others.

SCHOOL OF THE GOSPEL

Finally, ordinary Christian family life is a school for the gospel, a place for living out the grace of the gospel.

Conflicts that arise as we strive to live together in love show our profound need for the grace of the gospel. We cannot love God and others without grace.

Christ lived in human flesh without sin to provide us with righteousness that we can have no other way.

He died to pay the guilt of our sin, fully satisfying the demands of God's law.

Even now, He intercedes for us so that we might experience His grace and live as people who have known forgiveness and can extend forgiveness to each other.

The ordinary Christian family is not a place of perfection. We sin and are sinned against. Our children sin and are sinned against.

We are tempted to resolve conflicts through human wisdom, but we lose the benefit of our conflicts if we try to resolve them without reference to the gospel.

The inevitable conflicts of family living afford excellent opportunities to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

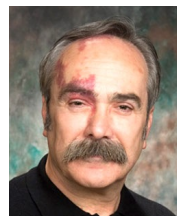
Parents who understand that they, too, are sinners who get carried off by passions and desires can empathize with their children who sin.

The parent who both understands the problem of sin and the grace and power of the gospel is able both to understand and to truly help children who sin.

The experience of being a sinner who has found grace enables parents to bring the power and grace of the gospel to their children.

Christians love the idea of families where people love and honour God and live together growing in grace, but Christian families – who love God and others – do not exist as an abstraction. They are not an ideal in the world of ideas. Ordinary Christian families exist only as real flesh-and-blood people lay down their lives as living sacrifices.

Such families are powerful arguments for the truth and beauty of the Christian faith.



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