



The Christian's Family in Society¹

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As children of the living God, through his grace revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ, we are "in the world, but not of the world." For the Christian family, as for the church, to be distinctive demands being different. The key task for the Christian family is to relate assertively and positively to the realities of today's world without being caught up in secular society's powerful influences. In maintaining life-long family orientations and relationships, including the crucial function of parenthood, the Christian family faces increasingly menacing forces in secular society. These forces are overcome if the family deliberately holds Christian values above secular values. The crucial values are these:

1. Sanctity and commitment to the marriage relationship
2. Development of the home as a place of warmth, nurture, acceptance, and healthy stimulation
3. Learning of God and growing in grace together and individually through the Word of God and its implementation through a just, merciful, and loving life-style
4. Involvement in outreach, through the church, participating in God's redeeming work in society.

The caption on the first article in the *New Republic* of September 6, 1975, caught my eye: "The Obsolete Home." I thought, this may be the first major piece in the popular press to acknowledge that the family has been laid to rest. Home as we have known it is being written off by one after another of the opinion leaders and scientists of our time. No, it is not yet a headline story; the *New Republic* article was concerned instead with changes in housing patterns in America due largely to inflation. But the changes were not due to inflation alone, as I read in one of the secondary points in the article:

... the post-war children aren't behaving like their parents. They're marrying later, divorcing more often, having fewer children and sending both men and women to work — factors that may weaken the lure of the single-family home.

Things are changing. Several months ago I presented a brief paper at a national conference of social scientists and educators who are involved in major research and development activities in the area of moral and ethical values. In the paper I argued that the school is by no means the best bet as an institution through which to work for moral values in our society; I contended that the family is crucial, and even to assume that the church is dead is to be misled by occasional appearances. As I sat down, I expected the discussion to center on criticizing my contention that the church is still a viable instrument of human welfare. I had engaged in this debate with various colleagues in social science on many occasions. Instead, much to my surprise, the discussion immediately attacked as "archaic" and "quaint" my view that the family can be expected to play a significant role in values development. Didn't I know? The day of the family is over!

¹ Ted Ward. The Christian's Family in Society. In *Living and Growing Together*. Gary R. Collins, ed. (Waco: Word Books, 1976). See this chapter and full text of this book at <http://www.ccel.us/living.toc.html>

It was like being present at a turning point of history. Leading American and Canadian scholars were arguing that the family as we have known it is dead, for most practical purposes. Secular society is ready to abandon the family as a defunct institution. I propose three conclusions:

1. In the Christian community, the family cannot be abandoned; it is basic.
2. The Christian family is now well on the way to being distinctly different from the secular family (or from whatever substitute for the family the secular society may yet create).
3. The pressures upon this increasingly different Christian family can have certain strengthening outcomes for the church.

The first point above is essentially theological and can be supported scripturally. The second point is sociological; it can be observed by anyone who has been alert to what the "body-life" ministries, for example, are helping Christian families to become. The third point is admittedly speculative, but I would support it on historical grounds. Even as the Jerusalem church through persecution was scattered and thus became an even more world-impacting reality, the whole history of the church reminds us that Christ is glorified and the church grows through adversity. I am not at all pessimistic.

Scientists have two different ways to respond to social trends. The most common today is to shrug and say, "That's the way it is." But the scientist who draws his or her moral premises from spiritual sources does not shrug and does not accept the way things are as being necessarily the way things ought to be.

As a Christian, I see trends in society that I don't like, can't accept, and must work against. But I cannot expect secular society to share my concerns point for point, nor can I impose my views over the will of those involved. I must do more than make the best of the way things are; I must take a particular responsibility for my own family and share responsibilities uniquely for the families of the church of our Lord. We are salt in the general society, but we are *members* of one another in the Christian community, the body of Christ. As Christians, we have decisions to make, ideas to reject, concepts to embrace, and on some issues we need to *fight*. (If we accept the instruction and the disciplines of the Word, we won't often be fighting against one another. My view of trends includes the observation that as we encounter more pressure from secular society we have less time and less inclination to waste our resources fighting among ourselves. Hallelujah!)

The key institutions of society are ordained by God in the Scriptures: church (Matt. 16:18), family (Eph. 5, 6), and civil government (Romans 13), but that doesn't mean that every family is godly, that every government is Christian, or even that every religious organization is approved by God. Indeed, institutions of all sorts arise from the needs of human society. To say that some institutions are secular and some are sacred is a serious misunderstanding. From a Christian point of view, only the particular religion in which Jesus Christ is glorified and worshiped as Lord might be called a totally non-secular social institution, and even it is shot through with secular influences that make it look like Jesus' description of the great mustard tree loaded down with birds (Mark 4:32). The Christian's family is part of the larger social institution—family. The distinction of the Christian is not in having a family or in believing in one's family but in honoring Christ by establishing or being part of a particular kind of family. If we could get that straight, we would need to worry far less about secular influences. I am more concerned about erosion than about frontal attacks anyway. For centuries Christians have handled the head-on attacks of evil in society. But the subtle undercutting and washing away in bits and pieces seems to me more dangerous. For example, the self-centeredness that is in the nature of

man can be enticed by worldly things even in a Christian family. In a secular society that is materialistic and that measures one's worth by one's properties, the Christian can be gently teased into forgetting Jesus' teaching: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth" (Matthew 6:19). A question mark must be placed over the ways we stimulate our children to succeed, even over the ways we lay up treasures to provide for them a "good education" and a "good start in life." In reference to the subtle influence of television, I fear the "quiz" and "give-away" shows. Their emphasis on the supposed beauty of gaining goods of financial value seems threatening to the Christian family.

Another specific matter of great concern to me is the subtle undercutting of the marriage relationship. As if the constant bombardment by lewd and vicious views of sex were not enough, a greater threat comes in the form of situation comedies and variety shows that emphasize infidelity and intellectual competitiveness in marriage. As far as I have seen, "Sonny and Cher" is the most damaging show on the air. And frankly, I'm not comfortable with "All in the Family" although surely Archie Bunker's wife, Edith, demonstrates the long-suffering and somewhat dull patience that many in America associate with Christianity. Learning to laugh at human frailties and flaws may be somewhat therapeutic, but the larger effect is to condition us to accept as normal the bickering, competitive, and spiteful behavior that leads to broken marriages.

On another important issue, I am in harmony with those who seek justice, including fair play and equal opportunity. Thus I join in seeking liberation from secular social customs that place men in special authority and power over women in an unbiblical way. But I caution my fellow-liberators that to grasp for women the whole competitive dog-eat-dog system of the "man's world" will be a hollow victory. Far better it would be if we could work from a Christian perspective to reduce the ailment in the secular society's view of the male gender roles that results in a man's *need* to dominate.

The main threat of the public schools is the pressure they put upon our children—pressure to conform, to compete, and to succeed. When the "Christian school" is compared to the public school, it is often hard to spot any major differences. The problem is deeper than whether or not the teacher is a Christian and what sort of sign is over the door; schooling itself, in the pervasive Greek model that is characteristic of Western society, is inherently competitive and success oriented. But, you may ask, isn't this what we need to prepare our children for the realities of society? Wait, just whose realities are we interested in? The Christian is to be a member of a family of a community, to see individuality, not in terms of "better-ness," but in terms of gifts that the Spirit gives one for the benefit of others in the church. This calls for development as a cooperative, serving, and giving sort of person. ("For the love of Christ controls us" [2 Cor. 5:14]). It is inherently non-Christian to enhance the human traits of selfishness, competitiveness, and pragmatic valuing. On this last point, one of the flaws of schooling that even the secular educators are now fretting about is the relativism and pragmatism that leads a person to go to any and all lengths in order to succeed. Pragmatism is shot throughout the whole society, but it focuses its effects on the family through schooling, from nursery school through graduate school.

It is difficult to talk about the influence of secular institutions without becoming overwhelmed in detail. One assumes either that the institutions of secular society each represent a unique influence or that they each contribute some parts to a much larger whole of secular influence. I hold the latter position. That is, I cannot say that certain institutions should bear unique responsibility and guilt. The school is not a unique influence nor does it pose a unique threat; the "business world" has no distinctly separate moral impact; certainly the service institutions such as hospitals and credit unions carry no moral messages that are apart from the rest of secular influences. Indeed, the only honest

way to proceed is to examine the major influences that cut across all the social institutions. In order to decide which are the major influences, we must project them against a backdrop of Christian values and biblical teachings.

In the process of becoming whatever it is that God is making of my life as a disciple and as a scholar, I am gaining certain sensitivities. These sensitivities are like the antennae of the beasts who screen the air about them for alien and dissonant fragments. I have learned to spot pragmatic decision-making especially within the church, wherein we decide what is "right" by asking what works. I have also learned to see the leadership issue Jesus warned about in Matthew 23 as he saw the danger of the Greek concept of leadership, that is, leadership as authority and as status. He warned against its corrupting the church even as it had already infected the synagogues at that time. And today it is so thoroughly embedded in the church we don't even call it a secular influence! I have become sensitive to injustice—especially those that spring from privilege, power, class, sex, race, and position.

Perhaps the most useful way to deal comprehensively with this complex topic is to share what my sensitivities have led me to see as the major whole influences of secular society. These are of particular concern to the Christian family. I refer to these influences as *whole* because they are spread throughout the secular society. They are not the peculiar property or responsibility of any one institution.

Materialism. We live in one of the most materialistic societies in the history of the world. Unhappiness, even to the extremes of suicide and divorce, is the result of placing hope, confidence, and pride in a materialistic and mechanistic society. Some Americans are becoming aware of the horrible ecological effects of over-consumption, extravagance, and waste. The secular society's economic foundation rests on consumerism, and its children must be taught to buy, buy, buy, eat, eat, eat, and go, go, go or the whole society will fall apart. Materialism causes us to value *things* more than *people*. I see its effects in my own life-style; I complain whenever my children disturb, damage, or deface my "things."

The twin evils of materialism are *competitive greed* and *self-centered individualism*. How deeply these cut into our realization of true community within the body of Christ! What can we do about materialism within the Christian family? Here are several suggestions:

- Encourage cooperative experiences.
- Set non-materialistic goals together as a family; decide together what is worth living for and worth working toward.
- Encourage and affirm one another as being worthy. Remember God gave his Son for each of us.

Faulty communication. Even within the church, much communication is one way, simply "telling." The faulty communication styles of the secular institutions, in general, are tending to dehumanize us. Even in our families we see the effects; sometimes they are called "communication gaps" or "generation gaps," but at the root they are faulty concepts and faulty habits. The current research in values development reveals a close relationship between communication styles within the child's experiences and the development of higher structures of values. People were meant to transact, to reason together, and to converse. Look again at Genesis: God began his relationship with the beloved creatures who shared his own image by walking and talking in the garden. From current research we understand that for all of us moral development depends on a freedom to communicate, to share, to seek counsel, to know the accepting fellowship of trust-worthy others who are always ready to talk

through the dilemmas and the times of disequilibrium. What can we do to reduce the secular influence of faulty communication?

- Listen to one another with non-judgmental openness.
- Encourage the seeing of one another's point of view.
- Develop warm and lively communication styles while the going is good. Then the communication lines will be available and open when the rough moments occur.

Relativism. The reason so many church people contend that the public schools should stay out of the area of values education is that the schools have nothing philosophical to offer but the secular society's relativism. The secular society is like a drifting whip with a broken anchor chain. The secular society argues that nothing can be completely trusted, that what works is what counts. Thus pragmatism is rapidly becoming the dominant philosophy, and what is good is what works, and what *is* becomes the norm. How different is the Christian presupposition that what God has said provides a rock-solid basis for knowing what *ought* to be.

Relativism has particularly assaulted marriage. The vows of old are being replaced by fingers-crossed generalizations that are to be respected as long as they work out, until something "better" comes along. The Christian family can guard itself against relativism in the following ways:

- Help children see marriage in the best possible light.
- Spend time together reading God's Word and discussing its moral meaning.
- Discuss moral and ethical issues and arrive at judgments together.

Deterioration of justice. As the Word of God is pushed farther and farther from the center of human reasoning, injustice becomes more common. The prophets of old were sent time and again with God's invitation to repentance; their voices cried against injustice. Scholars of the Old Testament point out that *righteousness* cannot be defined apart from *justice*. Today's institutions are so thoroughly shot through with injustice that we wonder at God's patience with our society. Let us lift our voices, as of old, crying out against injustice wherever it is seen. We live in a society where might makes right, where authority is equivalent to righteousness. Our families are threatened; somehow we must see to it that God's nature, his justice, love, and mercy become central characteristics of our life-styles and family relationships. Suggestions for the Christian family:

- Take no privileges based on age, sex, race, prestige, power, or authority.
- Treat one another, even the youngest one, with respect for the dignity of the person.
- Seek relief and resolution of unjust conditions *for all people*.

Some of us tend to see the words *society* and *secular* as interchangeable. The words *secular* and *Christian* or *secular* and *godly* are contrasting terms; *society* can refer to either. Within society there are secular influences and there are Christian or godly influences. But *secular* is not an alternative word for "evil." In fact, many secular institutions have some good within them, even from a Christian's viewpoint. I offer for your consideration Paul's contention in Romans (1:18-20; 2:14-15) that even those who have never heard (who in one sense are totally secular) have within them a witness of the goodness of God. Thus it is not surprising that even within secular institutions, schooling, for example, certain good intentions and some good outcomes can be seen. If we assume that everything in society is pitched against us and that the influence of God is absolutely limited to the redeemed and to their particular forms of institutions, we mislead ourselves seriously. Isolationism and non-evangelical, introverted stagnation are the sure outcomes of such a theology. The history of the church shows recurrences of

asceticism of a most pathetic sort resulting from a loss of kingdom vision. *This is our Father's world.* We are salt within it. Let us continue to lay claim upon the whole world in his name. To do less is to become salt having lost its savor.