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Ministering to the Family in Today's Society

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We pastors have seen in our ministries the all-out frontal attack of the devil upon the marriages and families of our own people, and upon the same institutions in our culture. It is crucial to recognize that we are battling against "spiritual powers." But the task does not end there. We must also wage war rightly, biblically. To suggest ways to wage this battle in a biblical way is my purpose.

Ministry to Marriages and Families in the Past

It is instructive to reflect upon the nature of such ministry in previous generations when

conditions in the church were much different. To make my point a bit more graphically, I refer you to the TV depiction of the "American family." A generation ago, "Leave it to Beaver," "My Three Sons," and "Ozzie and Harriet" were weekly fare in most homes. While you may argue that these were sugar-coated families with unreal problems and superficial solutions (and I'd agree!), it is significant that on those programs "family" was an identifiable institution.

These days, in contrast, you will see "Three's Company" (or is that already *passe?*), the story of a young man living with two women, feigning homosexuality so as to be able to keep the

apartment. Or, perhaps, "Kate and Allie," the story of two divorced women with their children, struggling to keep their sanity and their humor while coping with life. Do not forget "Dallas" and "Dynasty," filled with fornication, adultery, broken marriages and homes, homosexuality, and every other kind of corrosive corruption imaginable. The "Cosby Show" is indeed different, but its uniqueness is noteworthy because it is not reflective of the current state of affairs.

This difference in the television portrayals of the family reflects the different world we minister in, a world of radically different needs than that of a generation or two ago. Then, ministry was not geared especially and intentionally to the family or to marriage as an institution. Rather, marriage and family were addressed in an incidental manner. Given the conditions of the times, such treatment was adequate. Consider the "traditional" ministries of the Christian Reformed Church: "family visiting" was regularly and faithfully conducted; the preacher usually taught all the young people in weekly catechism classes; Christian day school was nearly universally supported and endorsed in the pulpits and by the consistories. In short, although these "ministries" did not aim to focus upon marriages and families, the inevitable consequence of their consistent and regular practice was the shaping and norming of generation after generation of people within the Christian Reformed Church with a recognizable and definable marriage-and-family concept and practice. These, together with the yearly sermon on Lord's Day 41 and the (perhaps too narrow) application of the Word of God to the "holy trio" of "church, home, and school," served to provide added strength to an already sturdy covenantal concept of the institutions under consideration here.

Trends in Family Ministry in the Present

These days, however, the crisis in which the institutions of marriage and family are found and the painful relationships in which many of God's people find themselves have necessitated

the development of specialized family ministries. Notice how many of these ministries are extra-ecclesiastical. Notice also that many of them are simplistic or even unchristian in perspective or methodology. Consider, for example, the fundamentalism of some television preachers. One of them said in a recent televised crusade that "if you get yourself saved," your family problems will disappear. Sometimes they tend to apply texts like band-aids to family and marriage problems, offering "recipes" to solve the problems. Perhaps that is the greatest appeal of these brothers: in our age of "lawlessness," in this state of flux, these preachers do indeed give clear—but simplistic—answers.

In most Christian Reformed churches, a Christian version of behaviorism receives much attention. In fact, if you would ask most ministers and consistory members in the Christian Reformed Church to suggest ways to minister to the marriages and families, you would hear the same refrain over and over: show Christian films about the family. Without here offering a detailed analysis of these approaches, I wish to observe simply that one popular minister uses a very suspect hermeneutical method when he claims that there is no situation, including physical abuse, in which he would endorse a wife or a child showing any rebellion against the authority of a husband or father since, as Samuel said to Saul at Gilgal, "to obey is better than sacrifice... rebellion is like the sin of divination" (I Samuel 15:22,23). Sometimes the advice of a popular Christian is helpful but suffers from a weak concept of the offices of husband, wife, parent, and suggests a method of parental discipline which is shaped more by behaviorist psychology than by the biblical conception of "nurture" applied to those whom God has made in his image.

Perhaps our family ministry has been shaped too much by secularist and humanistic approaches sometimes suggested by popular preachers. When "self esteem" takes precedence, as is sometimes suggested, the consequences for marriages and families are staggering. One is left, it seems, with "survival of

the fittest" in these institutions. And not many today are fit enough to survive!

What most characterizes current ministry to marriage and family is that it is *crisis oriented*. For the most part, we have been behind. We have not been ahead of the problems, preparing and equipping our people for what they will face, working preventively. Rather, we have treated the cases as they have come to our doors: a divorce here, a tyrannical father there, with a runaway or a suicide thrown in all too frequently. In failing to minister consistently in a *normative, foundational, and preventative* manner which strengthens, equips, and warns God's people about the spirits of the age, we have failed to shepherd the flock God has entrusted to our care.

Foundational Principles of a Reformed Ministry

Cornelis Venema identified four spirits of our age which corrode the biblical view and practice of marriage and family. I wholeheartedly endorse his analysis and agree that lawlessness, individualism, radical feminism, and materialism are real and present dangers. I have also been helped greatly by the analysis of Paul Vitz (*Psychology As Religion: The Cult of Self-worship*, Eerdmans, 1977). Vitz argues that all such "isms" have one thing in common: they evidence the worship of the self. (One cannot call such a thing "selfishness," which is a character trait. Vitz calls it *selfism*.) One of the greatest contributions of Dooyeweerd to Reformed theology and philosophy is the description of religion as the direction and commitment of the heart ("out of the heart are the issues of life") which, then, inevitably structures the whole of life. If this is so, then "selfism," as Vitz describes it, is *the* faith-commitment which stands in antithesis to the Christian faith. It is the selfish heart direction which we see in Adam and Eve's disobedience; it is the selfish faith which we see in the lament over Israel's sin in *Judges*: "there was no king in Israel. Every man did what was right in his own eyes."

Such selfism is not only evident in the corrosive spirits of the age but *also in the methods*

employed by many to combat them. In order to make my point clear, I offer the following foundational principles to provide a modest beginning for the framing of a Reformed conception of ministry to the family in today's society.

(1) Ministry to the family must recognize the precious covenantal nature of the institutions of marriage and family. To explain this first foundational principle, I shall discuss the remarkable scriptural interweaving of the descriptions of the vertical covenant established between God and his people with the horizontal one made between husband and wife, with the almost inseparable identification of the Family of God and the families of God's people. It is noteworthy in Scripture that marriages are to reflect The Marriage. Such is the language of Hosea, of Malachi 2:14ff, Ephesians 5:25ff. And as Gordon Pols showed in an earlier article, the identity of the family is directly derived from the Family of whom God the Father is Head. I believe that this is precisely what the *redemption* of the family is all about: not only is blood its bond, but in redemption, the bond of faith is added. To ignore the importance of the faith-bond is to perpetuate a deformed family life. To declare unimportant the blood (or adoption) bond is to deny the creational reality of the institution (see Matthew 10:34-39 and Luke 8:21).

Because God so identifies his covenant with his creational institutions, we may conclude that he considers them *precious*. They are not to be treated carelessly. Marriage and family, *because they are reflective of God's covenantal dealings*, are a legitimate object of our focus. To say it a bit differently: the preservation of marriages and families is, in itself, a legitimate object of the Church's ministry precisely because God in Christ redemptively identifies himself so intimately with those institutions. (Obviously, ministering to marriages superficially, without calling for faithful and heartfelt love for God in Christ is to horizontalize the Gospel and to idolize the institutions.)

In addition, this first foundational principle implies that God's dealings with his people are, to some degree at least, dealings with the corporate entities of marriages and families. It is

not to be assumed that God deals only with individuals, even though fundamentalists suggest this is the way he works. Scripture makes very clear that God deals with communal groupings. Consider the promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 17 or the judgment of Achan in Joshua 7. Blessing was promised to Abraham *and his family* (united in both blood and faith); the curse of the covenant was applied to Achan *and his family*. Consider also Acts 16:31ff, where the declaration of salvation and the consequent

selfism.

Paul Vitz makes the point powerfully. After demonstrating the methodological bankruptcy of selfist psychology and family therapy (evidenced in Maslow, Rogers, Fromm, and Rollo May) *precisely because* it is client-centered instead of objectively normative, he says: "the social destructiveness of much of today's psychotherapy can be attributed to characteristics of the therapy process itself, although psychologists assume that social or

Our ministry must give God's norms for stewardship. It is not only relationships which are normed by Scripture; our use of the resources entrusted to us by God must also follow divine patterns. This involves more than warning God's people against the idolatry of the "good life." It includes the setting of values on time usage, challenging the evaluation of children's education on strictly economic terms, and reminding the people of God that "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

application of the sacrament of baptism were given to the jailer *and his household*.

This first foundational principle implies, then, that our ministry to marriages and families must be corporate in its approach. We cannot combat the antithetical faith of selfism by approaching only individuals. We must recognize the corporate dimensions of sin in marriage and families; we must minister to the appropriate members of the institution communally. (The bulk of the demands on my pastoral time can be traced to a limited number of extended families in each church. I believe this demonstrates clearly what God warned in the second commandment: the sins of the fathers are visited upon the succeeding generations.) To minister in such a setting requires that entire families sit together in our studies and that husband and wife together hear the claims of the Word of God upon them. To approach the individuals separately is to foster

personality characteristics are to blame when a client's marriage ends in divorce, for example. *The problem begins with psychotherapy's neurotic preoccupation with the individual patient* (Vitz, 83). Yet many pastors practice such a methodology in the study, or refer God's people to professionals who employ such a methodology in their offices. The solution is a large part of the problem.

Instead, the obedient (covenant) *institution* must be in focus, not the happiness or advancement of the individual. Bringing the marriage or the family to the blessed harmony that reflects the Covenant Marriage and God's Family is the goal. To aim pastorally to help the various *individuals* find fulfillment is, on the contrary, an illegitimate one.

(2) Ministry to marriages and families as creational institutions of God is always a ministry (normative application) of the Word of the Lord. God, who in paradise established

the marriage bond, provides norms for marriage and the family in his Word. It is the task of the church to hold out those norms for the obedient response of the people of God, and, indeed, for the entire world. We must now consider various applications of this principle.

In the first place, the Word of the Lord is normative for the *relationships* within the institutions of marriage and family. Such an assertion brings with it very specific practical implications. For example, the current spirits of the age have undermined the traditionally held understanding of the *offices* of husband, wife, and parent. Young people get married in the passion of infatuation. For years, ministers assumed that these youth, raised in the bosom of the church and in Christian homes, understood what loving each other involved. We can no longer take that for granted. We must assume nothing. We must rather build from the ground floor up. In pre-marital instruction sessions, we must deal with the basics—Ephesians 5 on what husband-love is like, as limited by the sacrificial love of Christ's example, and the same passage on the calling of every wife to "submit," and what that means. Pre-baptism instruction must cover the most elementary material on the nature and purpose of discipline, the scriptural understanding of nurture, and the like. In our pastoral contact with the youth of the church we must explain the high *calling* of student life, thus equipping them to confront the spirits of the age which challenge them concerning the "value" of chemistry, history, and obedience to their parents "as to the Lord." (I believe that catechism training ought to be conducted by the pastor, since it is urgent that *pastoral* contact be maintained with this vital segment of the church. Few opportunities for contact will be available if this is not done.)

What our parents assumed to be the values handed down from generation to generation we must teach as the fundamentals for the reclaiming of the creational institutions which are rejected by autonomous humanity.

The same situation holds for sexuality. Giving God's norms for the intimate relations within marriage is an urgent responsibility of

the church. That claim may be a surprise to you. We don't need to *inform* the members of the church about sexual matters. But we do need to *norm* them. We need to hold forth the prohibition of sex outside of marriage, and we need to teach that fornication is sin. We need to exercise discipline to rid the church of the corrosive, cancerous effect of pagan practices, such as those the Apostle condemns in I Corinthians 5. We need to quit reacting in a knee-jerk fashion because of the manner in which our fathers handled sins against the seventh commandment. Just because they sometimes over-emphasized the one issue at the expense of fairness and love does not allow us to ignore the seriousness of modern sins. Finally, we need to do serious work on applying the norms of Scripture to birth control methods. Some methods contribute to the selfism of the day, since they permit self-indulgence without fear of consequence. We must, in the face of such attitudes and practices, uncompromisingly hold forth the value of the bearing of children to the coming of the Kingdom, reminding the people of God that children are "a heritage of the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward."

In another area, our ministry must give God's norms for stewardship. It is not only relationships which are normed by Scripture; our use of the resources entrusted to us by God must also follow divine patterns. This involves more than warning God's people against the idolatry of the "good life." It includes the setting of values on time usage, challenging the evaluation of children's education on strictly economic terms, and reminding the people of God that "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Are these things obvious? Perhaps, but it is still necessary to teach them.

The ministry of the Word of the Lord to the marriages and families within the church involves giving God's norms for the recreational life of the home. Without reducing Scripture to a "do/don't" type of application, we must warn against worldly amusements. I John ("Do not love the world or the things in it") cannot be overlooked. A rereading of the 1928 Christian Reformed church synodical study on worldly

amusements is instructive. The recent work by John Bolt entitled *Christian and Reformed Today* rates the Synod's analysis as highly profitable, and laments only the overzealous application to the infamous "big three" of cards, movies, and dancing. The present-day distortion of "amusements" among the people of the kingdom is readily apparent. Consider the arrangement of the furniture in the family rooms of most Christian homes. Often the sofa and chairs are arranged so as to face the focal point of attention: the "entertainment center," including the TV, the VCR, stereo, video games, and so forth. Prosperity has enabled such accumulation; a lack of understanding of the norms regarding recreation and mutual interaction and love has permitted the world usage and abuse of them.

I must also refer to the normativity of the Word of the Lord for the faith and worship of the family. The heritage of the Christian Reformed Church stresses the family "altar." Our parents gathered with their families around the Word regularly, usually at mealtimes. Some reduced the exercise to superficiality. But most did not. The devotional submission to and knowledge of the text of Scripture were part of each family's day. But such is no longer the case. Some people maintain that the busyness of life makes impossible such attention to the Scriptures. But if we take seriously the comprehensive requirement set forth in Deuteronomy 6, we will insist that biblical parents structure life so that such comprehensive nurturing in the words of the text can take place. Perhaps we, as pastors, will have to stimulate alternatives, such as the use of Sunday afternoons (instead of the omnipresent TV sports programs) for family study of Scripture. Maybe we need to prepare study guides and discussion sheets to assist our people.

Family worship also involves attendance at church worship services with the family of God. The widespread practice of dismissing the children from the services for "children's church" is antithetical to the very thing I am pleading for. If the blood-bond is to be conditioned by the faith-bone within the family, the individualism evident in culture cannot be

allowed to fragment the family at worship. Indeed, keeping children in church services places a demand upon the preacher. We have to preach so as to keep them involved and listening. But it is not impossible. I remember a story one minister told about his boyhood preacher in the Netherlands. He was preaching about the plague of frogs in Egypt. He described, briefly but so graphically, the comprehensive nature of the curse of God by describing Pharaoh's wife and her probable reaction to finding a frog in her housecoat. The young boy in the pew never forgot.

To summarize this point: in every sphere of life the spirit of unbelief seeks to undermine and fragment the institutions which God created and which reflect his covenant relationship and love. Our ministry to marriages and families in this culture must be ministry of the very word of the Creator and Lord of those marriages and families. It is his Word alone which is the objective, eternal Law for the life of these institutions. We may not fail to make that Word specific for the people of God, who confront these spirits every day.

Some Thoughts of Methodology

My suggestions imply a certain methodology. I have suggested that ministry must be covenantal, implying a corporate, communal awareness and approach. I've suggested that another principle is Word-ministry, implying a specific and practical application of norming texts to the relationships, stewardship, recreation, and worship of families in today's society. A few methodological reflections are in order.

It is important for us to recognize the limitations of pastors. We pastors cannot do it all. If we try, we will not serve our people faithfully; furthermore, we will fail our own families. First, family ministry must be ministry that flows from and involves *all the offices within Christ's Church*.

As preachers, we are aware of our duties. Do not overlook the primary means of grace (Lord's Day 25, Heidelberg Catechism): *preaching*. The God-ordained power of the

pulpit must be mobilized against this corrosive spirit of selfism.

Our *elders*, too, must be deeply involved in ministry to families and marriages. It seems that in recent years we have delegated to them the work of discipline but retain the crisis counseling, particularly in marriage and family strife, for ourselves as pastors. This is not always a good idea. I shall discuss the current practices of some of the elders with whom I have the privilege to work. We have given new emphasis to the concept of parishes, to reemphasize for the elders their responsibility as shepherds (I Peter 5). One of these shepherds

opportunity for ministry is utilized if each couple about to marry is asked to meet with deacons to discuss the establishing of a family budget which reflects biblical stewardship. Further, the deacons can be called to minister in economic family crises. Many young families today get themselves in debt because buying by means of credit cards is very easy. What a marvelous ministry the deacons can provide as stewardship-counselors to families in such crises. They could also be asked to visit with groups of young couples for preventative work.

Do not not neglect the *office of believer*. Clearly, ministry is not only that carried out in

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(actually, "pastors") in my congregation has noted the functional failure of so many husbands and fathers to give leadership—headship—in their marriages and families. He has taken upon himself the task of visiting with each of the fathers in his parish to discuss the basic responsibilities of the office of husband and father. This work is in addition to the regular visiting with the family as a unit. His activity takes considerable commitment and effort. But his is just what the office requires and what the modern family needs.

Our *deacons* are called to participate in ministry to families. I referred earlier to scriptural norms for the stewardship of the Christian family. Here is where the teaching authority of the deacon comes to expression. A marvelous

"special offices." Scripture calls all believers to encourage and admonish one another, to spur each other on to love and good works. Such exhortations must be heeded. Specifically, Titus 2 enjoins the application of the wisdom of the elders to the practices of the younger element in the church. Interestingly, the older women are told to "teach the younger women how to love their husbands." Our sex-saturated society would turn such advice around. How does one implement such a word? Consider the apprenticeship of newlyweds to older, biblically-wise couples in the church. An older couple could be asked to look in on the young couple, to visit with them, to discuss the tensions, the temptations, the consequences of failure, and thus to "teach" them how to love.

Besides considering the involvement of the offices, I want to discuss referral counselors. Most preachers are too busy and ill-prepared to enter into long-term commitments. We usually refer the cases to professionals. But be aware of Paul Vitz' warning: most of current psychology employs an approach which is client-centered. It is, he says, symptomatic of a "neurotic preoccupation with the individual patient." This situation ought not to surprise us, since Paul warned us of the problem in Colossians 2:8. He called such kinds of counsel "hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends upon human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." Psalm 1:1 makes the same point.

I have learned much from a committed and Scripturally-based counselor with whom I have worked. One of his frequently stressed points is that counseling is ineffective unless it possesses *authority*. In Scripture counseling is not merely advising. It has the character of the authority of the Word of Christ, which, if rejected, brings about consequences. (Consider the following: I Thessalonians 5:12, Colossians 1:28, 2:16; and especially I Corinthians 5:1-5, 13). Only when biblical counsel and direction is heeded, humbly and believingly, will the purpose be achieved: the redemption of the marriage or family relationship.

Therefore, the vast majority of marriage and family counseling ought to be done by pastors and elders who possess the authority to discipline ecclesiastically those who refuse to heed the normative counsel of the Word of God. To refer to a "neutral" counselor may well be more comfortable for the couple or family, but it will be less effective if they can walk out without feeling the real burden of the threat of disciplinary consequences if they fail to work faithfully to implement God's norms. Where biblically-shaped counseling is available through referral, any blanket promise of confidentiality is contrary to the premise that family ministry is a multi-faceted application of the norms of the Word, and involves a Counsel which transcends any single counselor. By pledging confidentiality, the counselor denies the curse of the Covenant, implying only the

promise of blessing. Such testimony is clearly contrary to Scripture, where covenant breaking (including covenant breaking in family and marriage) is met with the curse of the Covenant Lord (see the especially comprehensive list of the curses for disobedience in Deuteronomy 28:15ff). A much more scripturally-effective counsel can be provided where pastor and referral counselor can work together, sharing information and ideas, and providing consistent witness to the urgency of obedience.

Finally, and of great practical consequence, consider the consequences of the language we use in addressing family and marriage crises. We frequently hear and use medical terms. Marriages are "hurting" and in need of "healing." Families are "sick" or in "tension," exhibiting various "symptoms." However, we do not serve God's people the Word of God faithfully if we fail to call sin "sin," and if we fail to call people, including those in marital and family brokenness, to repent and be converted. We cannot overlook the basic fact that marital and family sins, too, are sins of the *heart*. As the Psalmist teaches, what is needed is a "broken and a contrite heart." When the hearts of the family or marriage partners are right with the Father—soft, humble, loving—no problem in those institutions is insoluble.

Although my experiences are not normative for you, in *every* case in my ministry where a marriage or family has been broken, there has been at least one member of the relationship whose heart was fundamentally directed away from God and toward self. Where I have seen "healing," it has come by way of the breaking of the crust around the heart, and the transformation of that heart by way of humble confession and repentance. Where that change has been absent, any effective help has been only temporary and superficial.

Finally, remember that we are not mechanics, called to tinker with machines. We are ministers of the Word, called to proclaim that authoritative gospel to the *hearts* of God's people—to the hearts of their marriages, of their families, of themselves. In the final analysis, ministry to the family is ministry to the hearts of people.