

The Bible and the Family

1. Introduction

A sixty four year old man with learning difficulties collapses in Manchester in his front garden after the latest incident in a campaign of harassment by youths which had lasted for years. The police revealed that they had invested extraordinary resources into protecting him, but it was to no avail. An investigation is ongoing.

A father systematically abuses his two daughters making them pregnant 18 times over a twenty five year period. An independent review finds all the statutory authorities failed and they line up to apologise.

In Parliament the select committee on health declares that social care is “chronically underfunded” and “severely rationed” and that if politicians do not rectify this they will “betray current and future generations”.

Those are just some of the headlines from the last week. I could have picked any week and we would have had a similar set of stories. Stories which illustrate the progressive decay of families in the UK – and the rising burden which this puts on the nation.

About the time that I was born, the British government embarked upon a giant social experiment. Central to that experiment was the progressive removal of the conventional family from the centre of British society. Different cultures in different places and times have had different preferred family structures. But no culture in history has ever simply let people choose from any and every kind of household arrangement.

Rabbi Jonathan Sachs in his book *The Politics of Hope* imagines Charles Dickens, that great social commentator of the nineteenth century, being introduced to the twenty-first century. He would be astonished at the progress made. Health care, nourishment, roads and other infrastructure, housing and education – all improved out of all recognition. He would be hailed by adults rejoicing in freedoms which Dickens had barely dreamed of. But Jonathan Sachs suggests that Dickens’ sharp eye would have spotted something.

“That is all wonderful” he would say “but what about the children?”

When I first started examining issues surrounding families in the UK - a couple of decades ago – there was a monumental battle going on amongst researchers. Academics who proclaimed that children were being hurt by family breakdown were vilified and some lost their jobs. Today the evidence is overwhelming – despite, of course, thousands of examples of superb parents and kids in broken homes who thrive and succeed – the evidence is that on

average children who grow up without two biological parents do worse, educationally, have worse health, are more likely to go to prison, less likely to form a stable marriage themselves, girls are more likely to become pregnant as teens and on the list goes.

Now let me say that I know that amongst us there are people who buck that trend. Who grew up in a broken home and have done fine. Some who are presently doing magnificently in less than ideal family circumstances. When I stand up to talk about these issues I know why the politicians, by and large, tend to fudge, or avoid the key issues – because these matters touch raw nerves for many of us.

In our children's primary school, where I was chair of the governors we abandoned all mention of Fathers' Day. It just caused so much anger. Mothers tend to come out of all this somewhat better so perhaps it is not inappropriate to talk about the family on Mothers' Day.

Wider problem

Free choosing individuals in a controlling and supplying state.

Initial illustrations all chosen for another reason than breakdown of families – breakdown of communities

In each case the statutory authorities get the blame

Where were the neighbours when this man was being harassed?

Authorities simply could not keep up with father abusing his children – he moved 67 times in 35 years.

Health Committee – complained that social care had only risen 50% in real terms in the last decade. How much more do they want it to rise?

The state simply can't cope.

2. Circles of belonging in a modern society

Illustrate

“circles of belonging”

Modern society

The individual

The family – nuclear, weak, often broken¹

40% of children will not reach adulthood with both biological parents still together

Britain has the highest divorce rate in Europe –

¹ See The Centre for Social Justice, report on families.

<http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/CSJ%20Green%20paper%20on%20the%20family%20WEB.pdf>.

average duration of marriage is ten years. Last time marriage was so short was the end of the 18th century – due to death.

Highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe

“Mediating institutions”

Football club, Mosque, Church

Such institutions have almost disappeared.

Robert Putnam and others “social capital”

Bowling Alone – the decline of civic organisations, epitomised by the American Bowling League

In the UK – Rabbi Jonathan Sachs

The Politics of Hope

The State

Massively increased role

A hundred years ago standard rate of income tax – 6%.

Today government revenue is 39% of GDP

Older and OT society

Family

“honour your father and mother” – fifth commandment

Laws against adultery and controlling divorce

Family: “the father’s house”

all the relatives of a living couple
already what we would call an extended family.

Mediating institutions

The clan – wider group

The tribe – main subdivision – “twelve tribes of Israel”

The nation – Israel

Is the Old Testament model just an accident? – No. three reasons

1. It explicitly creates a model not like the surrounding nations

e.g. attitude to the king. – 1 Samuel 8.

V5 – they want to be like the other nations

Vv11-18 – the dangers of a king

Centralised bureaucracy

Centralised wealth

Prohibitive Taxation

2. Increasing modern recognition that centralised state cannot manage people on its own

From both left and right wings

“social capital”, “the situated self”, “communitarianism”

3. It is the New Testament model of how to live

3. Circles of belonging in the New Testament

The Family

Husbands and wives – Matthew 19:1-8

V3 – asked about divorce “for any and every reason”

Vv4-6 – sets out the biblical ideal

Vv7-8 – recognises the need to be realistic “because you hearts were hard”

- Policies which take seriously the clear intention of God – “God made them male and female” “a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife” “what God has joined let no man separate”
 - The centre for social justice – Ian Duncan Smith. Tory - straight speaking.
 - Specific policy – transferrable personal allowance for married couples
 - Specific counselling and support for couples – delivered by “mediating institutions”.
 - James and Emily – local Marston The Marriage Course.
- Policies which support non-conventional families without promoting them
 - Old Testament regulation of divorce – a good example.

Parents and children

Eph 6:1-4

Mutual responsibility

Extended family

1 Tim 5:16

Note: priority for elderly to be cared for by family.

1 Tim 5:8 – “worse than an unbeliever”

- Policies which bring together extended families
 - Recognition of grandparents who do child-care?
 - Financial incentives to enable elderly grandparents to be cared for in an extended family?
 - The Relationships Foundation.
- Christians:
 - you have a responsibility towards aging parents.
 - Adopting and fostering children

The Church

Eph 2:19-22

- Christians – you were made to function in a church
 - Church membership – many reasons for not joining
 - But underlying in some – desire to be a free agent
- For our society
 - Encourage involvement in local things – empower
 - Enable churches and faith groups to deliver basic care – Sunflowers.

Nation

A consciously limited role