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How Can the Church Today Uplift the Family Without Worshipping It?

Abstract

"Our children need to hear and see that it is precisely because we love them that we teach and model for them what truly matters most."

Posting about faith formation in the home from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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How Can the Church Today Uplift the Family Without Worshipping It?

Aaron Baart

There's a local Cristian radio station that for years has been playing the same little slogan in between songs: "Love. Hope. Family." It sounds nice. And who would ever disagree with the fact that those are all good things? I like love. I like having hope. I like family. Who doesn't? After all, I'm a family man myself. I have an amazing wife that I have been married to for twenty-one years. Together, we have five kids that I truly cherish—two biological and three adopted. God has fashioned our family in ways that are truly miraculous (five kids from four different countries!) and I value each of them so dearly.

And yet . . . there has been a slow creep in American culture over the past century that has elevated the concept of family beyond something that is good and beautiful to something that can be almost, if not outright, idolatrous. At first blush that may sound harsh, but even within the Church—just like that radio station—our language has morphed, making language about family virtually synonymous with faith, rather than subservient to it. But how do we know when that creep has occurred and when something that God created good has evolved into something more than that?

In his deeply insightful book *Counterfeit Gods*, Tim Keller notes that,

"The human heart takes good things like a successful career, love, material possessions, even family, and turns them into ultimate things. Our hearts deify them as the center of our lives, because, we think, they can give us significance and security, safety and fulfillment, if we attain them."

In other words, basically anything can become an idol. Traditionally, we have envisioned idols to be actual miniature, carved stone or wooden deities around which liturgical practices or cultic worship is practiced. However, that which steals from faith is almost always much more subtle than that. Keller elaborates,

“We think that idols are bad things, but that is almost never the case. The greater the good, the more likely we are to expect that it can satisfy our deepest needs and hopes. Anything can serve as a counterfeit god, especially the very best things in life.”

Family is, indeed, one of the best things in life. After all, God himself ordained the family unit on page one of the Bible, creating Adam and Eve who were inherently interdependent on each other already before sin entered the picture. In their words, familial relationships don't merely exist to provide backfill for a sinful, lonely vacuum inside the human heart. Rather, the very notion of family was part of God's plan even prior to sin's entrance into the world. Furthermore, our need for the experience of love within the context of the most intimate of relationships is actually a direct reflection of being created in the image and likeness of a relational God—a three-person community of perfect love—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In fact, even the language God uses to describe himself in Scripture highlights and celebrates the strength of familial ties and titles (e.g. Father & Son). In his fantastic book, *Sacred Marriage*, author Gary Thomas asks the question of whether or not God created the institution of marriage in order to make us more *holy* or more *happy*. The question itself is on point and could be extended to ask the same about the larger family unit as well.

In other words, as parents, we need to carefully discern whether the practices within our homes and the language we use to articulate our dreams for our children center more around a life of discipleship, or one of ease. Granted, there is an intuitive tendency within any parent's heart to want to “bubble-wrap” their kids, hoping to protect them from the perils of an unpredictable world. We want to pave the way for our kids and make sacrifice after sacrifice for our children so that they can be “happy” and not struggle as hard as we did. However, almost unanimously across culture we associate happiness with easy-ness, not holiness. And this is precisely when a good thing can easily evolve into an *ultimate* thing.

Our children need to hear and see that it is precisely because we love them that we teach and model for them what truly matters most. That doesn't mean trying to help create the path of least resistance for them in life; rather, it means teaching and showing them what it means to daily deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow him. It means cruciform living—words and deeds, decisions, and costs—all incurred to grow their faith, not their contentment.

Consider the following list as just a few ways that as parents we can practically consider small changes that help elevate the priority of following Christ over our own impulses:

- 1) When you speak your dreams over your children for their lives, articulate intimacy with Christ, faithfulness in difficulty, and contentment that transcends circumstances. Use your language to prize spiritual maturity over earthly gain.
- 2) When demonstrated in their lives, affirm emerging godliness in your children over accomplishment. Train their hearts to value looking like Christ more than the latest athletic accomplishment or grade on a report card. "I love it when you _____.
I see Jesus in you when you do that!"
- 3) Plan a family trip around faith formation and not merely entertainment. Once in a while, skip the all-inclusive resort and go on a mission trip together. Or, I once heard of a family that actually arranged their family vacations around all the global sites of the greatest revivals in history. Now, this might sound extreme, but consider the impact on the imaginations of those kids as family travel is arranged around the greatest movement of the Holy Spirit in history, rather than the latest attractions on earth.
- 4) Invite your kids into conversations around giving at an early age. Make family decisions collectively, incorporating their input as you learn the unique ways that God has broken their hearts for the things of the Kingdom. Cultivate hearts that love to give as much as they love to get.
- 5) Tell your children the stories of Scripture, of church history, and of the persecuted church. Lift up people in your own community as examples of those who sacrifice for others, giving themselves to more than mere material gain, people who are actively seeking the Kingdom in daily tangible decisions.

Children are indeed a gift from the Lord. And family is good. Very good. But, like every other element of the Kingdom of God, it only works when we give it away. Let's teach our kids to know the Lord, to be excited about the in-breaking of his Kingdom, and then help them to arrange their lives around being an instrumental part of it. They can, and should, celebrate the good things of life— but more than anything, we also want to see them fixated on the only ultimate thing.