

# **Strengthening the Family Study Guide**

*to Accompany*

# **The Family**

**A Christian Perspective  
on the Contemporary Home**

**FIFTH EDITION**

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# Preface

In our book, *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home*, 5th ed., we present an integrated view of contemporary family life based upon social-science research, clinical insights, and biblical truth. This study guide is designed to focus on the major concepts in each chapter for the purpose of reflection, discussion, and personal and practical application. This systematic way of applying the material deepens the concepts through shared experience. We have found that the most fruitful way for positive change to occur is through active involvement and interpersonal interaction.

Whether you are a professor, or a leader or participant engaged in family life ministry, you will find this study guide helpful. Feel free to utilize select material as you create educational experiences for academic courses; church study groups; Sunday school classes; retreats for married persons, adult singles, or youth; enrichment seminars; parenting workshops; women's or men's weekends; or family conferences.

Each chapter in the study guide is organized with the following content:

- A brief overview that summarizes the purpose of the chapter
- A list of discussion questions concerning the chapter contents, which are useful for personal or small group reflection
- Participant exercises for processing the chapter material
- Suggestions for more in-depth engagement, including further exercises and other methods for using the material as well as important considerations

It is no secret that living in relationship requires commitment and effort, especially when our ideal is to be Christlike. There is much that we can do to improve our family life, and practice makes perfect. Acknowledging our constant need to be mindful of God's intention keeps us optimistic about improving the quality of important relationships. The growth, learning, and healing that is part of this process is what makes the struggle rewarding. Our failures and humanness humble us, and we recognize our need for God's indwelling spirit as we continually strive for covenant, grace, empowerment, and intimacy to be at the center of our relationships. Meaningful change takes time and effort, but when relationships are valued there is an ongoing desire to relate to each other on a deeper level. We believe that the use of this study guide will be instrumental in helping you bring about richer and more caring relationships with those you love.

# 1

## A Theological Foundation for Family Relationships

### *Developing a Theology of the Family*

#### **Overview of Chapter**

In chapter 1 we present a theology of family relationships based on the Bible's descriptions of trinitarian relationality, God as a parent in relationship to the children of Israel, and Christ as the groom in relationship to the church as his bride. The resulting theology of family relationships includes elements of *covenant* (to love and be loved), *grace* (to forgive and be forgiven) *empowerment* (to serve and be served), and *intimacy* (to know and be known). When relationships mature to include each of these elements, people can establish Christlike relationships both inside and outside the immediate family.

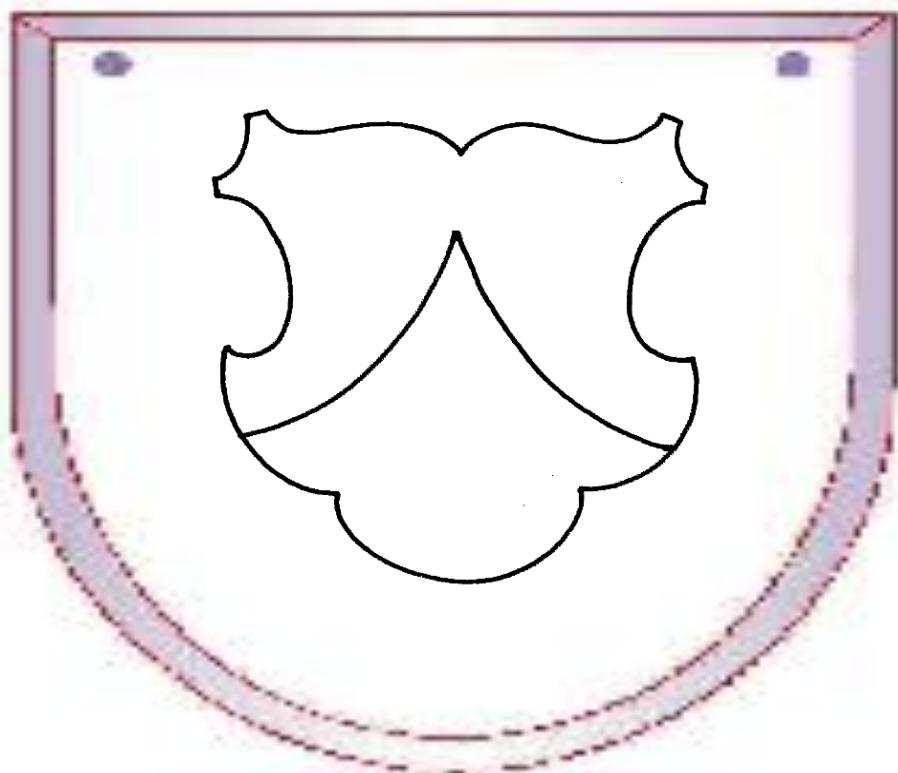
#### **Discussion and Reflection Questions**

1. Refer to figure 1 (p. 8) and discuss covenant as a core value, like the trunk of a tree. How do family members dwell mutually in family fellowship? Consider the example of divine dance.
2. To what extent is it possible for human beings to love unconditionally? Have you ever experienced this? Give examples from your life.
3. Discuss the importance of unity and uniqueness.
4. Name the persons who empowered you as you were growing up. Who empowers you now? Give examples of how you have been empowered.
5. What can be learned about intimacy from the relationship between Adam and Eve as covenant representatives? Explain how intimacy develops through empowerment.

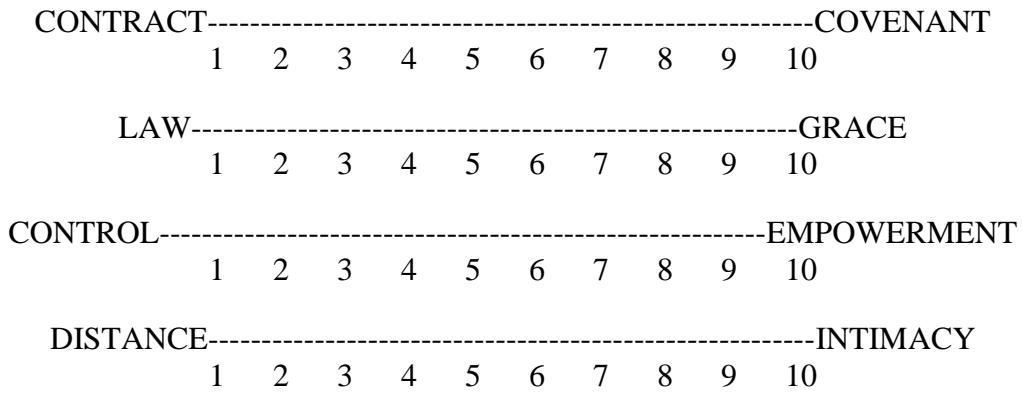
#### **Participant Exercises**

1. Have each participant draw an empowerment shield (see sample) with symbols of family strengths (e.g., anchor, cross, music staff, graduation hat, etc.). In small groups, have members present their shields, discussing how each symbol is empowering. Next, assemble the whole class and have one member from each small group report on the positive family qualities that are a result of empowerment. It may be helpful to have construction paper, scissors, glue, and magazines available for those who want to cut out symbols instead of drawing them.

*Empowerment Shield*



2. We suggest that Christian family relationships need to be characterized by a high degree of commitment, grace, empowerment, and intimacy. On the following continuum, where do you rate your family for each of these criteria? What have you learned from this exercise?



### Suggestion

Have participants break up into small groups to share about the dimensions in their family relationship. Have them discuss the positive growth that comes through covenant, grace, empowerment, and intimacy, in contrast to the lack of growth that comes through contract, law, control and distance. Discuss how self-esteem is a product of being empowered by family members.

# 2

## The Family as a Developing Biosocial System

### Overview of Chapter

In chapter 2 we introduce clinical and social-science wisdom on what constitutes a strong, effective family. Two approaches are described as useful in assessing healthy families. The family-systems approach views the family as a unit of interrelated members who are connected in complex ways by their relationships. The developmental approach focuses on life cycle stages of family life. The theological content in chapter 1 and the clinical and social-science content in chapter 2 provide the basis for developing an integrated view of family life in the chapters that follow.

### Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Give examples from your own family for each of the feedback levels: simple feedback, cybernetic control, morphogenesis, DoS (differentiation of self), and reorientation.
2. Discuss the importance of semipermeable boundaries in family life.
3. Families experience great stress in every developmental stage transition. Why do you think this is the case?
4. What developmental stage has been most stressful in your own experience? What were the circumstances that made it difficult? When is DoS a dominant theme? How do boomerang children change the dynamics?
5. How would living in an extended family system ease the transition between each stage of family development? How might it make things difficult?
6. How do major world events like wars, pandemics, or disasters impact family developmental stages?

### Participant Exercises

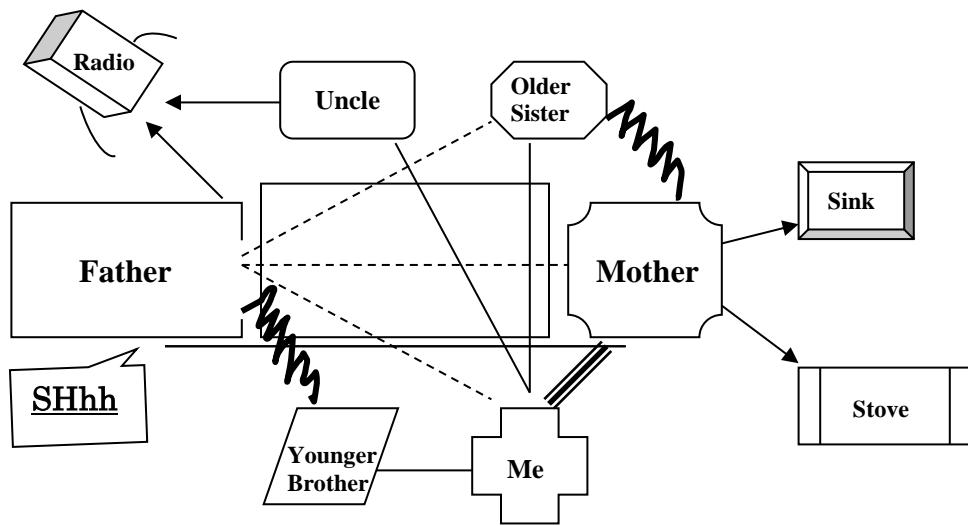
1. Reflect on how *cohesion*, *adaptability*, *communication*, and *role structure* existed (i.e., was either effective or ineffective) in the family you grew up in. Look at table 3 (p. 40) and gauge the level of cohesion and adaptability (flexibility versus structure) that was present during your preteenager years. How would you have wanted this to be different and how would that have changed things?

In conjunction with this exercise, have participants break up into the following four discussion groups based on their evaluation of their family when they were about twelve years old: *flexible disconnected*, *flexible connected*, *inflexible disconnected*, and *inflexible connected*. Each group is to discuss what evening meals were like in their home. Alternatively, each group could describe how

decisions were made in their home or how family members showed affection to each other. Ask each group to appoint a recorder to summarize the general descriptions that come from the group. Each group should report these insights to the reassembled larger group.

2. Draw a picture of your family dining room table. Around this table, label chairs with the names of your family members according to where they usually sat during your preteenager years. Write down or draw pictures to represent roles that different family members played, interactions between family members (e.g., conflictual, overly involved, distant, etc.), the physical and emotional atmosphere in the room (like the TV blasting, or a strained or pleasant environment), and so on.

### ***Example of the Family Table***



### **Suggestion**

Share your table and observations with others in a small group discussion. Consider the interactions between family members (both positive and negative) and the impact this had on the family system.

# 3

## Mate Selection and Cohabitation

### *Romance and Reality*

#### **Overview of Chapter**

In chapter 3 we focus on the process of two people coming together to form a marital relationship. Given the emphasis on romantic love as a basis for marriage in western societies, we make a distinction between different types of love within relationships. The chapter closes by offering a “biblically balanced” approach for discerning a mate. We suggest that God’s will is often confirmed through consultation and affirmation of trusted family members, friends, and the Christian community.

#### **Discussion and Reflection Questions**

1. Do similar types of individuals tend to marry each other or do opposites attract? How would you assess this question with regard to your parents’ marriage (if they are married), or for yourself if you are currently in a relationship?
2. Do you think marriages are happier in a participant-run or parental-run mate selection system? Why?
3. Discuss the difference between love and love addiction.

#### **Participant Exercises**

1. Review your significant relationships with male and female friends. Using the headings “Similar” and “Different,” write down their names according to how they resemble you. Based on your list, do you tend to seek out people who are similar to or different from you? What can you learn from your patterns of interaction with these friends? Discuss the implications for mate selection.
2. Focus specifically on each family member in your home when you were a child and consider the qualities that you appreciated about each one. What qualities did you admire? Were there qualities you disliked? Why? Consider how these qualities influenced your selection of male and female friends. Share with one or two other participants what you learned about yourself during this reflection.
3. Write down all the words that come to mind when you think of love. Try to categorize these words into major ingredients for creating a good relationship with another person. Are your words mainly nouns or verbs, feelings or actions?

## **Suggestion**

After reflection, process as a group how early childhood relationships influence the choice of a life partner. Be alert to anyone who may have been reminded of serious negative memories. It's a good idea to have a list of therapy referrals should a person want to process early childhood experiences further. Be sympathetic and understanding while being mindful of your limits.

# 4

## Establishing Marriage

### *Moving toward Differentiated Unity*

#### **Overview of Chapter**

In chapter 4 we show how establishing a strong marriage is dependent on resolving issues related to each partner's family of origin. In marriage, a husband and wife learn and begin to play new roles that they define for themselves and for each other. Coordinating and working out mutually agreed upon roles constitutes the major focus of marital adjustment during early marriage. The goal is to achieve differentiated unity.

#### **Discussion and Reflection Questions**

1. In what way are your ideals about marriage a reflection of your view of the marital roles of your parents? Give examples of how partners replicate patterns from their family of origin.
2. Reflect on the statement, “a person is not ready to marry until they have achieved a healthy differentiation from their parents.” Describe what “healthy differentiation from parents” looks like. How is RSR (relational self-regulation) part of the differentiation process?
3. What are the major differentiation issues you have (or have had) with your parents? How does Gen. 1–2 speak about differentiation?
4. Discuss the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) in terms of differentiation. One of the most challenging tasks in life is to leave your family of origin and make it on your own. Think about the day you left home (physically, emotionally, or spiritually) and draw a picture of this day in your mind or on paper. Who was there? What emotions were expressed? Who was not there? What were your feelings as you left?
5. Discuss the concept of differentiated unity; that is, being one and retaining uniqueness. Indicate how the term *perichoresis* relates to this concept.

#### **Participant Exercises**

1. Consider personality differences such as introverted/extroverted, structured/flexible, or thinking/feeling. How do these impact a relationship? Take a common activity, like going on a trip, and describe how these personality differences may cause problems during the

- trip. If you are aware of the Myers–Briggs assessment, or other personality test assessments, talk about them with your group.
2. Draw a picture of your leaving home experience. This is the time when you left home emotionally or physically. It may be the day you left home for college, your first job, your wedding day, a trip abroad, for the military, etc. Break into small groups to share your picture and discuss your feelings about leaving home and separating from your family.

### **Suggestion**

This is a good time to discuss the process of differentiation, relational self-regulation, and autonomy, and why this is important to experience prior to marriage.

# 5

## A Model for Biblical Marriage

### Overview of Chapter

The marital dyad is a dynamic, growing relationship that must be lived out in a changing pluralistic society. Three competing models for marriage—the *traditional*, *biblical*, and *modern*—are compared with the criteria of *commitment*, *adaptability*, *authority*, and *communication*. The biblical model is presented as an ideal in which covenant, grace, empowering, and intimacy are the basis of commitment, adaptability, authority, and communication.

### Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Using table 4 in the book (p. 94) consider the differences between the three types of marriages—a marriage in which a couple is committed to each other, committed to marriage as an institution, or committed to self-fulfillment in marriage.
2. What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of *segregated*, *interchangeable*, and *undifferentiated* marital roles systems?
3. Compare the *traditional*, *biblical*, and *modern* marital systems in terms of their ability to provide marital stability and marital quality and equality.
4. How is a trinitarian view of God reflected in marriage? How does this view change the idea of personal resources, dependence, and power in marriage?
5. Dual-earner marriages require balance, role salience and role satisfaction. Why is this so important?

### Participant Exercises

1. Using the concept “there are six in the marriage bed” (i.e., each spouse has a set of parents who influence them), discuss expectations about spousal roles and rules in the home. Give examples of conflicts between spouses that are the result of how each spouse’s parents acted when they were growing up. (For example, a wife’s father was frugal to a fault, and when the husband acts frugally, the wife responds strongly.)
2. Have everyone break into small groups and make a list of the ten most important ingredients in a happy marriage. Have the entire group share with each other and write down all the suggestions. Don’t forget ingredients such as humor and good sex, which may not get mentioned. The compiled list should provide a broad perspective of specific things that encourage marital happiness.
3. In reference to the phrase, “You have to be willing to ‘give up’ to have a successful marriage,” ask participants to discuss whether they agree with the sentiment of this

statement. Is it necessary to give our “selves” up when putting the priority on the “us” in marriage? How does *kenosis* fit into this?

## **Suggestion**

It is important to point out that there are exceptions to the stereotypical categories in table 4; i.e., the traditional, biblical, or modern views of marriage.

# 6

## Parenting

### *The Process of Relationship Empowerment*

#### **Overview of Chapter**

In this chapter we contrast alternative styles of parenting and the effects they have on the development of children. Based upon social-science literature and a biblical model of God as parent, Christian parenting is defined as a process of empowering children toward maturity.

#### **Discussion and Reflection Questions**

1. In reflecting on your discipline style as a parent, choose between the *teaching* and *modeling* styles of instrumental parenting and describe why you would parent your child from that parenting style. Give examples of the four styles of socio-emotional parenting.
2. How do you respond to the suggestion that parenting can best be thought of as “discipling?” How would your parents have raised you differently if they applied this concept?
3. How are children who are raised in authoritarian homes likely to differ from children raised in permissive homes?
4. Which is the greater weakness in parenting today—lack of parental support or lack of parental control?
5. Distinguish between effective and ineffective types of parental control. Give examples of using logical or natural consequences as a form of discipline. How are these empowering?
6. The authors make the following comment: “We believe that a biblical model of parenting can be derived from the scriptural depiction of God as parent” (p. 125). Do you agree? How does your concept of God reflect your role as parent? Do you ever think about God as mother in addition to God as father?

#### **Participant Exercises**

1. Using figure 7 (p. 120), have participants describe ways in which their parents parented them through each mode: telling, teaching, participating, and delegating. Were there serious deficits in one or more of these modes? How have you tried to compensate for these deficits? How will these (or how do these) deficits affect your own parenting style and how you relate to others?

2. Draw or collage a picture of God as parent. What messages come to mind as you reflect on your drawing or collage? Make two lists that describe how God parents effectively through the control and support dimensions discussed in this chapter (one list for control and one for support). Do you have a good balance between how God empowers you through firm guidance (control) and loving support?
3. Read passages of Scripture that depict God as parent (e.g., Isa. 49:15; 66:13; Luke 13:34; Hosea 11; 1 John 1:10–14). Ask others to reflect on how they respond to God as parent and how they feel as God’s child. Be careful not to stereotype masculine or feminine characteristics of God, and be sensitive to the metaphors that depict God in male and female terms. Remember that God is spirit and therefore neither male nor female; the mothering and fathering imagery simply presents a picture of how God relates to us.

### **Suggestion**

Together in small groups, have participants share their lists describing God in support and control dimensions. In addition, have everyone share their picture of God as parent. Talk together about finding a good balance between the control and support dimensions and give specific testimony of how God has interacted in your life.

# Developing a Mature, Reciprocating Self

## Overview of Chapter

Human beings are created in the image of God, and this influences how we should approach relationships. Thus, the purpose of human development is for the self to develop reciprocal relationships with God and others. The major theories of child development are evaluated in terms of how well they fit with this biblical view of human personhood. The chapter concludes by pointing out practical implications for the parenting of young children.

## Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Compare *psychoanalytic theory*, DST (*developmental systems theory*), *cognitive structural theory*, *cognitive developmental theory*, *object relations theory*, *Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory*, *social ecology theory*, and *social learning theory*. Discuss *social learning*, *symbolic interaction*, and *cognitive development* theories in terms of whether they present an active or passive view of child development.
2. How is freedom defined within the reciprocal determinism of social learning theory? How does this view of human freedom compare with a biblical view of human freedom?
3. Why are parental attitudes toward a child so important in the development of the child's self-concept?
4. Distinguish between *assimilation*, *accommodation*, and *equilibration* as they relate to the cognitive development of children.
5. What are some ways that birth order affects children in their family? Discuss the impact of gender, culture, physical and mental conditions, reconstituted family dynamics, large age gaps, deaths, etc., on the development of children within the context of birth order.
6. Discuss the idea that when it comes to raising children, "it takes a village." Discuss the responsibility a community has in the development of children. Is this community-oriented approach possible in today's world?

## Participant Exercises

1. Reflect on your experience growing up with your siblings. Draw a picture of your sibling subsystem according to birth order. What adjectives would you use to describe each sibling (examples include intelligent, rebellious, good looking, etc.)? How are your siblings different and how are they similar? Discuss whether some relationships between siblings were stronger than others. Who were you closest to and why? Who were you

most competitive with and why? Did the gender of the sibling make a difference in the role that they played in your family? How so?

2. Write down characteristics, both positive and negative, of the most significant sibling relationship(s) you have. Now consider your relationships with your spouse, children, and important friends. Are there similar characteristics in the relationships you have with these people and your significant sibling relationship(s)? Are you surprised by these similarities?
3. Make a list of some of the things you talk about with one or more of your siblings when you are together. Alternatively, write a letter to one or more of your siblings expressing some of the insights you are gaining throughout these exercises. Can you identify some of the unfinished business you have with any of your siblings? How might you want to rectify this?
4. Divide participants into the following sibling groups: oldest sibling, second-oldest sibling, middle sibling in a large family, middle sibling of three children, youngest, and only child. With groups assembled, have members come up with a list of adjectives that describe their sibling group, and have a recorder write them down. Discuss together dynamics like how you felt about your sibling position as a child, what you liked and did not like about it, and how you felt about your siblings and their position in the family. Then have one spokesperson from each group describe the key points of agreement among siblings in each position. This activity makes for a fun interaction between groups, and it provides a good opportunity for everyone to understand the pros and cons of each sibling position in the family. Have the whole group reflect on any interactions between sibling groups that were empowering.

## Suggestion

Make sure to acknowledge there are exceptions to every position in the family, even though there are similar experiences within each group. Important factors to be aware of include the following: gender (e.g., only girl among boy siblings), spread of ages (a six-year age gap can be significant), and when a sibling in one position relinquishes their place to another sibling due to sickness, death, or other problems.

# Family Spirituality

## *Nurturing Christian Beliefs, Morals, and Values*

### Overview of Chapter

Family spirituality encompasses all the ways families cultivate an understanding of biblical truth, moral beliefs, and values. Within a trinitarian model of family spirituality, mature individual spirituality will be based upon each family member's differentiation in Christ.

### Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Describe spiritual differentiation in your family of origin; that is, the family you grew up in. Give examples of spiritual enmeshment or spiritual disengagement within your family. How did spiritual differentiation within your family work? Did spiritual issues change as you and your siblings progressed from childhood to adolescence to adulthood?
2. Using Fowler's faith development model, reflect upon and trace your own faith development process. Do you find that it adequately considers your own "faithing" experience?
3. How does being in Christ form the basis of your identity? How are you differentiated in Christ?
4. How is your identity based on being adopted into God's family through Christ? How do you authentically live out this identity?

### Participant Exercise

1. Work in small groups to create family rituals that enhance family spirituality. Begin by encouraging each group member to share any family rituals they practiced while growing up. The rituals could be acted out if appropriate. In sharing about past family rituals, focus on how these rituals reinforced the spiritual values important to your family.

### Suggestion

Invite participants to brainstorm what has worked for their families in terms of promoting spiritual morals and values. Welcome positive examples of what has worked, as well as negative examples of what hasn't. Are there unique things that each participant can share about their family that others might benefit from? For example, one might keep a sacred corner in their

home that includes a candle, cross, and a quiet place to pray. And other family members are encouraged to bring something from nature to add to the altar in this sacred corner.

# 9

## Adolescence and Midlife

### *Challenging Changes*

#### Overview of Chapter

In chapter 9 we analyze stress both for adolescents and midlife individuals. We indicate the conflict that can occur in the family when both adolescence and midlife are simultaneously present. If parents at midlife learn to give responsibility and adolescents learn to act responsibly, mutual empowerment is possible between parents and children.

#### Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Why is adolescence a period of stress and strain? Give examples of identity crisis, differentiation, and identity formation. Why do you think some adolescents “leave in a huff?”
2. What is the double inferiority complex? Is there also a double identity crisis for teens and parents?
3. In which types of families is adolescent rebellion likely to be the highest?
4. What is the greater contributing factor to parent-adolescent conflict: parents not giving sufficient responsibility to adolescents, or children not taking sufficient responsibility?
5. Is there any biblical support for the view that good parenting makes sure that children “turn out well?”

#### Participant Exercises

1. If the makeup of your class allows, divide the class into two groups (adults and adolescents) and have each group choose a panel of four members to represent them as follows:
  - *Adults:* Describe your leaving home experience. Indicate how you felt about being on your own, both the fears of not depending on your family and the excitement of making your own independent life choices. What were some of the issues you had with your parents during this time?
  - *Adolescents:* After listening and responding with understanding and interest to the adult panel, describe how you imagine your own leaving home will happen. What do

you fear and what do you look forward to? What issues do you think you will have with your parents during this process? (Adults are to listen with interest and understanding while avoiding reactive responses.)

2. Make two lists, one titled “Parents Letting Go!” and the other titled “Adolescents Taking Hold!” In the first, list what parents need to do when their adolescent child is preparing to leave home. In the second, list what adolescents need to do when they are preparing to leave home. Compare and contrast the two lists. Decide how parents and adolescents can participate together to create a positive leaving home experience.

### **Suggestion**

The participants may be similar in age and you will want to represent the adult or adolescent cohort accordingly. That is, facilitators should pay attention to the age distribution of the group(s) participating in the exercises and tailor the discussion and materials according to age. In other words, emphasize materials relevant to the age of the participants.

# 10

## The Joys and Challenges of Family in Later Life

### Overview of Chapter

The family in later life typically consists of three separate stages: the launching of children from home, the post-launching years, and retirement. These later years consist of a full third of the life of a typical family. Major issues that the later-life family faces involve differentiation, social and economic independence of children, parental adjustment to loss of parenting roles, care of elderly parents, adjustment to retirement, growing old, and death of elderly family members.

### Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. What are the main transitional tasks a family deals with during the launching stage? Discuss accountability in terms of a *smooth* and *recalled launch*. Give examples of positive good-bye rituals.
2. Can you think of reasons why there has been an increase in *boomerang children* in recent years?
3. Focus on the major adjustment that is required during retirement years. Discuss factors that make this stage of life meaningful. How does retirement impact the marriage dyad? What new opportunities are there for serving God during retirement, and why is it important to stay engaged with life?
4. How important is grandparenting for the development of children? How can grandparents contribute most to their grandchildren?
5. Identify some of the common gains and strains that a multigenerational household experiences. Develop a list of principles or suggestions that might make multigenerational living a more positive experience.
6. Caring for others (parents or spouses) is often an unanticipated aspect of aging. How might a biblical perspective be brought to bear on this issue? Consider self-care resources for the caretaking role.

### Participant Exercise

1. Break the class into the following groups: individuals who are in the midst of launching, those who have already launched, teens who are the first to leave home, adult children who have boomeranged home, grandparents in multigenerational households, those in the midst of retirement, and adults caring for elderly parents. (If individuals fall into multiple groups, have them pick one group to join.) Have these groups discuss the joys and the

challenges they face in their current life stage. Ask each group to select one person to summarize and record the responses given. After allowing each group to report what was discussed, open it up for the entire group to reflect.

### **Suggestion**

Select and tailor questions and exercises according to the ages and life stages of the participants.

# 11

## Changing Gender Roles and Relations

### *The Impact on Family Life*

#### Overview of Chapter

In chapter 11 we explain gender-role differences and reasons traditional gender roles are being called into question. As gender-role changes impact family life, a corresponding opportunity to work toward a biblical basis for female and male involvement in the family arises.

#### Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Do you identify as a biblical feminist? Why or why not?
2. Discuss the implications of *critical theory*. Give examples of hegemonic privileges.
3. How has the redefinition of gender impacted family, work roles, and relationships? Do the benefits outweigh any disruptions? Explain.
4. Can there be women's liberation without men's liberation?
5. In what ways does the traditional definition of gender roles keep women dependent on men and men dependent on women? How does Miroslav Wolf's proposal for a radical reconciliation enter in?
6. Much of the recent writing on changing gender roles has called for greater participation on the part of the husband/father. How is this coparenting practice consistent with a Christian view of family life?

#### Participant Exercises

1. Have the women in the group form an inner circle and discuss question 3 or 4 above, while the men in the group listen from the outer circle. Next, switch the two groups and have the men discuss the same question. Then, in one large group discuss the emotions that came up.
2. Reflect on the life of Jesus in the Gospels. Make a list of one-word descriptions that you would use to characterize Jesus. As a group, write these words in a location that is easy for everyone to see, and organize the words under three different gender-role stereotype categories: *masculine*, *feminine*, or *both*. Next, tally the number of words in each category and reflect on the implications of this breakdown. What have you learned from this exercise?

3. Select four male and four female characters from the Bible. Examples include Paul, Peter, John, David, Mary, Martha, Esther, and Ruth. Write these names on separate sheets of paper and tape them on the wall at different places around the room. Take each character one at a time and ask participants to describe their personality. After the group describes each character, have participants stand next to the name of the character with whom they identify. And have each person discuss why they identify with this character. Then have a representative from each group report on the qualities of this biblical character and their gender. That is, reflect on the gender of the character and how gender influences the character's actions in a particular story. Additionally, reflect on how the gender of the character influences your engagement with the story and character.
4. A relaxation exercise that helps one to understand their own gender is to ask participants to imagine that they were born the opposite gender. Continue with the exercise by reading slowly through the following instructions:
  - Get in a relaxed position and close your eyes. . . . I'm going to slowly lead you through the process of imagining being born a different gender than the one you were born with. So, take a few deep breaths, relax, and let's begin by imagining your parents' anticipation of your birth. Imagine the day of your birth and the response of family members when your parents announced your gender. Next, consider your early years; what toys did you play with, how were you treated by family members, playmates, and teachers? Continue through the years, reflecting on your gender as you enter junior high school. Be aware of your development and various puberty experiences, including menstruation and having wet dreams. On into high school, think about dating behaviors and attraction, academic progress, expectations in terms of athletic involvement, and future goals. Now, you are graduating, and people ask you questions like "will you go to college?" And "what career goals do you have?" What do you think is possible given your gender? Are there limitations that you face in terms of your ambitions and possibilities? How about marriage? Or will you stay single? What issues will you encounter? And, if you enter marriage and family life, what are your thoughts about birthing or adopting children, and about parenting? Take a moment to consider what life would be like for you here and now if you were of the opposite gender. Take a few last moments to reflect. We will take some time to share about this experience, so *slowly* come back to who you are now as your true gender.
  - Have participants reflect on this experience in small groups of 2–3 people. Then process as a large group what this practice brought up and how it leads to a better understanding of the opposite gender.

## Suggestion

Make sure you pace slowly enough through the exercise to help the participants relax and imagine what it would have been like to grow up with a different gender. Some will have great difficulty doing this exercise, so simply acknowledge this difficulty and normalize it. Most, however, will be able to reflect on their own or opposite gender, including its limitations and advantages. Point out that while there are advantages and disadvantages for each gender

experience, mutual appreciation and understanding comes when we acknowledge that gender is a journey. Close with a simple word of prayer as follows:

We are women and men of God, and we have tenderness and strength!  
We do what needs to be done, and we comfort those who need comforting.  
We appraise situations intuitively and reasonably.  
We give and take in seed to create life.  
We nurture, equip, empower, and enhance one another.

Our hands grasp work, and our eyes see goals.

Our arms caress and our faces smile.

We can be closed, and we can be vulnerable.

We can hurt and be hurt.

Lord Jesus, help us come together as women and men of God,  
as we seek to advance your kingdom on earth and to do your glorious will. Amen!

# 12

## Becoming an Authentic Sexual Self

### Overview of Chapter

In chapter 12 we begin with the assumption that God created us as sexual beings and declared this as “very good.” Although God intended that we be authentic and whole in our sexual relationships, there are both sociocultural influences and biological facts that contribute to sexual brokenness. Focusing on the four important areas of sexual expression—namely, sex and singlehood, masturbation, sexual preference, and marital sexuality—we give practical guidelines for Christians who are attempting to achieve wholeness in a broken world.

### Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Discuss the concept of authentic sexuality and how it relates to the meaning of being created by God as sexual beings.
2. How do you respond to the idea that human sexuality is an interactive, developmental process of sociocultural and biological factors? What are the implications of the statement, “Because these systems are imperfect, we are all imperfect in our sexuality?”
3. What are ways in which contemporary culture serves to disconnect *sexuality* and *personhood*? List examples from the media or find magazine pictures and newspaper adds to illustrate this statement.
4. The chapter gives six guidelines for single persons in making decisions about sexual involvement. How helpful and realistic do you find each of these guidelines? Which of the guidelines touch upon the most problematic area for contemporary singles?
5. How do you understand sexual identity in the LGBTQ community? How can the church be a support to this community?
6. The chapter provides six principles for couples who want to achieve authentic sexuality in their marriages. In what ways do these principles contribute to a mutually satisfying sexual relationship?

### Participant Exercises

1. Body image is an important aspect to consider in the process of becoming an authentically sexual person. Discuss positive and negative body image messages that impact one’s sexuality. How does one develop a positive body image, affirming and accepting their unique body?
2. Arrange participants in distinct groups, associating each group with one of the following concepts: *covenant*, *grace*, *empowerment*, and *intimacy*. Each group should discuss how their theological concept applies to healthy sexual interaction and expression. Have a

representative from each group summarize the main points of their discussion for the whole class.

## Suggestion

Sexuality needs to be presented and discussed in a safe, relaxed way. Stating that we are all broken in our sexual lives, but that God forgives and heals our brokenness is essential. Healing is a process, and many of us are in this process of healing. Making assumptions about and passing judgement on others is not in keeping with God's covenant love. A good way to end the discussion is with a simple prayer as follows:

Sex is your good gift, O God,  
For enriching life,  
For continuing humanity,  
For communicating,  
For showing me who I am,  
For revealing my mate,  
For enhancing our "one-flesh" relationship.

It's hard for some to be thankful for sex.  
Because sex has been more of a problem than a gift.  
Heal our sexual wounds and struggles.  
Help us preserve sex as a good in our lives.

Thank you, Lord, for making me a sexual being.  
Thank you for showing me how to treat others with trust and love.  
Thank you that we can affirm our sex and become authentic sexual beings. Amen!

# 13

## Intimate Communication

### *Expressing Love and Anger*

#### Overview of Chapter

In chapter 13 we consider why expressing feelings is so important for achieving family intimacy. The chapter details the effects of communicating emotions and the obstacles that make it difficult for family members to do so. Conflict is inevitable in family relationships, and it can either be dealt with in destructive or constructive ways. Ways of handling conflict are also presented in the chapter. Identifying conflict styles will help family members better understand one another and it will provide new ways of interacting. The chapter concludes by examining biblical concepts regarding emotional expression.

#### Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Why is it important for family members to express emotions (like love, sadness, and anger) to one another? How is this related to fear, vulnerability, and intimacy?
2. What are some obstacles that make expressing feelings difficult (e.g., gender differences, cultural norms, parental modeling, and family experiences)? Discuss the importance of the home being a safe place to freely express emotions.
3. How do emotional IQ, DifC (*differentiation in Christ*), and scriptural guidelines help with expressing emotions?
4. Building on the topic of conflict styles, give examples from the Gospels of Jesus depicted as a winner, a withdrawer, a compromiser, a yielder, and a resolver. What is your natural conflict style and how do you monitor that style when engaging with other family members?
5. Considering God's unconditional love, what are the consequences of disobeying God in the context of family relationships? Is God's love qualitatively different from human love?

#### Participant Exercises

1. With a small group share one way that a person in your family expresses love through action. If you were to consider the ways you say "I love you" nonverbally through your

- actions, who receives your love and how would they know it (e.g., putting a note in a lunch box, texting an encouraging message, etc.)?
2. Identify your own personal conflict style within your family. What do you like and dislike about your particular style? How does it work in the relationships that are important to you? Now, identify the styles of each of your family members. How do the conflict styles of your family members affect your own style? How do you need to adjust to better deal with conflicts that arise in your relationships with those you care about?
  3. *Group Exercise:* Break participants into groups based upon their self-identified conflict styles (*winners*, *resolvers*, *withdrawers*, *yielders*, and *compromisers*). Give brief examples of each style to help participants choose a group. Mention that no one style is better than another; each style has negative and positive aspects.
    - Have each group discuss where they originally learned their conflict style, as well as what they like and don't like about it. Ask each group to appoint a recorder who will later summarize highlights from their group.
    - After 15–30 minutes, have each recorder present a summary of their groups' discussion to the entire group. Keep each group intact so individuals can listen to the other group responses along with those who share their particular conflict style. Then have each group consider the difficulties that arise when a spouse or family member uses a different style. Encourage each group to articulate what they need most from the people in the other groups to be able to improve the conflict experience.
    - Each person's style needs to be understood and accepted, but each person also needs to be willing to accept the disruptions their style can cause in relationships with loved ones. One must acknowledge, accept, and take responsibility for their style and modify it for the sake of unity with others.

## Suggestion

It is important to never judge a conflict style. Instead, one should enhance their understanding and appreciation of different styles so that friends, spouses, and family members can work together.

During these exercises it is useful to point out difficult combinations of conflict styles. A knowledgeable leader can give brief vignettes of difficult conflict situations that are common; for example, conflict between a resolver and a withdrawer (often the resolver pursues, and the withdrawer retreats even more). Or conflict between two winners (strong fights and standoffs are common in this arrangement). Or conflict between two compromisers (decisions can be tough to make).

Be alert to the possibility that withdrawers may have had dysfunctional families in which abuse or neglect was present, rendering withdrawal the only way to survive a difficult situation. It can be frightening for withdrawers to consider other conflict styles, especially because withdrawal may have been an important way for them to manage life. It is common for withdrawers to want to change their conflict style, but it's crucial that any change is made in the context of safety, where they feel acknowledged and affirmed for why they came to the withdrawal style. They may feel out of control or that they could endanger someone if they are not given freedom to step back and to withdraw in the heat of anger. But after the heat has

cooled, they are encouraged to take responsibility, to reach out to family, and to find ways to interact with other family members to solve conflict.

Winners need to listen and remain quiet to allow other family members to talk freely. Resolvers need to withhold their eagerness for conflict to be resolved by learning to self soothe and avoid being overly demanding. Compromisers need to make sure they don't always compromise but that they also make decisions out of their own agency. Yielders need to pay attention to their own wants and desires (it can be helpful for them to make a list) and to learn to express rather than yield, which can lead to resentment.

# 14

## Work and Family

### *Conflict or Collaboration?*

#### **Overview of Chapter**

In chapter 14 we describe how work and family life relate to each other. Historically, gender has influenced our understanding of how the separate spheres of work and family life develop, and gender continues to influence how we approach the separate spheres today. In the modern world, work and family life are primarily viewed as distinct and separate social spheres that have little overlap. However, in our book we describe how work and family have a complex relationship that can lead to both conflict and enrichment. Many skills are learned in the family that translate to the workplace and vice versa. Additionally, work and family spheres sometimes make demands on individuals that are challenging to resolve. Our book describes how calling is an important Christian doctrine that allows one to navigate between work and family spheres.

#### **Discussion and Reflection Questions**

1. What is work? Why do you work?
2. How do work and family life relate to each other? Is there conflict or collaboration between the two?
3. How do the authors define calling? Does calling reflect how you understand your work? Does calling reflect your understanding of family life?

#### **Participant Exercises**

1. Describe your spiritual conversion experience. How has your identity been shaped by becoming a Christian?
2. How does your identity in Christ reflect primary calling?
3. Describe three aspects of your work that are fulfilling.
4. How does your work reflect secondary calling in your life?
5. Consider a time when work and family-life demands created conflict for you. How did you resolve this conflict? How could the primary and secondary understandings of calling have aided in resolving this conflict?

## **Suggestion**

Work and family life are very important. When thinking about this material, remember that each domain of life is a source of both joy and sorrow. As you and your group discuss work and family conflict, offer support and encouragement as individuals describe their conflict.

# 15

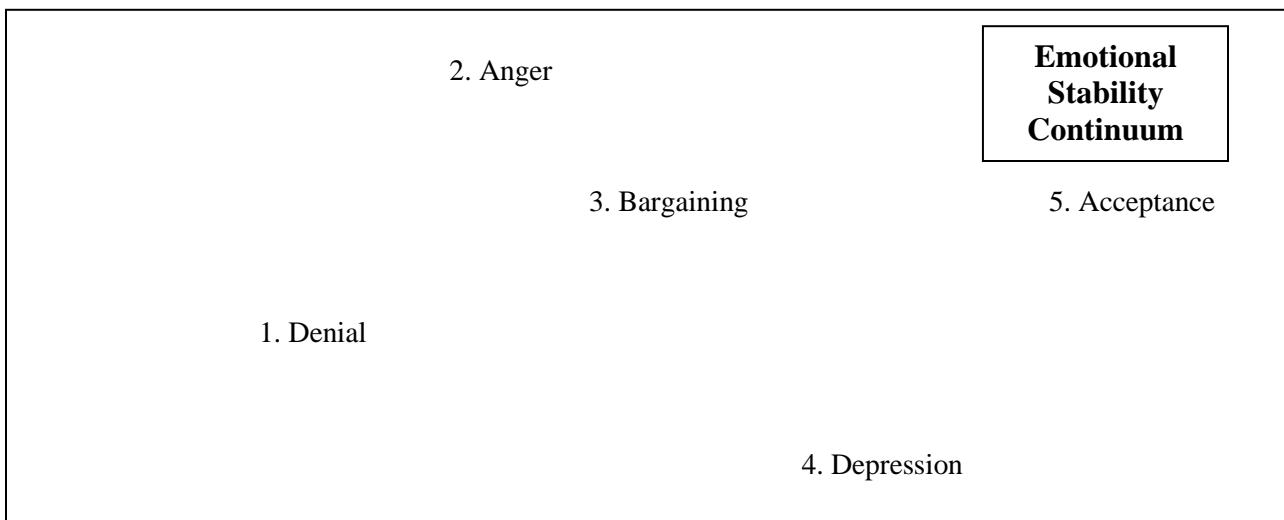
## Through the Stress and Pain of Family Life

### Overview of Chapter

Chapter 15 presents a model for understanding family stress that focuses on the nature of *stressful events*, the *resources* available to families in times of stress, and *coping* strategies for families to use. In our discussion on family crisis, we suggest that coping can best be understood in terms of stages of recovery. A Christian perspective neither encourages a fatalistic view of stress nor denies the legitimacy of the pain that stress causes. Finding a balance that acknowledges our reliance on God and others during stressful times is needed and encouraged.

### Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Which of the two approaches—*coping* or *problem solving*—do you find most helpful in understanding how families deal with stress and pain? Why?
2. How do catastrophes differ from other stressful events? Give examples of *ambiguous loss* and consider what might be helpful for individuals who experience this.
3. The emotional stability continuum below identifies the different stages experienced during the recovery of a stressor or crisis (see p. 276 in the book).
  - Consider a stressor or crisis in your own life and discuss how the emotional stages of recovery—listed in the graphic below—have been helpful to you in dealing with this. Circle any of the stages (i.e., denial, anger, bargaining, depression, or acceptance) that apply to your recovery process, and connect them with a directional line to indicate the chronology of your recovery experience and where you have seen changes in this process. Your experience may not follow the stages as listed in numerical order, which is okay.
  - In what ways are the stages closer together or further apart as you have recovered from this stressor or crisis? Has your movement between these stages been fast or slow? Has the rate of movement between the stages changed? Why? How do you know that you were at one point compared to another in your recovery?



## **Participant Exercise**

1. Identify a real or potential crisis in your family and write down a brief description of the crisis in the left-hand column below. Explain how your perception of the event impacts recovery. How do biblical beliefs enter in? In the center column, list potential resources for responding to this crisis event (personal, family, and social resources). Finally, in the right-hand column, identify the most viable coping response(s) your family could employ to deal with the crisis event. How can the church be a resource?

Crisis Event

Resources (personal/family/social)

Coping Responses

## **Suggestion**

During the discussion time, be alert to current or past painful events that may not be fully resolved for individuals.

# 16

## Divorce and Single-Parent Families

### Overview of Chapter

In chapter 16 we examine some of the factors that contribute to breakdown in family life. The high divorce rate in America suggests that millions are experiencing pain and loss both in marriage and in parent-child relationships. We discuss the unique challenges of the single-parent family, including lack of time and money and relations with the noncustodial parent. The chapter concludes with a Christian response to the prevalence of single-parent families by discussing how family values should be formed by a biblical ethic that values all families and cares for the needs of the most dependent family members.

### Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. What are some of the major factors that help explain the rise in the divorce rate over the last thirty years?
2. What are the emotional stages of divorce? And what are some long- and short-term responses to divorce?
3. Describe the impact of divorce on children in terms of age and life stage. List some of the important ways parents can help their children adjust to the new circumstances of life after a divorce.
4. Devise a list of challenges that custodial and noncustodial parents face. Give a best-case scenario for coparenting after divorce. Why is it important to consider family values when divorced parents are negotiating?
5. Discuss the unique stressors involved in single parenting. What personal resources can help to prevent burn out?
6. How can the church better provide support and programming for those going through a divorce and parenting after a divorce?

### Participant Exercise

1. Have representatives from the whole group present the various stages of divorce (*denial, anger, disillusionment, second adolescence, and acceptance*). Have the rest of the participants ask questions about and offer suggestions for how one can move to a better place after divorce.

## **Suggestion**

The topic of divorce and single-parent families can trigger current or past emotions for those who are themselves divorced or the child of divorced parents. Allow feelings to be expressed and acknowledged as may be helpful for individuals or the group. It often feels good to be heard in a personal way.

# Complex Families in Contemporary Society

## Overview of Chapter

In chapter 17 we document how the family in contemporary society can take a variety of forms due to the likelihood of remarriage following divorce. After presenting the issues involved in remarriage and reconstituted families, the chapter concludes with a plea for compassion, noting that Christianity can offer hope for restoration and renewal to these families.

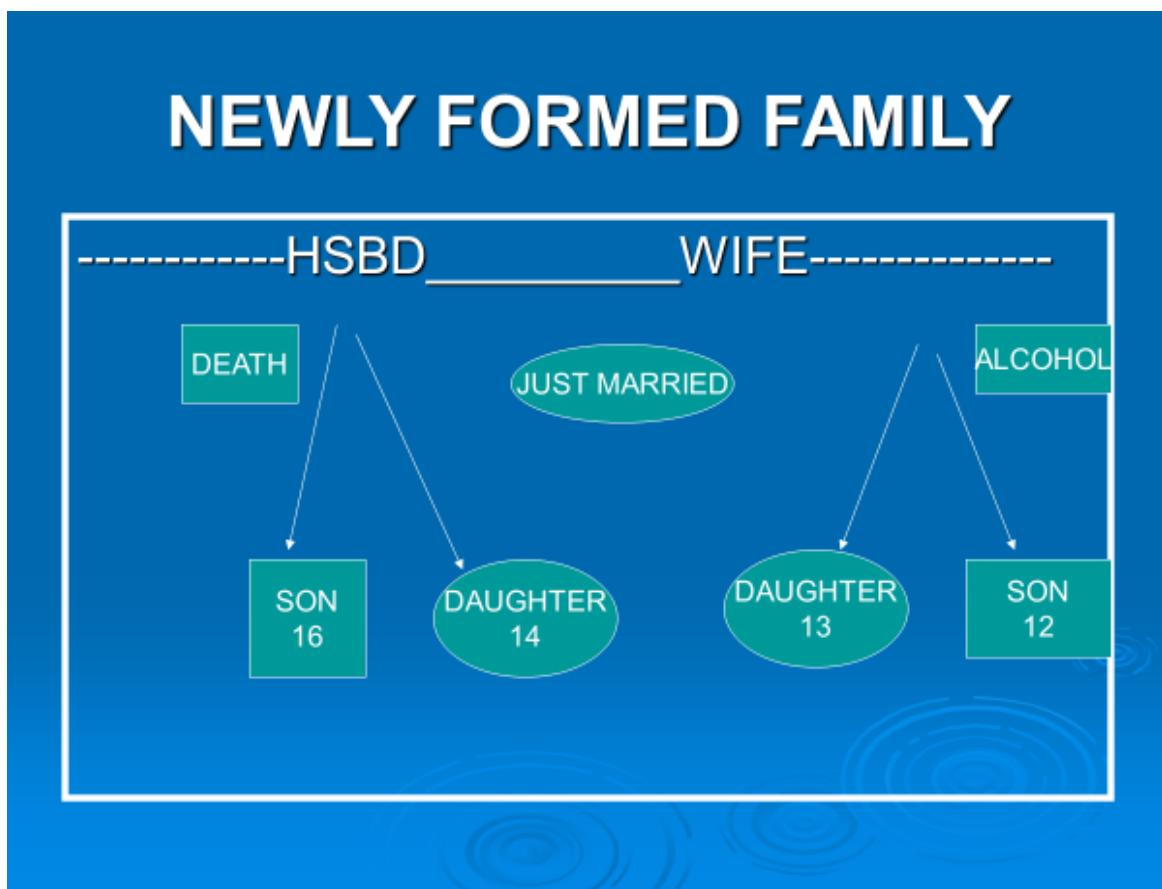
## Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Identify core features of trinitarian theology and how they apply to newly formed families (consider differentiation in Christ and diversity).
2. Family loyalties are an important consideration in divorced and blended families. Talk about loyalties in your own family. How might loyalty cause conflict and inhibit newly formed families?
3. Consider the story of Janet and Terence (p. 301 in the book) and discuss what went wrong (e.g., unfinished grieving, unrealistic expectations, and trust issues). Which relationship do you think is most fragile in newly formed families? How can this relationship be protected and strengthened?
4. List the common myths around stepparenting (even from children's stories) that make it difficult for one to be a stepparent. How would one challenge the impact of such myths?
5. Give examples of how "ambiguity of status" impacts the newly formed family. Discuss the differences between fathers and mothers with male and female children. What advice would you offer to these families to help them thrive?
6. The leadership roles of parents and stepparents can involve a tricky negotiation. What is the best-case scenario when it comes to discipline and rules?
7. Discuss the crock-pot analogy and list the intentional steps needed to create a satisfying blend. How are family rituals helpful? Give some examples of establishing new rituals.

## Participant Exercises

1. Family loyalties are important to consider within divorced and newly formed families. Give participants 5–10 minutes to consider family loyalties in a personal way and have them write down their reflections. Let participants share their thoughts with the rest of the group (or in small groups). In other words, question two above is important to address as divorce and single-parent families are prevalent today. As more and more families are blending, dealing with the baggage of invisible loyalties is important for developing healthy families.

2. Set up the following scenario of a newly formed family: a widowed father (widowed five years ago) with a sixteen-year-old son and a fourteen-year-old daughter marries a divorced mother (divorced three years ago) with a thirteen-year-old daughter and a twelve-year-old son. Ask for volunteers to role play each of the family members in the scenario and have them stand up and spread out in the classroom. Take the role of director and ask the husband and wife to stand close to one another to symbolize their new marriage. Next, have the children place themselves in the space *without moving* anyone else and *without talking*. That is, each child needs to decide where they belong in the family in order of age. This movement needs to be done in silence so that the observers can interpret the meaning of the placement without words. When everyone is in the space and located in the family, ask the rest of the group to comment on where the family members placed themselves and why each child is located where they are. All ideas are accepted.



Next, return to focusing on the role-playing family members. Seated in a circle, let them talk freely as the person in terms of where they placed themselves and why. Let them express the feelings that came up during this exercise. That is, debriefing should

involve each family member reflecting on the role play experience and why they were in their specific role in the family.

Now, have the role-players return to their seats. As a group, consider how this is a teaching moment about newly formed family structures. Point out sibling dilemmas (e.g., who gets more attention from mom or dad and why?). Think about what kind of relationship the kids have with the divorced parent, and how they might acknowledge or relate to the deceased parent. What happens to the marital dyad when the kids join the group? How do factors such as age, gender, sexuality, loyalty, sharing space in the home, finances, etc. play into the new family dynamic? Make sure you focus on the strengths of this newly formed family as well as the weaknesses. Provide an opportunity to consider solutions to issues that arise as well.

## **Suggestion**

Be informed about blended families so you can be supportive and positive in your approach. If participants from blended families or single parent families are present, be aware that they can make a valuable contribution to the discussion. However, be mindful that this discussion may bring up past or present pain.

Give examples of how a family might cooperate with one another to have a happy holiday experience. Or consider how to establish new blended family experiences. Or come up with creative suggestions for enhancing blended family life.

# 18

## Biblical Family Values in a Modern and Postmodern World

### Overview of Chapter

In chapter 18 we demonstrate how the family does not exist in a vacuum but is rather influenced and manipulated by wider sociocultural structures. The adverse effects of these structures on the family include a crisis of morality and parental authority, a generation gap, the isolation of the nuclear family, increased dependence on mass institutions, a lack of ties between extended family members, the separation of work and family life, and individual and family worth being determined by economics. Unfortunately, most of the current “solutions” to these problems are false hopes that treat the symptoms more than the sources of these problems.

### Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. In small groups consider what you believe to be the best and the worst times in our modern/postmodern world and make a list. Share these lists with the whole class to invite further discussion.
2. Break into small groups and have each group discuss the influences that one of the following spheres has on the modern/postmodern family: political, education, religion, family, and stratosphere. What is the role of the church in the modern/postmodern family and in which social situations are Christian families *least* likely to be adversely affected?
3. Break participants into four groups by assigning each group one of the following dimensions of social-cultural life: *fragmentation of consciousness, complexity of communication, disintegration of community, and dominance of commodities*. Have each group spend fifteen minutes discussing the false hopes of their dimension and discuss potential solutions. Have each group give a five- to ten-minute presentation of their ideas to the whole group.

### Participant Exercises

Have the whole group act out a dilemma of modernity. For example, you may set up a situation in which a Christian family is attempting to live out Christian concepts according to the theology of relationships (see Part 1 in the book). Living in modern society means that this family is pushed and pulled in many different directions in terms of morals, family values, mass media, work, and materialism. Invite the group to creatively showcase how the family might navigate these pressures.

## **Suggestion**

Another family case that the group could act out would be a couple deciding to take coparenting seriously. Both partners decide to work part-time jobs so they can spend quality time with their newborn. Have some participants from the group verbalize messages that this couple might hear in the following arenas: from the workplace (e.g., no benefits for part-time work), media (e.g., emphasizing material things), neighbors, extended family, friends, church, school, and community. Other participants can articulate false hopes of these competing messages or radical solutions for the couple to consider.

Considering the varied perspectives of the participants involved in the exercise, it could feel like a free-for-all as participants reflect on the chaos that comes with deciding to stand by personal principles in our modern and postmodern world. There may not be consensus. In other words, the diversity of perspectives may generate chaos in the room as discussions may be energetic. And this chaos may reflect the chaos that participants are experiencing in trying to live the Christian life in a modern and postmodern world. After the scenario has fully played out, let the group discuss the exercise and have them come up with radical Christian answers and solutions for the family. As part of this discussion, reflect on two things: (1) how the interactions in the room reflect the chaos in our modern and postmodern world, and (2) how the theology of relationships was expressed.

# 19

## Creating a Family-Friendly Society

### Overview of Chapter

In chapter 19 we emphasize that hope for the contemporary family is found in creating a positive environment in which family life can be lived. However, such an environment can only become a reality by means of radical responses to the wider manipulating sociocultural structures. On the community level this means restoring the biblical ideal of *koinonia*, which requires both an emphasis on the inclusiveness of the family and the establishment of protective boundaries around the family. On the societal level this means restoring the biblical ideal of *shalom*, which demands that Christian employers enact programs that give priority to relationships, uphold family values instead of sacrificing family for economic gain, and recognize the importance of the beliefs and values embedded in the faith of their employees.

### Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Discuss why a realistic and determined response to modernity/postmodernity is necessary for change. Why is the postmodern view problematic?
2. How realistic are the ideas, put forth in this chapter, for responding radically to modernity? What would an ideal *koinonia* or *shalom* environment look like if you were to design it today?
3. Have you experienced *koinonia* or *shalom* in your own community? What is the closest you have come to *koinonia* or *shalom*? Share examples with other participants.
4. Ponder the following statement in light of biblical teaching: “The reconstruction of community can take place only when the concept of family is regarded as inclusive rather than exclusive” (p. 336). Discuss your reaction to this idea with another participant.

### Participant Exercises

1. Break participants into four groups, assigning each group one of the following responses to modernity/postmodernity: *release from bondage to commodities*, *reconstruction of community*, *revitalization of communication*, and *reintegration of consciousness*. Have the groups brainstorm one creative and hopeful example of their particular response. Encourage groups to let their imaginations run free. Then have the groups present their ideas to everyone.
2. Brainstorm what a new community based on *koinonia* and *shalom* would look like. In small groups, have people envision and discuss these ideal communities. To help you flesh out your ideas, draw a picture or make a collage with pictures from magazines. Have each group share their pictures and ideas with the entire group.

## **Suggestion**

Give the groups freedom to think outside the box as they come up with ideas. Have a few of your own suggestions ready as well.

# Appendix

## Family Ministry in the Church

When it comes to personal and familial well-being, we believe the time is ripe for an emphasis on prevention and enrichment. This is an important way the church proactively invests in the life of its members, creating hope, *koinonia* and *shalom*. Family enrichment in the local church not only benefits individuals and families but the entire church family as well.

Enrichment is best done in specially arranged programs in which participants commit themselves to an extended block of time. In preventive family enrichment the emphasis is not only on education of family life, but upon empowering participants to make changes in their relationships. The leader must have knowledge and understanding of the specific topics and be a facilitator rather than a lecturer.

Involving the target audience in experiential ways enhances practical learning and engagement. The format can vary from a Sunday school class or study group to a ten-week series, or a weekend retreat on a specific topic (e.g., marriage, parenting, singleness, authentic sexuality, etc.). Participants are encouraged to examine their relationships and identify areas that need strengthening.

Practice is an important part of ensuring that the skills can be applied in everyday living. This greater emphasis upon changing family behavior requires that the skill and expertise level of the leader be commensurate with these goals. We suggest the following regarding leadership:

1. *The leaders should be comfortable openly demonstrating and modeling the behaviors that are being discussed.* A marriage retreat, for instance, is best led by a married couple who models what they teach by their actions. A session on marital conflict, for example, could begin with the leaders being transparent about difficulties they have in their own marriage due to differing conflict styles. Giving personal examples helps participants to relate and relax. Humor can help lighten the mood when necessary. The retreat leaders will set the standard for depth of openness and sharing, which others will follow.
2. *The amount of time allotted for presenting content must not exceed a third of the total time allotted for participant interaction.* Thus, if a speaker talks for ten minutes on a topic, then participants need at least thirty minutes to process the information through exercises or small group discussion.
3. *The focus should be on strengthening skill development rather than correcting dysfunctional behavior.* A retreat setting is not the place to do therapy with participants. The purpose of a retreat is enrichment and building upon existing potentials. It is important to take note of people with more serious problems, and for the leaders to have specific counseling resources available to recommend to these individuals.
4. *A retreat should be organized around a clear biblical view of human personhood and relationships.* Although there are other ways to establish a biblical basis, the theological

basis for family relationships presented in this book can be adapted for a variety of retreat settings.

5. *There should be opportunities for participants to develop realistic change strategies that they can continue to use and practice when they return home from a retreat.* And participants need to be challenged to focus on specific changes that they can make to their current relationships. Consider using the following change strategy outline.

## Change Strategy

### ***1. Objectively State the Concern***

Identify a specific behavior or the absence of a behavior, that you would like to change. It must be something that all parties involved (spouse, parents, children, etc.) will commit time and effort toward changing. This concern should be discussed until it is clearly understood and stated.

### ***2. Consider All the Alternatives***

Brainstorm together all the conceivable ways to reach the stated goal. List each option or possible approach without passing judgment on any suggestion.

### ***3. Consider the Possible Consequences***

Now carefully examine and discuss the possible and probable consequences of each alternative path (i.e., “If we do this, the result will be . . .”). Write down these consequences beside each option (alternative) from step two above.

### ***4. Negotiate, Compromise, and Accept***

Now discuss openly and honestly each alternative and how it will help you reach your goal. Try to reach a place where each person is sufficiently satisfied. You may decide that the desired outcome is not worth the price of a compromise that would have to be made. Or you may rethink your initial goal and choose a less demanding one.

### ***5. Clarify Your Choice and State the Alternative***

Now verbalize the goal and the solution you have agreed upon. Write it down.

### ***6. Create a Plan of Action and a Contract***

Develop a system, strategy, or specific approach for attaining your goal. Be specific and detailed. Develop a formal and specific contractual agreement and plan of action:

We agree to [insert goal].

We will do this [insert number] times per week.

### ***7. Implement and Follow Up***

Begin the agreed upon action as soon as possible. Establish evaluation dates along the way to assess your progress. Make goals and progress evaluations realistic and ensure that reinforcement is meaningful.

## **Retreat Formats**

### ***The Marriage Retreat***

Not all married couples share the same degree of openness and awareness of their relational needs. Thus, marriage retreats will differ in terms of the types of issues dealt with and in terms of the degree of personal involvement. Some marriage retreats are designed to provide information but involve little participation apart from listening to the speaker. Other retreats require high levels of personal involvement, encouraging couples to share, reveal, confront, and communicate directly. Although the higher level of involvement may be threatening to some couples, it has greater potential for creating a valuable experience. Even good marriages are made better when couples are willing to change behaviors and work at their relationship.

### ***Parenting Seminars***

Parenting seminars can be designed for parents only or for parents and children together. It can be easier to give a seminar designed exclusively for parents. Such seminars need to consider the diverse situations in which parenting takes place. It is best to consider parents' ages and the stage of parenting, as parents of young children and parents of teenagers face different issues. Paying special attention to the unique circumstances of single parents and parents from blended families is helpful for parents in these particular situations.

A more demanding yet potentially more fruitful seminar format might be one that includes both parents and teenagers. To be successful, this seminar must provide sessions in which parents and children can seek to understand their relationship separately and sessions in which parents and teenagers can work on their relationship together. We have found that role-playing and acting out challenging aspects of the parent-teenager relationship can be especially beneficial. The advantage of role-playing is that it allows parents to empathize with the pressures of being a teenager, while teenagers are allowed to empathize with the demands and responsibilities of their parents. The whole family processes the material as a unit. Using humor and various activities can help teens relate and participate.

### ***Family Conferences***

In many family conference arrangements, family members are separated by age the minute they arrive. Such conferences are family oriented only in the sense that all family members are present on the conference grounds at the same time. It may work wonders for parents and children to spend relaxing time away from each other, but a golden opportunity is missed for members of a family to seek to understand and work on their relationships together. We believe that the most effective family conferences will allow family members to interact together as a unit. Granted, the planning and execution of a conference with high levels of family involvement is demanding. But it can also be very rewarding. When the whole family works together to process information and develop relational skills, the impact will be greater than if each family member deals with the same issues separately.

We have found that some of the most successful family conferences are those organized by and for members of a local church. The church is a family of families. When all the church households are represented at a conference, sessions can be directed toward strengthening both the nuclear family system and the wider congregational family system.

### ***Women's and Men's Retreats***

Although retreats designed exclusively for women or men can allow powerful opportunities for sharing and growing in the Christian faith, inviting men and women to address womanhood and manhood in our current society in a retreat setting together can be life changing. In a setting where both are present, men and women listen to each other with deeper understanding as they address gender and sexuality in relationships.

### ***Conferences for Singles***

In one sense, singles' ministry would be less necessary if families and groups within local churches would make their activities more inclusive of singles. Even if this were the case, however, the unique life experiences that singles deal with often means that shared time together is preferable for singles. The conference setting can provide singles an opportunity to share life experiences and provide personal resources and encouragement to each other.

## **Conclusion**

It would be shortsighted for Christian ministry to fail to respond to the current crisis in family life. The most appropriate response that promises long-lasting benefit is to develop a top-notch program for family education and enrichment. Some local churches are already reaping the benefits of investing time and effort into strengthening family and congregational life. We hope that the material and suggestions given in this study guide, and in our book, will help extend the scope of family ministry.

For those using our material, we encourage you to be creative and innovative. Feel free to refine and build upon the material or develop your own material where you see fit.

Evaluation questions will assist you in gaining feedback from any seminar, retreat, or conference, and this feedback will lead to improvements. When you feel like what you are doing has limited value, take courage in the fact that the apostle Paul dared to begin new ministry strategies and at times also felt discouraged. Those who attempt to minister to the unmet needs of others in a broken world have a right to occasionally feel failure. Not to try is the greater failure. As ministers in Christ and comembers in the family of God, we have a golden opportunity to share and work together in building strong family and congregational life.

## **Sample Evaluation Questions**

1. What expectations did you have for the workshop? Did the workshop meet these expectations? How?
2. What do you think were the strengths and weaknesses of the workshop?
3. What did you learn that you are able to use?
4. Are there areas in which you would like further training?
5. Were there particular styles or characteristics of the presenters that you found helpful or unhelpful?
6. How could we present the material more effectively in the future?
7. Any additional comments or feedback is appreciated.