



The Baptist MESSENGER

INSIGHT

the new normal?

exploring family values in society today

This fall, NBC premiered a “comedy” series, “The New Normal,” produced by the makers of “Glee.” These shows are awash in family breakdown, and supposedly reflect family values in America today. The writers and experts featured in this *Messenger Insight* explore what God’s Word has to say about the family.



How Did This Happen?

The family crisis as a theological crisis



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Writing a generation ago, sociologist Christopher Lasch pointed to the weakening of the family as the most significant and dangerous development of our times. In his book, *Haven in a Heartless World*, Lasch described the breakdown of the natural family as a calamity for the society at large, as well as for the individuals whose lives are so directly affected.

Tellingly, he also wrote this: “The first thing to understand about the present crisis of the family is that it did not materialize overnight.” Indeed, it did not. The current crisis of the family must be traced to economic, political, social and ideological causes. But there is another cause as well. The family crisis is a theological crisis, and this must be the Church’s first concern.

The first theological fact about the family is the truth that the natural family (the family consisting of married parents of the opposite sex and their biological and adopted offspring) is not a product of human social evolution. The Bible reveals that God created human beings to live and to thrive within the context of the family, constituted on the foundation of marriage.

Genesis reveals God’s act of creating human beings as male and female, uniting them in the covenant of marriage, and assigning to them the responsibility to multiply and to exercise both dominion and stewardship. The perfection of marriage was made clear by the fact that the man and the woman were naked in the Garden, and they were unashamed.

Christians affirm that the family is one of God’s most essential gifts to his human children, and that honoring the Creator’s design for marriage and the family is the pathway to glorifying God and to human flourishing. God gave marriage and the family in creation to all peoples everywhere, and as a testimony to this fact, every thriving society has found its way to marriage and the impor-

tance of the family. The family is the most basic unit of society, and if it is not honored and protected, a society cannot long survive.

But the second theological fact about the family is our even greater need for marriage and family as protections in a world marked by sin. In a fallen world, marriage and family become even more important, not less. In such a world, we need the protections and comforts offered by the covenant of marriage. The mutual obligations of husband and wife, the promise of fidelity and the joys of life together take on a whole new importance in a world of dangers, toils and snares. The gift of children and the commitment to raise them within the committed boundaries and protections of the family point to the importance of both father and mother to the safe and healthy development of both boys and girls. The Law includes detailed instructions on the protection of the family and how it is to be ordered.

The third theological fact about the family is the continued affirmation of the family within the redeemed people of God—the Church. As the Gospels make clear, loyalty to Christ exceeds that of any family commitment, even as the Church becomes the family of faith, embracing within its life all who come to faith in Christ and into the life of the Church. And yet, Christians are explicitly instructed to honor marriage, to raise their children in the faith and to order their family according to the Scriptures.

The fourth theological fact about the family is that this life has implications for the eternal life to come. There will be no marriage or giving in marriage in Heaven, but our faithfulness in marriage and family in this life has eternal implications and consequences. The family that is ordered by the Gospel of Christ will be based on a marriage that pictures Christ’s own love for the Church and will extend to children who are raised in the admonition of the Lord and are confronted with the Gospel and its promises.

The family is indeed in crisis. A recent report from the U.S. Census Bureau indicates that fully 40 percent of all babies born in the United States in 2011 were born to unmarried mothers. Divorce rates are catastrophic, and unprecedented numbers of American adults are never mar-

rying, creating a new non-marital underclass that passes on disastrous consequences that will harm generations to come. In some American neighborhoods, children and teenagers have never even been to a wedding, since marriage has simply ceased to exist as an expectation. Even when parents are married and live in the same house with their children, many of those children are actually raised by the mass media, with older children and teenagers often living in a digital world that is quite disconnected from their parents.

The social pathologies pile up in shocking statistics, but the greater tragedy is the injury in individual lives. Christians know that the family cannot save us. Only Christ can save. But we also know that God loves us and that He has given us marriage and the family for our protection and flourishing. The Church must face the truth that the family crisis is, first of all, a theological crisis. Christians must recover a biblical understanding of the family and live before the world, celebrating and sharing the joys and satisfactions that the Creator gives us in this precious gift. We must live honestly before the world, knowing that our honest acknowledgement of our own need for God’s grace in our marriages and families is a testimony to our need for the grace of God shown us in Jesus Christ.

Christians are rightly concerned about the family crisis in the society, and we must work to protect and defend the family against its enemies. We must be heartbroken witnesses to the dangers the family crisis has brought, even as we are joyful witnesses to the reality of marriages and families restored.

But, long before the society at large will care about our perspective on the family crisis, the Church must humbly and faithfully show the world what God intended from the beginning, for His glory and for our good.

Before anything else, the family crisis is a theological crisis. And a theological crisis is the Church’s responsibility. In other words, the first responsibility in addressing the family crisis is ours, and ours alone.

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Family trends in today's church



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We know the statistics. We all know the devastation, the hurt, the awkwardness, the blame, the anger; we know it whether first hand or by living life with those who suffer through the agony of rending apart what was to be joined together as one. It is critical for those of us in the Church to ask some questions if we desire to do our part to stem the tide of divorce, cohabitation and brokenness.

First, what is the condition of the intact marriages in our congregations and communities? What are the odds that all of them are doing well in terms of satisfaction, stability, health, safety, and joy? How many Christian couples in our churches are committed, but miserable? This is a critical question as we conceptualize how to intentionally minister to all couples, but especially "fragile" ones.

Secondly, what are the implications of these trends regarding the difference our faith in Christ makes, or should make, on our marriages and relationships? George Barna, LifeWay, the Southern Baptist Convention and others have examined this question. The common denominator is this: young people in our homes and in our pews are, by and large, not seeing much difference between those who carry the label "Christian" and those around them who profess no particular faith identification at all.

Does it bother us that our young people, watching our example on Sunday morning and Wednesday night, but also on Tuesday evening, and around the house on Saturday afternoon, can ask "Why aren't you any different than everybody else?" Do we understand the potential impact of our divorce culture on the relational expectations of the next generation? Do we grasp the relevance to their

view of the transformative work of Christ in our lives? If we don't look much different than the rest of the world, the answer is evident.

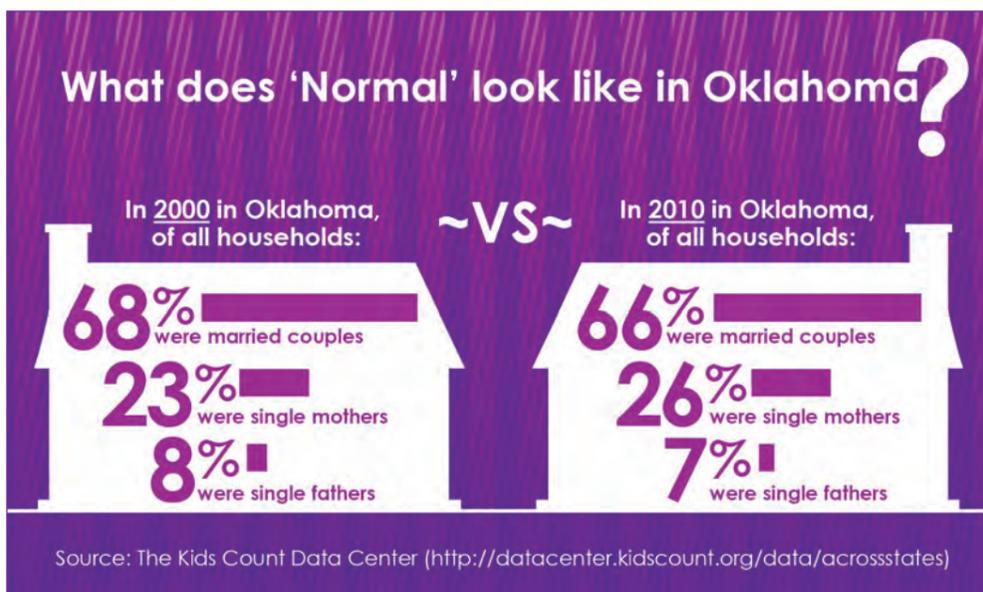
That's the bad news. The good news is, we also know the answer. It's the Great Commission, lived out in families. To stop this decimation, we need to understand that at the root, it is a spiritual problem, with a spiritual remedy. More than anything else, three things are needed: obedience, instruction and accountability. Here are things the Church can begin doing that can impact these trends for our good and for God's Glory:

2. Practice Biblical Compassion. Do we treat divorce as a death in the family? That's what it is. We need to consider ministries that deal with the issues in relationships (counseling ministries, Divorce Care, etc.), but we also need to think about the needs of the family after the fact. Honest compassion, the intentional meeting of physical needs where possible, the potential need for grief processing, direct personal accountability on the part of one or both ex-spouses and "extended family" support for all involved, specifically children, are all necessary to consider. And let us not be too quick to rule out the possibility

that God may wish to tell a story of His redemption in one or more members of such a family. It's hard to imagine a more powerful way to encourage hurting couples than for someone to say, "We've been there, but look what God did through His people."

3. Change Expectations. This has nothing to do with what marriage ministry means, and everything to do with church polity. Look at your policies, structure and programming. What is actually required of people when they want to join your fellowship? Are prospective members given any kind of expectation of biblical accountability? If a couple has trouble, will they be surrounded by a loving, safe, orderly community that will walk with them while they seek help? To what degree does your fellowship "encourage" small group participation of some kind, such that people have a difficult time hiding out in Sunday service, and then disappearing while lives fall apart the rest of the week? How can your church offer special enrichment opportunities (Date nights, retreats, etc.) as well as ongoing family equipping (sermons, Bible studies, discipleship training offerings, etc.)? An ounce of prevention is still worth a pound of cure. Intentional steps in any of these directions can be of great help in changing the culture of your congregation and the community it reaches.

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1. Make Disciples. Couples who call themselves Christian have a statistically similar divorce rate to those who don't. Couples who report attending church together, praying together and serving together have a much smaller risk of break-up. Linking the practicing of our faith with our relationships makes a difference. Pastors, preach and teach on the Fruit of the Spirit, but link it to the home as well as the workplace, the neighborhood and the far off reaches of the globe. Let's make the application of our proclamation first about our home, and then everywhere else.

The cultural shift



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While I was growing up, one of the most exciting annual events for my brothers and me was the State Fair of Missouri. We considered the 30.6 miles from Marshall to Sedalia a major journey. But now that I've traveled around the world, that trip seems like backing out of my driveway.

Just like my sense of distance, times have changed. In the years I've worked with families, I've realized that after World War II, our country experienced a cultural shift. It happened so fast we didn't recognize its devastating effects. The shift created four significant gaps in our children's lives—things that were once normal but have now gone missing:

Rite of Passage: Every child longs to grow up. Little Johnny wants to push the lawnmower just like Daddy—even though he can't reach the handles. And little Susie keeps trying on Mommy's lipstick and high heels.

By the time he reaches middle school, little Johnny still wants to grow up. He's out in the school yard puffing on a cigarette. Since our society doesn't tell him when or how he becomes an adult, he tries out different adult activities. Smoking, swearing and drug abuse, along with body piercing and tattoos, are all ways kids try to say, "I'm an adult."

Instead, they need a rite of passage: a definite step between childhood and adulthood. At Awe Star Ministries, we don't take students overseas until they move

into adulthood. Our mission trips serve as rite of passage events. We've seen countless lives changed because we encourage students to live like young adults.

Significant Tasks: Kids today not only want to grow up, but they also want to make a difference. One day, I was making another vain attempt to fix our old jalopy. Caleb, blond, blue-eyed and 3 years old, called to me, "Dad? Can I help?"

I could have ignored him or barked, "No! You're too little!" Instead, I said, "I have a special job for you. Could you hold this screwdriver and hand it to me whenever I need it?" He beamed.

Of course, I could have worked on the car without Caleb's help. But I was giving him a significant task: a special assignment that demonstrates an individual's worth to the people he considers important.

Years ago, it wasn't uncommon to find teenage doctors, lawyers and other professionals. Today, we don't think young people can do more than take out the trash. But when we give them significant tasks, they step up and into much greater responsibilities.

Logical Consequences: When I was growing up in our rural community, my parents cared about the way I behaved. And so did every other parent. If Mom and Dad weren't around to catch my mistakes, another adult was. I couldn't avoid a logical consequence: the predictable outcome of an action. Sometimes, I did extra chores or lost a privilege. Other times, Dad took off his belt to administer the logical consequence in a more personal way.

Today's kids often miss logical consequences. Don't make your bed? Mom does it for you. Forget to do your homework? The teacher lets you turn it in late. And the dreaded Science Fair project? Let me put it this way: How

many nights have you stayed up making sure little Johnny or Susie earned a blue ribbon?

Without logical consequences, kids don't know right from wrong. I like to say, "Without logical consequences, there are no values." Our society proves that again and again.

Grace Deposits: The final gap caused by the cultural shift lies in the area of grace deposits—statements or actions that communicate an individual's intrinsic worth in a way that he or she finds meaningful. Before the cultural shift, extended families often shared a home or lived nearby. Grandma and Grandpa played the important role of grace-givers who filled and refilled their grandchildren's emotional bank accounts.

Today's kids have many experiences that cause grace withdrawals: serious things such as abuse or neglect, and minor ones such as a bad grade on a test. But because many of us have moved away from our extended family, we've lost the grace-givers in our children's lives. Our kids are losing grace—and losing out.

A hopeless situation? Of course not. The same God Who gives children the desire to grow up is the One Who can help them reach Christlike maturity. Mom and Dad, make sure to provide your kids with each of these four experiences. The culture has shifted, but with God's help, you can handle it in a way that helps you raise capable, responsible, self-reliant adults—not kids who never grow up.

For more information, visit www.ropparenting.com or purchase my book *Rite of Passage Parenting: Four Essential Experiences to Equip Your Kids for Life* (Thomas Nelson, 2007) and its companion workbook.

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Youth and the breakdown of the family



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Some of the most obvious signs of the erosion of the family are occurring in the lives of our teenagers. A declining moral corrosion coupled with a disregard for authority are compounding the desperate search for significance that characterizes the youth of every generation.

In the midst of such deteriorating conditions, believers could point their disapproving fingers at the typical scapegoats of broken marriages, hormonal development and worldly influences. But simply identifying these contributing factors will only widen the generational and cultural gulf that exists between today's teenagers and many ill-equipped parents. Instead, believers must determine a thoughtful and biblical approach to capturing this pivotal teenage generation by recognizing three significant truths.

1) Teens are spiritually responsible to God. Our culture has completely obscured the identity of a teenager by prolonging childhood, promoting adolescence and preventing maturity. Society has established conflicting standards to measure personal responsibility that teens possess. Consider the broad range of age restrictions for a driver's license (16), entrance to an R-rated movie (17), the purchase of cigarettes, voting and military enlistment (18) and drinking alcohol (21). This inconsistent paradigm is directly opposed to the biblical expectation of a youth's spiritual responsibility before God. Jesus embraced spiritual responsibility at the age of 12 while continuing in subjection to the authority of his earthly parents (Luke 2:41-52). As "youths," Daniel and his friends took spiritual

responsibility for their actions (Dan. 1:3-8). Similarly, the apostle Paul endorsed a clear distinction between children and those who were spiritually responsible to God (1 Cor. 13:11). He also exhorted Timothy to use his youthfulness as a platform for ministry, rather than an excuse for adolescent behavior (1 Tim. 4:12).

Consequently, our expectations of students and our discipleship efforts must reflect the biblical precedent, rather than our culture's distorted perspective. This means we must challenge students with truth and help them assume the spiritual responsibility God expects of them. It also requires us to parent with a spiritual approach to heart issues, to help them develop a biblical worldview, and to disciple them with true spirituality, rather than a Christianized form of legalism.

2) Parents are spiritually accountable to God. Another necessary step involves parents owning the responsibility of raising their teenagers. While most parents continue to clothe, feed, fund and provide shelter for their teen, many parents rarely exceed these basic parental responsibilities. Sadly, too many parents abdicate their role in the spiritual development of their teens by relying excessively on youth pastors and other "professional" teen workers to shape their students. The spiritual formation of our children is the greatest source of joy in parenting (3 John :4), but many adults are scared or unwilling to effectively disciple their student. Not only does this forfeit the blessing of parenting, but it also cripples the student and sends them swinging on the trapeze of life with no form of support, safety net or even basic training!!

God clearly has charged the parents with the responsibility for the spiritual development of their children (Deut. 6:4-9, 20-25). Our church family and student ministries are meant to supplement parents, not supplant them! This means we must lead by example by maintain-

ing a vibrant relationship with Christ so that we may teach them something beyond the same Sunday School stories they learned in preschool. While we should partner with others in discipling our teens, ultimately, the responsibility belongs to the parents.

3) Teens have spiritual potential for God. Although teenagers present some unique challenges, they also offer some of the greatest opportunities to see God work. Unlike career and family adults, teenagers can radically redirect their lives for Christ without the challenges of a major shift in responsibilities. This is one reason why almost every great spiritual movement in history has begun through the transformed hearts of teenagers. As a result, we must recognize that teens are every bit a part of the church of today as they are the church of tomorrow.

In particular, this current generation of teens has some unparalleled potential for several reasons. Today's teens are highly motivated by service opportunities that are based on principles of truth. They also have a greater global vision than previous generations because of their exposure to other cultures through America's increased diversity and their technological access to other countries. In addition, their fluency with media communication enables them to correspond with tremendous efficiency. All of these attributes of contemporary teens position them to fulfill the Great Commandment and the Great Commission (Matt. 22:37-40, 28:18-20). We can leverage their devotion, compassion and technology abilities for the cause of Christ by providing ministry and missions opportunities for them and inviting them to participate now rather than waiting for the future. If we continue to wait, ultimately, we will forfeit our future.

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Pornography and the modern family



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Since the mid-1990s, the Internet has changed the face of modern society. Parents can email their children at college, coworkers can videoconference with colleagues across the world, and friends can rekindle relationships once lost to time and distance.

From its very beginning, the Internet held exciting potential for relationships, business and culture.

It was not long, however, before the Internet began to show its dark, insidious underbelly. What at first seemed like a purely positive avenue for connecting families, colleagues and friends soon revealed its latent potential for devastating the family.

The Internet now offers new frontiers of unfaithfulness with unprecedented access to pornography. In what has become a multi-billion dollar cash cow, the so-called "adult industry" wreaks havoc on men, women and children through exploiting its participants and dangling the proverbial carrot of sexual temptation in front of its consumers.

Pornography websites account for nearly 40 percent of all Internet traffic. "Sex" is the number one term entered into Internet search engines, and the *Journal of the American Psychological Association* found that 86 percent of men will likely visit Internet sex sites if faced with the opportunity. More than half of pastors surveyed by *Pastors.com* reported viewing Internet pornography in the past year, and the vast majority of them do not have any accountability for their Internet use.

These statistics are not entirely surprising given the fact that 91 percent of men raised in Christian families were exposed to pornography as children or adolescents.

But pornography is not an issue with which only men struggle. If you have paid attention to pop culture lately, you have likely heard about Magic Mike, a movie about male strippers that has attracted hoards of female viewers, or the *Fifty Shades of Grey* erotic trilogy that glamorizes a deviant sexual relationship and has camped out on

the *New York Times* bestseller list for nearly a year. Additionally, *Today's Christian Woman* found that more than one-third of its female readers admitted to accessing Internet pornography intentionally. Pornography is not limited by demographic. Pornography can affect anyone because we are all sexual beings and are all subject to the consequences of the Fall.

The effects of pornography on the modern family are particularly ruinous. Jill Manning, a sociologist, explains that pornography leads to decreased marital satisfaction and intimacy, unfaithfulness, abusive sexual practices and a devaluation of monogamy, among other results. In fact, a majority of divorces in America are attributed to Internet infidelity or pornography.

This issue affects millions of Christians, but unfortunately, the church tends not to handle sexual sins very well. We place homosexuality, adultery, pornography and other sexual behaviors at the top of a fabricated hierarchy of sins. The result is that the church often treats a struggle with pornography as taboo, forcing strugglers to hide their sins and maintain a façade of purity and strength. Too often, we hate both the sin and the sinner.

Systems of accountability are absolutely essential in preventing pornography consumption, and in the process of finding healing and support both for pastors and other Christians. Programs like Covenant Eyes, which filters search results and emails to an accountability partner a list of Websites visited, are available for computers and smart phones. These types of programs offer necessary safeguards and boundaries and help keep us accountable sexually. They will not, however, fix the underlying issues related to consumption of pornography. Our problem with pornography is bigger and more complicated than that. It's an issue of the heart, not solely of behavior. What we need is a willingness for the church to recognize the role pornography plays in our lives and to

do something about it. It's time for the church to stand up and be the church.

Struggling with pornography is not what destroys families. Struggling privately is. When women hold ourselves to the same standard to which we hold our husbands, we will view pornography in proper perspective. When men practice transparency and accountability, we will see a generation emboldened to fight the difficult fights against sexual temptation. When wives refuse to use their husbands' struggle with pornography as ammunition in arguments, we will shine light on darkness and provide a safe place of honesty and freedom. When our churches embrace Christian counseling without stigma or shame, we will foster an environment of healing. And when our families practice confession and unconditional love, we will see Jesus offer power and wholeness.

Pornography enslaves men and women and has broken our families. But God does not leave things broken. He is the God of restoration and reconciliation, and only He offers true freedom from pornography and from its devastating effects on the family.

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How do I respond when a loved one says 'I'm gay'?



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In today's age of gay rights, in a culture that is affirming of homosexuality, many of us may know someone who self-identifies as gay or lesbian. This person may be a neighbor, a co-worker or friend. The "new normal" has us living in a world in which homosexuality may hit close to home.

Many Christians now must ask, "How do I respond when a loved one says 'I'm gay'?" How you respond when they disclose that they believe they are gay or lesbian makes a world of difference in your relationship with them going forward. This is especially true if they are your child.

First, remember this is not about you. It is about that person. The desire for your loved one is that they be reconciled to God from this sin. You can, and must, extend God's love while holding to a position that homosexuality is sin. (It certainly is not the only sexual sin identified in the Bible, but it is indeed one of them.) They can be reconciled with God from this sin and others.

Whether the disclosure comes from a family member or friend, their admission of homosexuality hits you hard, especially as a Christian. Your initial reaction is likely to be one of shock, disbelief, anger, hurt and guilt. You have started the grieving process. No, your loved one has not died; yet, with the news of their homosexual identity, but you have experienced loss. Immediately, you start thinking of the dreams you had for your child. You may even start thinking about what others will think. You will wonder if you will even be able to face your friends, your family and everyone at church. Then your anger toward your child or your loved one will surface. How can they do this to you? All of these thoughts have gone through your mind in a matter of moments. Your loved one is standing right there before you waiting for you to respond.

Turn away from your anger or you will push them away. Turn your love for them towards them. They need you to show them that you love them. Embrace them! Say to

them that you recognize that this was not an easy thing for them to do. Share with them that you know it took a lot of courage and that you are thankful that they told you. You are not endorsing their homosexuality but you are affirming their courage, their love for you and your love for them.

Although it is hard to hear someone say "I'm gay," recognize that it is better than hiding it in the darkness. Praise God that they have brought their homosexuality into the light. Your loved one may sound euphoric or say they are more joyful than ever. Understand that the reason for this joy is that they have brought this deep dark sinful secret out into the open. They may not see it this way, but it is something you can take comfort in. Let it give you hope.

One of the most important responses is to listen to your loved one. What was their thinking process on this matter? Ask them when did they first "feel" different. Keep away from the word "why." Continue to listen to their answers. Do not get defensive. You are fact-finding. This is about you learning their experience. This is not about you telling them yours. You want to understand their process of rationalization. Do not say, "Why didn't you tell us?" Ask, "What kept you from telling us?" There is a lot you will learn by asking these questions and others.

Never bring up the matter of homosexuality, allow them to bring it up, and they will. They may give you books to read that express their thoughts on homosexuality. Read them. This allows more needed discussion.

Do not argue, but always bring the discussion to God's Word, especially Gen. 2:4-25 that reflects God's intended design. Step back and let the Holy Spirit move. As your loved one shares their journey, you should not affirm their conclusion; however, you can confirm the journey. Tread



lightly and be gentle. Intercede before God for them. Your loved one wants you in their journey; otherwise, they would not have told you about it. Ultimately your desire is for them (and yourself) to be restored into the image of Christ. This involves a true, life-long transformation from sin to Christ-likeness. Even in this most difficult of circumstances, God is faithful to extend His grace through forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration.

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Note: Charlene Hios is the founder and director of Bridging The Gaps Ministries in San Francisco, Calif. She is a graduate of Golden Gate Seminary (GGTS),

and is studying for her Doctor of Ministry. A former lesbian who was washed, sanctified, justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:11), Hios travels around the country speaking to churches sharing her testimony and speaking to how churches can minister compassionate truth telling and grace to a world impacted and affected by homosexuality.

FURTHER READING:

- *Someone I Love Is Gay: How Family and Friends Can Respond* by Bob Davies and Anita Worthen, InterVarsity Press, 1996.
- *When Homosexuality Hits Home* by Joe Dallas, Harvest House Publishers, 2004.
- *Where Does a Mother Go to Resign?* by Barbara Johnson, Bethany House Publishing, 2004.

Family build up: Where do we go from here?



Anthony L. Jordan

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America has come a long way in a short time. I can still hum the theme song of "Leave it to Beaver." The Cleaver family represented the best in a Norman Rockwellian world. But the "Beav" was soon replaced with Archie Bunker and his dysfunctional family led by his hypocritical and convoluted worldview. Now we have "Modern Family" and "The New Normal." For most of us, there is nothing "normal" about the portrayal of family on television.

Do you see the progression, or for me, the regression, toward the familial abyss? The writers for this Insight have given powerful pictures of the demise of the family and some of the causes. They have also shown valuable insight into ways to reverse the trends of modern culture.

Some people would say that the tsunami of dysfunctional marriages and family life in America cannot be stopped—I do not believe that for one second. As long as there is the Gospel and the church, there is hope. But how can we stem the tide? How can we reverse the destructive trends in the family?

I am convinced that the starting place is not changing laws and society, but changing the church. Jesus has called us to be salt and light. What happens among believers matters. Statistics bear a sad report. Marriage and family life in the church are not much different than society as a whole. Brethren, this should not be. People of faith have the power of the truth and the Holy Spirit to guide them and empower them to live on a higher plain. So the first step toward the future is to allow the truth of God's Word to serve as the guide to marriage and family.

If we allow God's Word to guide our family life, we will find ourselves swimming upstream. But has that not been the pattern throughout Christian history? People who live by the teaching of Scripture are in conflict with a broken and sinful world. At the same time, when we live in an authentic Christ-honoring way in our most cherished relationships, the world notices. The early Christians astounded the Roman world because of the way they lived. The door of witness was opened because others recognized they lived life on a higher plain. People today do not need our condemnation for non-biblical lifestyles, but they do need our testimony of the fulfillment and joy that comes in living according to God's standard as revealed in the Bible.

"... when we live in an authentic Christ-honoring way in our most cherished relationships, the world notices."

I hear some people protesting that the demand of living a Christian lifestyle is too much to stand—that the biblical standard of marriage and family is too high. Arguments are made that to bear testimony to a lost world, marriages and families must be perfect. Not so! People are not looking for

perfection, but honesty. They are looking for people who have an answer for failure. If there is a lesson to be learned from the stories of Scripture, it is that families are not perfect. Thus, marriage and family life find strength in a living faith marked by grace and love. We treat one another with the same depth of love and forgiveness that Christ has demonstrated toward us. Christian love toward one another is unconditional and permanent, and reflects the love Christ has shown. Love is not only a feeling, but also a conscious act. Christian marriages are not perfect, but are marked by the ability to ride the waves of mistakes, hurts and failures because of the amazing grace and love of God at work in us.

The same is true of children from a Christian home who face the same temptations and struggles of others. They, too, can fail and fall, but the security found in the Christian home is one of unfailing love and overflowing grace. Parents and children express a love to each other that will not let go.

There is also an affirming and encouraging side of love and grace demonstrated in the family. This kind of love seeks the best for family members. As Paul so eloquently writes, this love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things." Wow! What child would not be blessed to grow up in a family with parents who love like that? Marriage and family life that focus on the needs of other family members provide the best cradle for healthy living.

So, for me, the future of family is as bright as the church that teaches the transformational truths of Scripture and applies them to family. While better television programs and a change of worldview within the culture would be nice, our hope is not found outside the church. Hope is found in faithful living in the truths of Scripture, because by doing so, we find our greatest fulfillment in the most intimate relationship—the family.

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