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## Fathering the Fatherless

Mark Eric Strong

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GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

FATHERING THE FATHERLESS

A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

MARK ERIC STRONG

4-12-03

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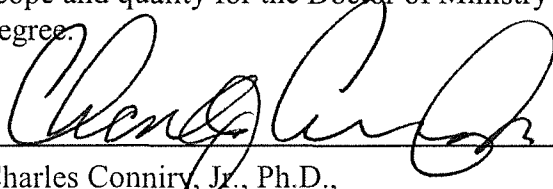
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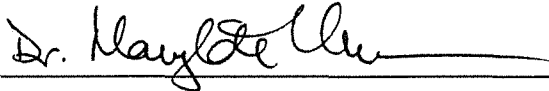
**Presented by: Mark E. Strong**

**April 2, 2003**

We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Spiritual Formation degree.



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To Dad, Gramps, Paw-Paw, and most of all God

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## Abstract

### **Fathering the Fatherless**

Thesis: The purpose of this study is to aid the pastor in mobilizing the local church to minister to those individuals and persons who are affected by father absenteeism. To accomplish this objective, I seek to understand the nature of the problem from a sociological, psychological and biblical perspective, and then propose a simple strategy to aid the congregation in ministering to the fatherless.

The introduction of the paper defines the issue of father absenteeism, stating why father absenteeism is a problematic trend. Chapter One discusses the causes of father absenteeism. The chapter seeks to answer the question from a sociological perspective as to why fathers abandon their homes and children. Causes such as war, voluntary abandonment, cultural trends and the decline of marriage are discussed.

Chapter Two covers the impact that father absenteeism has on the lives of those affected. Psychological issues such as pain and father hunger are explored along with the inherent risks of poverty, juvenile delinquency and diminished educational opportunities. Chapters Three and Four give a biblical overview of God as father and examines the roles of earthly fathers as taught in the Old and New Testament Scriptures.

Chapter Five delineates a simple strategy a busy pastor can utilize. The strategy consists of forming a task force, preaching, mentoring and prayer. I close the chapter by suggesting how the pastor might use these tools to minister to the fatherless.

## MINISTRY STORY

In 1988 my wife and I were installed as the pastors of what was called at that time Immanuel Free Methodist Church. Dr. Esther Turner founded the church in the late 50's primarily as an outreach to inner-city children in North Portland. Her burden was to share the love of Jesus with African American children and by doing so challenge the racial divide of her day. Throughout the years, Immanuel, now Life Change Christian Center, has endeavored to be keepers of the original flame by ministering to children and by seeking to be a multi-racial congregation. Currently, we have a number of programs for children and the vision of our church is to become even more diverse racially and ethnically. During the last couple of years God has blessed our congregation, and has sent workers and leaders to our church to work towards making our dream a reality.

Recently, a number of the leaders in our church gathered for a prayer meeting in a part of our building where the future sanctuary will be located. We all formed a large circle and began to pray for God's blessing upon the project. As we were praying, I began to look around at the people who stood praying in the circle. There were some people who were in their twenties, some in their thirties, some in their forties, fifties and sixties. However, what struck me at that present moment was how many of our leaders from all of the age groups present were raised without a father. I counted approximately fifteen out of the twenty or so individuals in our meeting that night who had grown up without

an active paternal presence. The father absenteeism was due to abandonment, divorce, incarceration and a myriad of other issues.

Prior to this prayer time my awareness of this issue was dormant. However, I also thought about the many other members and children in our church who are being raised without a father. My thoughts then flowed to the fatherless young men and women in the community that our church is attempting to reach for Christ. The founding passion of our church was to minister to children, yet we had not targeted this obvious ministry need. Children need fathers. My conclusion, based on my personal observation and my knowledge of our church and community, is that we have a large problem on our hands. Something has to change in order to effectively address this situation. This brings me to my ministry problem: ***“How can a local church father the fatherless?”***

## INTRODUCTION

### **Defining the problem of father absenteeism**

Gone are the days when it was “normal” for a child to grow up with both parents in the home. For many in our culture, the idea and the reality of a child having the benefit of being reared by a mother and a father has become a figment of the imagination rooted in antiquity. Equally distressing is the fact that the parent who is generally missing in action is the father. In the majority of cases, parental absence is due to the abandonment of the father, not the mother. Father absenteeism is rising to problematic proportions in our day. David Blankenhorn makes this observation,

The United States is becoming an increasingly fatherless society. A generation ago, an American child could reasonably expect to grow up with his or her father. Today, an American child can reasonably expect not to. Fatherlessness is now approaching a rough parity with fatherhood as a defining feature of American childhood. This astonishing fact is reflected in many statistics, but here are the two most important. Tonight, about 40 percent of American children will go to sleep in homes in which their fathers do not live. Before they reach the age of eighteen, more than half of our nation’s children are likely to spend a significant portion of their childhoods living apart from their fathers. Never before in this country have so many children been voluntarily abandoned by their fathers. Never before have so many children grown up without knowing what it means to have a father.<sup>1</sup>

Other statistics show that from 1960 to 1990, the percentage of children living apart from their fathers has risen from 17 to 36 percent, and it continues to rise.<sup>2</sup> In the

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<sup>1</sup> David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 1.

<sup>2</sup> David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (New York: Martin Kessler Books/The Free Press, 1996), 3.

African American community the fatherless plight is worst. The 1990 U.S. Census reports that 51.1 percent of African American homes are headed by single mothers.<sup>3</sup> This means that in the African American community 11.1 percent more children are fatherless than mainstream America. The implications of this are serious and will be discussed in depth later. Problems such as poverty and crime are a couple of the social ills fueled by father absenteeism in the African American community.

Statistics have a tendency to be sterile and impersonal. This issue, however, hits home for me. I have witnessed the reality of growing father absenteeism. I have seen it in my own family and in the lives of my close relatives. I have also witnessed this trend firsthand in my pastorate. As an African American pastor ministering in an inner city context for the last fourteen years, I have ministered to countless numbers of individuals, children, teens and adults who have lived the majority of their lives without a father. While some have adjusted and are healthy and whole, many are struggling to deal with issues inherent in fatherlessness.

Not only is the lack of a father's physical presence an issue, but adequacy is just as important.<sup>4</sup> Adequacy refers to the skills a father needs to be a competent father. There are children who have a father in the home, but the father's influence is detrimental to their welfare. We have had several cases at our church where I felt that the physical presence of a father was more detrimental than his absence. The cases usually involved an abusive man with an unhealthy need to exert dictatorial control over his family. Or,

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<sup>3</sup> Shelia R. Staley, *The Black Family, Past, Present & Future* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 57.

<sup>4</sup> James A. Levine and Edward W. Pitt, *New Expectations: Community Strategies for Responsible Fatherhood* (New York: Families and Work Institute, 1995), 27.

they involved an ignorant man who believed that just because he was a man, he had the God-given right to do as he pleased.

I will never forget a conversation I had with a young woman who attended our church. She had recently married a young man who had fathered her child. The marriage lasted only a short time, and they decided to share custody of their young son. The little boy had just returned home to his mom after spending several weeks with his dad. Upon his return his behavior was that of a pimp! He began to call his mom and other women derogatory names, and his desire was to be a pimp like his daddy. The question I asked myself was, “What behavior was this man exhibiting around his son?” This was not a case of father absenteeism, but father inadequacy. While this man was present physically with his son, his influence served to instill and reinforce negative and antisocial behaviors in his son. A father not only needs to be present, he also must be equipped with the necessary emotional, supportive and communication skills to act as a father to the child. Otherwise, he can do more harm than good.

Popenoe defines a father as one who fathers a child biologically, and who also provides guidance, instruction, encouragement and love and care for his child.<sup>5</sup> To fulfill this definition, a father must be present and have the skills to do the job. I believe every child has the right to experience the blessing of a father in some fashion. In fact, I believe every child has an innate desire to have a good father as well. As a child, I remember a song by the group called the Temptations. The song was called “Papa Was a Rolling Stone.” The dagger in the song is in the last line of the chorus that states, “When he died,

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<sup>5</sup> Popenoe, 19.

all he left us was alone.” From the statistical trends and from personal experience, too many children are being left alone.

Too many children are fatherless, and the church as God’s redemptive agent in the community has a responsibility to address this issue. In communities throughout America, many youths have numerous odds stacked against them. Pressures exist to get involved in gangs, to use and sell drugs, and to make money by illegitimate means. If the church can at least help in a small way by ministering to the fatherless problem, our children will have a greater chance to avoid becoming further sad statistics. Also, they will have a greater chance of becoming dedicated disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

To address the problem several areas need to be examined. The first area is a deeper exploration of the causes of father absenteeism. Second, the impact of father absenteeism on the lives of children needs to be determined. Third, discovering and defining the biblical perspective on the character and role of the father should be addressed. Finally, practical solutions for pastors need to be developed. My hope is that as we are aware of the issues, we can formulate a plan that will keep more children from feeling the pain and disadvantages of being fatherless.



## CHAPTER 1

### DISCUSSING THE CAUSES OF FATHER ABSENTEEISM

#### **Introduction**

A few thousand years ago Malachi the prophet penned a phrase that not only had messianic implications, but also illuminated a critical issue confronting the lives of many people in the twenty-first century. Speaking of the forerunner of Christ he writes, "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse (Malachi 4:6)." Without discussing all of the theological nuances and implications of this verse, I simply want to stress the point that the prophet identified the existence of a disconnection between fathers and children, and he implied that the disconnection would have harmful repercussions. Several causes of father absenteeism will be discussed in this chapter. The areas to be covered are war, voluntary absenteeism, the media, the decline of marriage, divorce, the increase of single motherhood and work.

Statistics show that we are currently experiencing a disconnection between fathers and children in dramatic portions. It is father absenteeism. The questions we must ask ourselves are: Why are close to nearly half of the children in our nation going to bed at night without a father in the home? And, why are so many kids growing up without having a dad around and a positive paternal influence in their lives? If you were to ask

these questions fifty years ago, the answers may have been a bit simpler due to the fact that the major cause of father absenteeism was death, not a myriad of other factors.<sup>1</sup> However, times have changed, our culture has changed, values have changed and the political landscape has changed. In this chapter we will examine some of the major causes of father absenteeism in order to gain some much-needed insight into the fuel that feeds the fire of fatherlessness in our society.

### **A Historical Cause: World War II**

Quoting Ernest Burgess, Cynthia Franklin states, “So comprehensive and fundamental are the changes brought by war, and so closely is the family interrelated with the larger society, that perhaps there is no aspect of family life unaffected by war.”<sup>2</sup> In the eyes of many sociologists, World War II greatly impacted American culture and placed a great amount of stress and tension on families. Franklin stresses this point by writing,

World War II had a profound effect on American society. For the United States, it lasted twice as long as World War I, brought over fourteen million men and women into the armed forces, and added another ten million to the labor force. Family life considered an institution began a period of significant change. Arthur Marwick has argued, war always tests existing institutions, and sometimes leads to their transformation or collapse.<sup>3</sup>

World War II did indeed bring change to the American family and in many ways collapse as well. The war altered and in some cases permanently changed the lives of twenty-four million people directly and millions of other people indirectly. Unlike the

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<sup>1</sup> David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (New York: Martin Kessler Books/The Free Press, 1996), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Donna L. Franklin, *Ensuring Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 99.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Vietnam War where everyone *knew* of a family who had someone in the war, during World War II, every family *had* someone in the war. While I do not necessarily buy into the Ozzie and Harriet or Brady Bunch view of marriage and family, I do believe it is good to have both Mom and Dad in the house. How they work out the roles is up to them, However, both need to be close enough to be lovingly accessible to the children and one to another.

World War II ripped the heart out of this ideal by separating mothers from their children, fathers from their wives and fathers from their children. Mothers were forced to work and in many instances to spend long hours away from the family. The percentage of working women rose from 17 percent in the 1930's to 25 percent by the end of the war.<sup>4</sup> This meant that while dad was off fighting, mom was off working in the shipyard. During this time opportunities opened up for many teens and youths to enter the labor force. It is interesting that juvenile crimes rose to the highest level during this time period.<sup>5</sup>

At the beginning of the war, military leaders did not favor drafting fathers. The rationale for this was that every child needed and deserved to have the blessing of a father in the home. However, by 1943 it was deemed necessary to draft fathers because quotas could not be filled with single men and men without children. This ruling brought a considerable amount of protest. Blankenhorn writes,

Popular opinion remained decisively opposed to drafting fathers. A Gallup poll during the fall of 1943 found that 68 percent of Americans believed that compared to drafting fathers, it was preferable to draft single men employed in industries essential to the war effort. Public opinion also favored drafting single women for noncombat military service to avoid drafting fathers. As George

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<sup>4</sup> Popenoe, 124.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 125.

Gallup put it, the public objected to the father draft because it would break up too many families where there are children.<sup>6</sup>

The public was right. It is estimated that 3 to 4 million fathers were killed in combat, and many others returned home as frustrated angry men never able to get reassimilated into family life. Others who made it out alive remained absent from their families for months and years.<sup>7</sup>

World War II not only affected the family structure of white America, but it also had adverse affects on African American families. In her book *Ensuring Inequality*, Donna Franklin points out several ways that she believes the war hurt black families. One such way was the sudden and late northern migration to urban sprawls. She says,

World War II placed severe strains on all American families, but its heaviest impact was felt by the African American family, weakened by slavery, share-cropping and the northern migration. During the 1940's, twice the number of blacks migrated to the North than had relocated between 1910 and 1930. By the end of the postwar decade, the proportion of blacks in urban areas would finally exceed those in rural areas—a shift that had been made by whites some thirty years before.<sup>8</sup>

As African Americans made the trek northward, they encountered a few obstacles that affected their families. The first was a lack of available housing. The government attempted to rectify the situation, but failed miserably. The majority of its attempts were aimed at white communities, and when it tried to develop housing for blacks it was met

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<sup>6</sup> David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 52.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>8</sup> Franklin, 114.

with strong resistance from whites. It goes without saying it is hard to raise a family without a roof over your head.<sup>9</sup>

Second, Franklin points out the fact that blacks were thirty years late in their migration. In my family when you were late for dinner, you were privileged to eat the leftovers. By the time blacks made the northern migration, there were not many leftovers available, as whites had had a thirty-year head start. The reality of slim resources complicated by racism made this harsh transition doubly difficult. Franklin points out the effect of poverty on the family life of blacks:

Facing a weakened economy without the social controls that once provided communal aspects of the southern life, black marriages disintegrated, out of wedlock births proliferated, especially among adolescents. Although clearly dissatisfied in their competition with white women for jobs in the labor market, many black women opted not to return to the paltry wages and irregular hours of the domestic service jobs they had before the war. In an effort to cope with their much higher desertion, separation and divorce from black men, and with the difficulty of securing support from the financially beleaguered fathers, black mothers became more reliant on welfare.<sup>10</sup>

While economic hardships cannot be solely blamed for the deterioration of black families in the World War II era, the impact of poverty cannot be denied. After the war fathers could not find jobs, and mothers were forced to take the lower-paying domestic jobs that whites refused to take. This produced a situation that was detrimental for African American families. The economic inequality helped to grease the slide towards unwed births, divorces and a reliance on welfare by black mothers. In the end in

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 114-15.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 115.

many cases, the mother was left with the children while the father was left to struggle for a meaningful existence.

Regardless of race, it is clear that World War II placed undue pressure on American family life and exposed it to harsh elements that it had not previously faced. World War II was the first time America experienced a fatherhood crisis. The second time is now. The difference is that during World War II fathers were forced out of the home by a war, while now they are leaving by their own volition.

### **Voluntary Father Absenteeism**

Unlike World War II, where the cause of father absenteeism was governmentally mandated, today men are leaving or abandoning their children voluntarily. Studies in the 1990's demonstrated that never before had so many fathers willingly left their children. Many men left their home on their own volition and never glanced back.<sup>11</sup> This is quite disturbing. A man in our church often tells me the story of what happened shortly after he was born. Apparently his father walked out of the home and deserted him, his mother and the rest of his siblings. I asked him on one occasion if his father ever tried to contact the family or if he ever tried to help out in any fashion. His answer was an emphatic, "No!" He went on to say, "He did nothing at all. When he was gone, he was gone!" Sadly, though the characters and places may change, this father act has become commonplace in many lives.

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<sup>11</sup> Cynthia R. Daniels, ed., *Lost Fathers* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1998), 2.

In his book *Fatherless America*, David Blankenhorn points out several interesting statistics about volitional abandonment. First, he points out the fact that historically the primary cause of father absenteeism was paternal death. He states, "By the time they turned fifteen, about 15 percent of all American children born in 1870 had experienced the death of their fathers. Only slightly more than half reached 15 with both parents still alive."<sup>12</sup>

Though these statistics are very grim, due to the medical and technological advancements parents are living longer in today's world. More than 90 percent of children born in 1950 reach the age of fifteen with both parents.<sup>13</sup> Second, he points out that though death is historically the primary culprit of father absenteeism, it has been eclipsed by voluntary abandonment. Blankenhorn writes that now more marriages end in divorce than in death.<sup>14</sup>

Blankenhorn believes that from a child and social perspective, voluntary abandonment is more difficult to cope with than paternal death. His rationale is as follows:

1. When a child's father dies a child can properly grieve. The child can eventually (as painful as it may be) come to understand that death is final.
2. When a father leaves it creates a plethora of psychological ramifications for the child (self-blame, anxiety, resentment, etc.)
3. When a father dies, fatherhood lives on in the head and the heart of the child and the legacy of fatherhood is preserved. The mother generally aids in this process of preservation.

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<sup>12</sup> Blankenhorn, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

4. When a father leaves, the child suffers and his fatherhood is diminished and the value of fatherhood as a whole suffers. In many cases, because the mother is hurt, she aids in the diminishing process.<sup>15</sup>

The biological connection should be enough to keep fathers from voluntarily abandoning their children. Tragically it is not. Statistics show, “Among teens, only 67 percent live with their biological fathers, compared with the 91 percent who live with their biological mothers. In urban areas, the percentage of teens who live with their fathers drops to only 57 percent.”<sup>16</sup> While mothers typically will not leave their children under any circumstances, there are 24 million children living in America without their biological fathers.<sup>17</sup> Many of the missing fathers who have left the children have done so on their own volition.

### **Cultural Cause: Media**

One stanza of our current cultural hymn on fatherhood chimes with the message of the unimportance of fathers. In today’s U.S. culture, fathers are not necessarily a bad thing. However, they are not central to the parenting process, but peripheral.<sup>18</sup> Jonetta Rose Barras, in her book *Whatever Happen to Daddy’s Little Girl?* writes, “ Our culture’s decision-making created the mythology of the superfluous father.”<sup>19</sup> Myths are powerful

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 22, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Wade F. Horn and Tom Sylvester, *Father Facts* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Gaithersburg, Maryland: The National Fatherhood Initiative, 2002), 23.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ken R. Canfield, *The Seven Secrets of Effective Fathers: Becoming the Father Your Children Need* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers Inc., 1992), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Jonetta Rose Barras, *Whatever Happened to Daddy’s Little Girl?* (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2000), 45.



and can create reality as in the case of the irrelevancy of the father in our American culture. The myth of the “useless father” presents a unique challenge to the notion that all children need their fathers.

Cynthia Daniels writes, “Until recently, American culture for both historical and bioevolutionary reasons powerfully endorsed the father-child bond, and what we have today is a unique challenge to this endorsement.”<sup>20</sup> This challenge is observed in the numbers of fatherless children. The challenge is observed by the usage of artificial insemination and other methods for procreation. While many infertile couples may use this method as a legitimate way to bear children, others see it as a way to procreate without the lifelong involvement of a partner. To say the least, these issues and options raise many ethical questions that are beyond the scope of this work.

The challenge is also observed by some of the values and messages conveyed through the media and entertainment world. In her book *Media Effects and Society*, Elizabeth Perse stresses that one aspect of mass communications is socialization. She states,

Socialization is the function of mass communication that deals with social values and cultural heritage. A society is marked by commonly shared cultural norms, values and experiences. Mass communication serves to display and reinforce those values and experiences. Mass communication can also integrate new members of a society, children and immigrants, by teaching and relaying those norms, values and experiences.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Daniels, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth M. Perse, *Media Effects and Society* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 56.

Perse highlights two functions of mass media. One function of the media is to project our existing cultural values, and the second is to teach these values to others. While no single television program can harness the value system of an entire culture, it can speak to certain aspects in the climate of our culture.

The following are a couple of examples of programs that demonstrate how some segments of our culture view the importance of fatherhood. One Sunday night my wife and I were watching the television program, *The Practice*. A portion of the story line involved a young female attorney who decided that she wanted to have a child. After much consideration she decided to ask a male friend whom she admired to be the donor for her child. She chose the man because she valued his character, intelligence and demeanor. Her friend consented and she was impregnated. When the office staff received the news of her pregnancy, congratulations were in order. The only person who failed to congratulate her was her close friend Jimmy. She then pulled Jimmy to the side and asked him why he was not happy for her like everyone else. Jimmy replied, "I think the baby needs a daddy." Eleanor went on to tell Jimmy how disappointed she was in him for his failure to support her decision. Finally Jimmy gave her congratulations because of their friendship. He was the only objector in the whole program. When the child was born, the father's conscience convicted him and he desperately wanted to become a part of the child's life. Eleanor vehemently refused and off to court they went. The case was tried. The dad pleaded and begged, but he lost because he signed a contract prior to the pregnancy that forfeited all of his paternal rights.

In 1992, Murphy Brown dropped a bombshell when she decided to mother a child without the involvement of a father. This show prompted Dan Quayle's controversial "Murphy Brown" speech in which he castigated a culture that promotes fatherhood as "irrelevant."<sup>22</sup> Two years later, continuing on the same theme in a speech entitled *Standing Firm*, Quayle stated, "A society that promotes the idea that a father's role is irrelevant breeds irresponsibility."<sup>23</sup>

Recently, a popular magazine show conducted an interview with two women, one of whom was a popular singer. These partners had given birth to two children by a sperm donor. The carrot of the show was that they were going to reveal who the sperm donor was. He turned out to be a rock star who had no problem at all with the arrangement. The tone and the message of the program seemed to be, "Out with the traditional models of family, do what is right for you and everything will work out great." If you desire to have a child without a father being an active part of the child's life, that is totally acceptable. Though this type of ideology is not embraced by everyone in our culture, it is definitely present, and it does have an impact on the number of children who will have fathers actively involved in their lives.

### **Cultural Cause: Decline of Marriage**

Marriage is not as popular today as it was in years past. Marriage has fallen on hard times. People are now marrying later in life or not at all. Others feel that marriage is

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<sup>22</sup> James A. Levine and Edward W. Pitt, *New Expectations: Community Strategies for Responsible Fatherhood* (New York: Families and Work Institute, 1995), 13.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

simply one option among many for involvement in a relationship that brings children into the equation somewhere along the line. In *Father Facts*, Horn and Sylvester list some insightful statistics on certain aspects of marriage in America. Concerning the decline of marriage they state the following data:

1. In 2000, 56% of American men fifteen years and older were married, down from 59% percent in 1990, 61% in 1980 and 65% in 1965.<sup>24</sup>
2. Families, defined by two or more people living together who are related by birth, marriage or adoption, made up 90 percent of households in 1940, 81 percent in 1970, and just 61 percent in 2000.<sup>25</sup>
3. From 1980 to 2000 the percentage of married adults has decreased from 67% to 57% for whites, 51% to 34% for Hispanics and from 51% to 34% for blacks.<sup>26</sup>
4. Between 1970 and 2000, the percentage of households comprised of “women living alone” grew from 11.5 to 14.8 percent, while the percentage of “men living alone” households nearly doubled, from 5.6 percent to 10.7.<sup>27</sup>

While data shows an obvious decline in the numbers of married couples, the question still needs to be asked: Why is marriage so essential in the cause and prevention of father absenteeism and abandonment?

In *Lost Fathers*, Maggie Gallagher sheds some light on the significance of marriages in keeping fathers with their children. She writes,

Marriage is the vehicle by which, throughout history, society creates ties between men and their children. The current fumbling that attempts to produce these ties outside of marriage is without precedent and unlikely to succeed for the simple reason that marriage and parenting are not, as the experts have imagined, job labels that can be transferred from one employee to the next as personnel shift, but something else entirely: erotic relationships.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Wade and Sylvester, 151-58.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Maggie Gallagher, “Father Hunger,” Cynthia R. Daniels, ed., *Lost Fathers* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1998), 178.

I concur with Gallagher's statement that marriage is a critical vehicle for bonding men to their wives and to their children. In my pastoral ministry I have observed father participation in the lives of children in married and non-married situations. During the fourteen years that I have served as pastor of Life Change Christian Center, we have had only a few single fathers in our church who were raising their children on their own. In each case each father had one child, and the dads had help from the mothers at times. On the other hand, there have been numerous single mothers who have raised one to five children on their own in our church without the help of a father. I observed that the biological tie alone was not enough to cause the father to be actively involved in the life of his kids. Many of these men had either moved out of the state, entered into a new relationship or simply were dead-beat dads. From first-hand observation, I have seen that when the majority of the men leave the children's mother, they have difficulty keeping ties with the children as well. Studies support these observations.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, with the couples in the church that have stayed married, the men have stayed with the children as well. So from personal experience, I attest to the truth in her summation. Fathers that are married generally stay in closer proximity to their children physically, emotionally and spiritually. As my grandfather used to say, the way you love your kids is by loving their mother, and the best way to love their mother is by staying married.

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<sup>29</sup> Terri L. Orbuch, Arland Thorton, Jennifer Cancio, "Marital Disruptions and Parent Child Relationships: Interventions and Policies on Fatherhood". H. Elizabeth Peters, Gary W. Peterson, Suzanne K. Steinmetz, and Randall D. Day, eds., *"Fatherhood Research Interventions and Policies"* (New York: The Hayworth Press, Inc., 2000), 227.

If marriage is part of the solution for fatherlessness, the question of why marriage is on the decline in the African American community must be asked. Out of all the ethnic groups in America, African Americans have had the greatest decline in marriages. Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan state,

There are differences in degree of change and some countervailing trends. That is, change among blacks has been substantially greater than that observed in the general population in areas of marital timing (i.e., greater delay) and in the likelihood that black women will maintain a family alone. The proportion of black women and men who ever marry has declined by nearly 20 percent over the last fifty years, while the figures for the general population has remained steady. And that figure is even more striking among middle-age women.<sup>30</sup>

Until recently the majority of research dealing with ills in the African-American family structure focused on slavery, economics and other social factors. While not denying the impact of those factors, Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan bring other causes to the table. The three causal factors Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan see as contributing to the decline of African-American marriages are mate availability, marital feasibility and desirability of marriage.

Mate availability deals with the availability of potential mates. They state,

Demographers contend that a “marriage squeeze”—a decrease in the availability of marriage partners—among female members of the baby boom has led to delays in marriage and lower marriage rates, particularly for women (Glick, Heer and Beresford 1963; Rodgers and Thornton 1985; Schoen, 1983). The shortage is due to the gradual birthrates following World War II, coupled with the tendency of women to marry slightly older men. Baby boom women were therefore seeking husbands from older, but smaller cohorts. Although this marriage squeeze affected all races, it exacerbated the mortality-driven decline in African-American sex ratios, evident since the 1920’s (Cox, 1940; Jackson, 1971; McQueen 1979;

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<sup>30</sup> M. Belinda Tucker and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, *The Decline in Marriage Among African Americans: Causes, Consequences and Policy Implications* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1995), 16.

Staples, 1981a,b), and led, some to think, to a broadening of mate selection standards among black women (Spanier and Glick, 1980).<sup>31</sup>

The obvious impact of the marriage squeeze is that there are less men available for marriage. This means that there will be fewer marriages and possibly an increase in unhealthy forms of relationships that will produce children as an outcome. Several times in our church I have had talented and quality women (young and old) come to me in frustration and say, “Pastor Mark, where are the men? It seems like the good ones are already taken and the rest are on drugs or in jail.” I must admit that then I did not view their question as a greater sociological problem, but now I see perhaps it may be.

Second, Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan indicate that marital feasibility is a reason for decline in African American marriages. The primary Achilles heel in marital feasibility is economics. Again Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan state,

Sociologists and economists have been particularly concerned about the relationship between the economic condition of the African-American males and the black family structure. They have argued that black marital feasibility has decreased because the increasing economic marginality of black males has made them less attractive as potential husbands, and less interested in becoming husbands, since they are constrained in their ability to perform the provider role in marriage.<sup>32</sup>

We must face the facts. If a woman is courted by a man who has nothing to offer her in terms of economics, education and spiritual maturity, she is not going to want to pursue a relationship with that particular man. She is going to think that she can do better. So she passes the opportunity up and moves on, still choosing to be single. The man, on the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 18.

other hand, in most cases will not want to marry a woman without being able to contribute in some fashion to her economic well-being.

In his book *Black Men Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?*, Haki R. Madubuti taps into the frustration and pathos that many black males feel about their economic condition and how that affects their relationship with women. He states,

Black men in the United States are virtually powerless, landless and moneyless in a land where white manhood is measured by such acquisitions. Most Afrikan Americans have been unable to look at their lives in a historical-racial-political-economic context. Thereby, without the proper tools to analyze many Black men have defined their lives as a duplicate of the white male ethos. The problem (and there are many) is that black men in relationship to black women cannot, a great majority of the time, deliver the "American dream." Therefore the dream is often translated into a Black male/female nightmare where Black men are acting out of frustration and ignorance, and adopt attitudes that are not productive or progressive in relationship to Black women.<sup>33</sup>

The terminology he uses – powerless, moneyless, frustration – are all words I have heard many African American males use to express how they felt on numerous occasions. It is those deep-seated feelings and the reality of economic deprivation that keep many black men from taking the hand of the one they love in marriage. They will not do it because they do not deem it a feasible solution. They feel they can never give the woman all the things she needs or deserves. Unfortunately, other options they choose such as cohabitation or simply having children out of wedlock are far worse than being married and broke, because cohabitation is often short-lived and far less stable than marriage.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Haki R. Madubuti, *Black Men Obsolete, Single, Dangerous? The Afrikan American Family in Transition* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1991), 61.

<sup>34</sup> Janet Dewart, ed., *The State of Black America 1990* (New York: National Urban League, Inc., 1990), 92.



Finally, Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan state that a decline in African American marriage is due to a lack of marriage desirability. While the desire to marry has stayed pretty intact, what has changed is what they call the “normative imperative.” The normative imperative involves the need to marry, stay married, have children and be faithful to one’s spouse. Studies show that this notion has weakened considerably from the 1950’s through the 1980’s.<sup>35</sup> The importance of the data shows that Americans are open to other relationship options and have become increasingly accepting of singlehood. This being the case, most say they desire to marry, but they will get around to it when they get around to it. There is no rush.

### **Cultural Cause: Divorce**

While marriage is on the decline, divorce is on the rise. Sara McLanahan states that divorce rates have been climbing since the turn of the century and have stabilized at very high levels. She writes, “Divorce rates have more than doubled in most countries between 1960 and 1990; in some countries they increased fourfold.”<sup>36</sup> Divorce is probably one of the most vicious causes of father absenteeism where everybody loses, especially the children. Gallagher makes this observation:

Few people realize how difficult it is to transplant the relationships of family life to the impoverished ground of the visiting relationship. One of the sad and surprising truths we are beginning to face is that unmarriage radically alters the

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<sup>35</sup> Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan., 19.

<sup>36</sup> Sara L. McLanahan, “Growing up Without a Father,” Cynthia R. Daniels, ed., *Lost Fathers* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1998), 94.

father-child relationship. The children almost always experience this transformation as a profound loss.<sup>37</sup>

When Dad leaves he may tell his son, “Daddy and Mommy can’t live together, but I will always be there for you, son.” The stark reality is he will not be there, or he will be there in a way that is drastically different from what the child needs. When the father leaves, his finances usually leave. The day-to-day interaction with his children and the emotional contribution leave as well. If the dad happens to marry and adopts a new family, the child may be seen as a drain on the financial resources he needs to support his new family. It is a chilling, cold reality. However, the scenario does occur. Popenoe confirms this reality,

But the larger truth is that most divorced fathers in America, for whatever reason, lose almost all contact with their children over time. They withdraw from their children’s lives. They become terrible fathers. And for those noncustodial men who maintain some contact, the reality that a co-residence between a father and son is necessary, is not always a sufficient basis for sound and effective fatherhood.<sup>38</sup>

Just recently, a close pastor friend of mine attended a funeral of a man in his early forties who had passed away. He attended the service because the man was the former husband of a woman who attends his church and the father of her two sons. Several years ago the man ran off with another woman and divorced his wife. Upon marrying the woman, he neglected his boys. From that time until he died, the man had become a prosperous businessman, but gave his children from the previous marriage nothing. All his money, time and emotion were invested into his new family. Adding to this tragedy was that at the funeral, his two sons by his first wife were not even

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>38</sup> Popenoe, 27.

acknowledged. So my friend was left to minister to two teenage boys who were fatherless while their dad was alive, and now not even acknowledged at his death.

Our culture embraces divorce. It is almost easier to get out of a marriage than it is to enter into one. Television and radio are flooded with advertisements from divorce attorneys who promise to help you attain your just reward from the settlement. Laws have been changed that no longer make it difficult for people to divorce and that allow them a reason to exit the marriage for any excuse. Books line the shelves on how a person can have a healthy divorce. Celebrities are hailed for divorcing a spouse that was not growing as fast as his or her career. It is nothing for a celebrity to be on a second or third marriage. Even persons younger than myself are on their second and third try at marriage. Concerning the cultural upheaval of divorce Popenoe says,

Many family scholars and professionals argue that, because nothing can be done about it, we should accept the divorce culture and adjust accordingly. The dean of American family sociologist, Harvard's William J. Goode said: "We should accept the fact most developed nations can now be seen as high divorce rate systems, and we should institutionalize divorce—accept it as we do other institutions, and build adequate safeguards as well as social understandings and pressures to make it work reasonably well."<sup>39</sup>

Divorce rarely works well. On the contrary, we should revisit the institution of marriage and create safeguards and understandings that will ensure its workability and longevity.

Much more could be said here about the impact of divorce on the lives of children. However, I want to stress the reality that divorce is responsible for millions of fatherless children in our nation. Some of the effects of divorce on children will be discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 28.

### **Increase of Single Motherhood**

Our church, Life Change Christian Center, is located in the Boise-Elliot neighborhood of North Portland. The population of our neighborhood is 3,119. The prominent ethnic group is African American, comprising 32.8 percent of the population, with whites making up 26.7 percent and Hispanics 13.4 percent.<sup>40</sup> The largest family composite in our neighborhood is single-mother households at 21.8 percent, with the majority of these homes consisting of African American mothers. In adjacent neighborhoods female-headed households represent the greatest percentage of family structures as well.<sup>41</sup> This implies that the majority of children in our ministry area do not have fathers living in the home, and that they are African Americans. On a national level Horn and Sylvester write, "Of women entering their childbearing years, half will experience female headship at some point in their childbearing years, compared to the one-third a generation ago. Nearly 80% of all Black women will be the head of their families at some point in their childbearing years."<sup>42</sup>

While the number of single-mother homes has increased for all ethnic groups, the numbers are much higher for African American families. In the Urban League 1990 report on the state of black America, they report that single mothers make up 60 percent of African American family structures.<sup>43</sup> In 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan produced a

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<sup>40</sup> PortlandMaps Detail Report, City of Portland.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>42</sup> Horn and Sylvester, 31.

<sup>43</sup> Dewart, 91.

report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, that sent shock waves throughout America and continues to be a catalyst for discussion concerning the African American family even today. Moynihan's basic contention was that black families and communities were deteriorating, and one of the principal causes was the rising number of female-head homes without a father-husband present. Moynihan's report states,

As a direct result of this high rate of divorce, separation, and desertion, a very large percent of Negro families are headed by females. While the percentage of such families among whites has been dropping since 1940, it has been rising among Negroes. The percent of nonwhite families headed by a female is more than double the percent for whites. Fatherless nonwhite families increased by a sixth between 1950 and 1960, but held constant for white families. It has been estimated that only a minority of Negro children reach the age of 18 having lived all their lives with both of their parents. Once again, this measure of family disorganization is found to be diminishing among white families and increasing among Negro families.<sup>44</sup>

In every type of negative statistic concerning family issues, African Americans appear to be at the top of the chart. This does not mean that all familial and social diseases are perpetrated by single mothers. In the words of Stokely Carmichael, "*The reason we are in the bag we are in is not because of mama, it's because what they did to mama.*"<sup>45</sup> What did they do to mama? A brief inquiry into the institution of slavery may provide a few answers.

For two centuries the iron jaw of slavery ravaged the black family with implications that are still felt today. In his book entitled *Urban Ministry*, David Claerbaut

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<sup>44</sup> Daniel P. Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case For National Action," *Office of Policy Planning and Research United States Department of Labor*, March 1965 [online]; available from <http://www.dol.gov/asp/programs/history/moynchapter2.htm>; accessed 5 April 5, 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Franklin, 165.

writes, “To understand Black American life necessitates sensitivity to these eras, for the present social and economic condition of black America is largely the outgrowth of slavery and segregation.”<sup>46</sup> One of the by-products of slavery was the single mother and the absent father. Slavery forced the matriarch to be the backbone of the family while the black man struggled to exist. Slave owners who used the law for their own greed deliberately crafted this scenario. Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan say, “Colonial slave masters quickly established the right to define and structure the most intimate connections and activities of their slaves and servants, electing to control various aspects of their sexual behavior and family life through power as law makers.”<sup>47</sup>

During this time period the courts were even convinced that the slave owner was given divine order to be the moral guardian over the slave family. Hence, slaves had no legal authority over their children, and the children were named after their owner, not their parents. This made the ultimate allegiance to the master rather than the parents.<sup>48</sup> In 1662 an act was passed that forced black children, regardless of the color or condition of their fathers, to take on the status of their mother. The implications of this law impacted the black family for centuries. First of all, it provided a legal context for matrifocal kinship groups to exist throughout slavery. Second, it allowed slave owners to identify the child with the mother and in many cases to totally ignore the role of the father on all levels.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> David Claerbaut, *Urban Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1983), 151.

<sup>47</sup> Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, 38.

<sup>48</sup> Dorothy Roberts, “The Absent Black Father,” Cynthia R. Daniels, ed., *Lost Fathers* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1998), 148.

<sup>49</sup> Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, 38.

Lorenzo Ivy, a former slave, tells about a typical scenario that often happened to families during slavery. He says,

My master was very good to his slaves, and they thought a great deal of him. But all our happy days were over when he went south and caught the cotton fever.... He tuk two of my aunts an' lef der husbands up heah an' he separated all tergther seven husbands an' wives One 'oman had twelve chillin. Yessuh! Separated dem all an' tuk 'em south wif him to Gregory and Alabamy.<sup>50</sup>

The family unit was broken up by the slave owner, which left the wife widowed and at the helm of the family, with the father up "heah." Patterns etched in two centuries are hard to break. When you add in all the other factors such as economics, education, socialization, racism and sin it makes it even more difficult to break the cycle. The fact that women head most African American families is not difficult to understand, looking from a historical perspective. However, the future need not be like the past; the cycle must be broken and black mothers need to be united with the fathers of their children so that many fatherless children can experience the blessing of a dad.

### **Work**

Work can be another cause of father absenteeism. Mott, Kwaleski-Jones and Meghan cite career demands as a major cause of father absenteeism.<sup>51</sup> One of the traits that mark our society is long hours in the office. Many fathers simply do not take the time to consider that every decision they make to spend long hours at the job is a decision to spend long hours away from their children. Harry Chapin's classic song "Cats in the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 46

<sup>51</sup> Frank L. Mott, Lori Kowaleski-Jones and Elizabeth G. Menaghan. "Effects of Paternal Absence on Male Adolescents' Peer Relations and Self-Image," *Journal of Family and Marriage*, 59 (Winter 1995).

Cradle” captures the essence of this problem. In the song a little boy who is longing to spend time with his father asks his dad the question, “When are ya coming home dad?” To which the dad replies, “I don’t know when, but we will have a good time then, son.” In many cases the “then” comes too late. Swan states that work-related absences “from a child’s perspective” creates a father who is home for sleep and food and is otherwise withdrawn and preoccupied.”<sup>52</sup>

### **Father’s Relationship with the Child’s Mother**

The status of the relationship between the father and the child’s mother can greatly affect the involvement a father has in the life of his child. Jennifer Hamer conducted a study with African American men to determine what inhibits and what enhances their involvement with their children. Hamer<sup>53</sup> concluded it was the relationship with the child’s mother. Through her research she discovered that three types of relationships exist between mothers and nonresident fathers: friendly relationships, intimate relationships and antagonistic relationships. The friendly relationship encourages a father to maintain contact with his children. This relationship allows the father to stay in contact by phone. He is free to ask the mother about the child’s daily activities, and the mother is free to express to the father the child’s daily needs.

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<sup>52</sup> Donald W. Swan, “Influence of Father Absence and Satisfaction with Parents on Selected Measures of Nurturant Fathering.” Psy. D. diss., George Fox College (1996), 61.

<sup>53</sup> Jennifer Hamer, “What African American Noncustodial Fathers Say Inhibits and Enhances Their Involvement With Children.” *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 22 (Summer 1998), 120-25.



The intimate relationship consists of a sexual relationship between the father and the mother. This, however, does not mean the mother and father are monogamous or even intend to get married. The fathers in this situation feel they have a good relationship with their children. The difference between the intimate and the friendly relationship is that the fathers in the intimate relationship feel obligated not only to the child, but to the mother as well. When present, the father is actively involved in all aspects of the child's life. However, this relationship can be volatile, and if the parent relationship becomes strained, so does the father's relationship with his child.

The last relationship is the antagonistic relationship. This relationship characterizes the Hatfield and McCoy family feud. This relationship serves to inhibit and discourage the father's involvement in the child's life. The father may see the mother as simply a gold digger who is out to take him down, simply views her as a bad mother, or sees her as an enemy who is trying to hurt him through the child. In this relationship phone calls are denied, visitation rights are refused and in some cases the mother and child move without telling the father.

The conclusion of the study sees mothers as the gatekeeper, inhibiting or encouraging the role of the father in the child's experience. The blows of a broken relationship can make it hard for a mother or father to keep the door open. Unfortunately, many have made the decision to keep it shut and thereby keep the child from his or her father.

## Teen Pregnancy

Teenage pregnancy is a cause of absent fathers. Teen pregnancy is very problematic from a number of standpoints. First, when a teenage girl becomes pregnant, generally she lacks the economic and sometimes the relational structure to adequately support herself and the child in this life-altering change. Some people have argued that teens have always had children. However, in the 1940's and 50's the majority of teens were married or got married to the father of the child. This is not the case today. If the mother decides to keep the child, she is generally left with all the weight of rearing the child while the father exits the picture. Concerning this development Jean Elshtain writes,

However problematic teen parenting was in the past, for the most part it consisted of two people—mother and father. By contrast teen parenting today means almost invariably single motherhood for young women who are less likely to be prepared for the complex demands of children than their historical sisters.<sup>54</sup>

Elshtain's rationale for her statement is to the breakdown of the current family structures. She believes that the kinship net that existed in yesteryears is not as likely to be in place today. She also believes that the difficulty a young man will have in finding a job to support a family complicates the issue. Also, he lacks the public and political pressure to do the right thing. Tragically, our culture often strokes him for placing another notch on his belt.

The child of a teen mother is at risk statistically to be poor, to be abused, to drop out of school and to be incarcerated. Despite the negative odds, the U.S. has the highest

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<sup>54</sup> Jean Elshtain, "Lost Children," Cynthia R. Daniels, ed., *Lost Fathers* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1998), 128.

rate of teen mothers in the industrial world.<sup>55</sup> In the U.S., 76 percent of all teenage births are out of wedlock, and 74 percent of teen pregnancies in Oregon are out of wedlock.<sup>56</sup> Nine out of ten African-American teen mothers are single and the numbers seem to be growing.<sup>57</sup>

In our community this trend is rampant. From a casual glance you can observe young girls pushing babies in strollers and desiring to play as much as their children. It breaks my heart every time a teen mother comes to me and asks me to dedicate her child. In too many cases I have seen one child get blessed only for the mother to come again with the same request just months down the road. Sadly, besides the possibility of being one of the 9.3 million children who have not legally identified their fathers, later in life the children of teen mothers have a greater chance of being incarcerated, thus perpetuating the cycle of fatherless children.<sup>58</sup>

### **Incarceration**

One day I was going to have my glasses adjusted and ran into the mother of a young girl who attends our church on an infrequent basis. I made some small talk with the mom and told her it was good to have Sue attending our church. Her response was, "You need to really talk to her because last night she lost her mind." The mom went on

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<sup>55</sup> Georgia L. McMurray, "Those of Broader Vision: An African American Perspective on Teenage Pregnancy and Parenting," Janet Dewart, ed. *The State of Black America 1990* (New York: National Urban League, Inc., 1990), 165.

<sup>56</sup> Horn and Sylvester, 171.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

to tell me that her daughter cannot get over the fact that her father is in jail and for the most part will not be getting out for a long time.

Incarceration is a cause of father absenteeism. This is especially the case for black males and children. Roberts writes,

Black fathers are also separated from their families by imprisonment. Blacks, mostly men, make up over half of the one million inmates in American jails. The racial disparity in incarceration rates continues to rise, with nearly eight Blacks in state and federal prisons in 1994 for each White person incarcerated.<sup>59</sup>

Statistics from the Bureau of Justice also shed light on the problem of incarceration for African American males:

1. There are 34 sentenced African American male inmates per 1,000 African American men in the United States, versus only 4 sentenced White male inmates per 1,000 White men.
2. Over the course of a lifetime, 28% of African American men will enter a state or federal prison.<sup>60</sup>

Being incarcerated makes it difficult, if not impossible, to be a father. Even when the father is released from prison, great odds still exist. The need to find employment once discharged and the reintegration process into society provide unique challenges to being an available and good father.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we have discussed several causes of father absenteeism: the historical cause of World War II and other causes such as the cultural shift, volunteer

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<sup>59</sup> Roberts and Daniels, 150.

<sup>60</sup> Mathew Parker, *African American Churches Teaching Our Men Reaching Our Father*, (Detroit: Institute for Black Family Development and Moody Press, 2002), 55.

abandonment, the decline of marriage, divorce, the rise in single mothers, work, the father's relationship with the child's mother, teenage pregnancy and incarceration. While understanding the causes of these problems is important, equally important is the need to understand the impact the absence of a father has on the children who have been abandoned.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### THE IMPACT OF FATHER ABSENTEEISM

#### **Introduction**

In Jeremiah 31:29 the prophet identifies a cultural belief that circulated in the Israelite community. The prophet proclaimed, “In those days people will no longer say, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.’ Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes his own teeth will be set on edge.” His purpose for articulating this widespread belief was to stress that each person would be responsible for his or her own sins. While the prophetic injunction places the moral responsibility on each individual, there is still some truth in the saying. A father’s actions will impact the lives of his children. In this section of the paper, I will endeavor to determine the impact of father absenteeism on the lives of children. In prophetic language, I will discuss how the children’s teeth are being set on edge by the sour grapes of father absenteeism.

It is important to state that not all children are affected in a negative manner when a father is not present. There are many people who have grown up without a father and have done very well in life psychologically, socially and economically. In fact, Leighton Ford in his book on leadership mentions a study by Dr. Pierre Rentchnick. What Rentchnick discovered was that many of the world’s greatest leaders were orphans or had

simply been abandoned by their parents. Some of the names he listed were George Washington, Golda Mier, Alexander the Great and others.<sup>1</sup>

Personally, I know people who have grown up without a father present and though they may not be world leaders they are healthy individuals. The impact on father absenteeism on the lives of people is by no means deterministic. However, there are several identifiable problems and risks that many people face when abandoned by their fathers. And they must grapple with these problems in order to lead a healthy life. In the following pages we will examine the impact of father absenteeism on the lives of people in the areas of pain, poverty, teen pregnancy, violent tendencies, education and the mother-child relationship.

### **Pain**

One injury that father absenteeism inflicts on many lives is pain. Chanessa is a very intelligent and gifted African American young woman who attends our church. She is especially gifted in the area of music and arts. Recently she co-authored a rap song with another young woman describing the pain of not having her father involved in her life. Though the verse to this song is rather lengthy, it does give an insightful view into the pain this young woman experienced through her adolescent and teen years, and with which she is recently just coming to terms. She writes,

Second guessing wondering if my life's a blessing/ when the only thing that connects me to him is a paternity test/ when I prayed for the void to be restored/ I felt ignored till 15 years later he stood at my door/ heart beat racing anticipating to regain what was lost/ a chance to say my father freely quickly changed to cost/

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<sup>1</sup> Leighton, Ford, *Transforming Leadership: Jesus' Way of Creating Vision, Shaping Values and Empowering Change* (Downers Grove: Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 41.

no explanation only hesitation on why he didn't stay/ just said he wasn't ready the daddy role he couldn't play/ yet 8 years after I arrived a wife stood by his side/ and the seed he once neglected her womb now occupied/ but it didn't stop there two more years and a son appeared/ I wonder if I ever crossed his mind then/ now nearly a stranger he chose to hold my hand/ be a friend but I'm still looking for the father in that man/ I need more than provision cause all along God's had my back/ anything necessary for me to have I never lacked/ although your firstborn I feel like a stepchild/ you didn't raise me, I'm not priority but for your other two you'd go the extra mile/ if I ever really needed you I wouldn't dare ask for your help/ cause I'm already the antique you've placed on the back shelf/ though you say I make you proud you know nothing about me/ tell me my favorite food, favorite color, you know the simple things/ I guess when it comes down to it none of that really matters if you know nothing else you know that Christ is the reason I've lasted,/ now I'm not trying to accuse you for my disappointments for it's I who battles with rejection and being illegitimate/ I just thought that when you came I'd receive my natural inheritance/ but ever since you came I've only been second best/ and the rest of the story grows old as the years stretch longer/ your silent presence making me stronger/ to me this only proves how your title is just a guardian/ cause to me God is Daddy but you're simply my father.<sup>2</sup>

The distinctive causes of Chanessa's pain are obvious: the rejection, the abandonment, the disappointment, the emptiness and finally the hopelessness. She concludes her father simply will not come around and be the Daddy she has always desired.

In *Whatever Happened to Daddy's Little Girl?* Barras tells her pain of not having a father present. She writes,

I know fatherlessness. I know the emptiness it creates, the years searching for something to fill the void, looking for a substitute to make me whole. I know the insecurity; the endless battles that are recreated with each new relationship—battles that are never won; the pain that resurfaces after the departure of each man in my life. I wanted women to understand the distinct patterns of sadness, insecurity, confusion and unresolved pain that connects those of us who experience a father's loss either through death, divorce, or abandonment.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Charnetta Hutson and Chanessa Jackson, "Daddy's Girl." Song. 2000, Portland, Oregon.

<sup>3</sup> Jonetta Rose Barras, *Whatever Happened to Daddy's Little Girl?* (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2000).



Notice that there are distinct similarities between Chanessa's and Barras' pain. The void, the insecurities and the hopelessness are pangs that both of these women express. Though these two women have never met and are born in different environments and are different in age, father absenteeism unites them in a song of pain.

The pain caused by father absence is not isolated to women and girls; boys and men are equally affected. There have been several times during services, prayer meetings in our church, and in one-on-one conversations where I have had boys and men break down in my arms and cry because they had no father in their lives. I remember a conversation I had with Hank, a young man in his early twenties. Our conversation turned to his upbringing, and when he began to talk about his father he fell on the floor and began to sob like a baby. Hank's father had abandoned him and his family when he was a very young child and the emotions and all the issues of not having his father around seemed to come tumbling down upon him during our conversation. Donald Swan writes about the emotional impact a father's absence can have on boys prior to age six. He states,

According to Johnson (1993) emotional correlates of father absence are more prominent when the absence occurred prior to age 6. Examples include intense anger and lower self-control. Childhood psychopathology included nightmares, bed-wetting, withdrawal, fears and somatic complaints. Emotional symptoms were found to be markedly more severe in boys than in girls.<sup>4</sup>

All the symptoms Swan mentioned point to one thing – the child's pain. However, the pain that a boy experiences in childhood does not stay localized there. In many instances

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<sup>4</sup> Donald W. Swan, "Influence of Father Absence and Satisfaction with Parents on Selected Measures of Nurturant Fathering." Psy. D. diss., George Fox College (1996), 53,54.

the pain is carried on into his teen years and into adulthood which then has the potential to generate a myriad of other issues which will be discussed shortly.<sup>5</sup>

One primary reason for the pain caused by father absenteeism is due to “father hunger.” Robert McGee who is the founder of Rapha, a nationally recognized health care organization which provides care for people suffering from psychiatric and substance abuse problems, describes father hunger. McGee defines it as emptiness, an unfulfilled desire, a gnawing deep within one’s spirit and a continual craving to experience love from one’s father.<sup>6</sup> Maggie Gallagher speaks of father hunger in this fashion,

It’s an ache in the heart, a gnawing anxiety in the gut. It’s a longing for a man, not just for a woman, who will care for you, protect you, and show you how to survive in the world. For a boy especially, it’s the raw, persistent, desperate hunger for dependable male love, and an image of maleness that is not at odds with love: Father hunger.<sup>7</sup>

Father hunger affects individuals in the deepest levels of their being. It is like physical hunger – when food is not available for long periods of time, pain and anguish is experienced. When an individual longs for the love of a father and the father is not present to meet the need, emotional, psychological and social hunger pains can and do strike, leaving the child or adult to wrestle with the pain. Today many people are feeling the hunger pains and are trying desperately to stop the growling.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert S. McGee, *Father Hunger* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books, 1993), 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Maggie Gallagher, “Father Hunger,” Cynthia R. Daniels, ed., *Lost Fathers* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1998), 165.

## Poverty

A friend of mine, Curtis Kimbrough, wrote his life story in a book entitled *How I Got Over!* In the opening pages of the book, Curtis gives a snapshot of his childhood. Aspects of his story are key in the discussion of the impact of father absenteeism as it relates to poverty. Curtis was born in Indianapolis where he lived with his mother and siblings. He lived in what he describes as an ugly concrete three-story building called “The Projects.” His family shared the second floor with five other families, which were mostly poor or lower middle-class. While Curtis says that he has fond memories of Lockfield Gardens, he says he can still remember families arguing and fighting and teenagers hanging out in the hallways sniffing glue from paper bags. Since he was the second youngest, he looked to his older siblings for protection and guidance, even though they also were children.

When Curtis was about two, his father left home. His father, whom he calls Buck, had a bad drinking problem and his mother refused to put up with it, so out he went. A few years later, the couple tried to reconcile but it only lasted for a couple of days. Curtis’ father, Buck, eventually died in his forties from the effects of alcoholism. Curtis’ mother worked hard to support the family, working long hours and frequently. She worked nights, which meant the kids were required to take care of themselves during the day. To provide clothing for the family she frequented the Goodwill. Curtis went on to say that during those days they ate a lot of cornbread, beans and mayonnaise sandwiches. He also

adds that though they were poor the suffering was minimized by his mother's and others' efforts.<sup>8</sup>

Curtis' story communicates a reality that exists in the lives of many fatherless children. The reality is poverty. Statistics show that single female-headed homes are at a greater risk of poverty than the rest of the general population. America's Children: Indicator of Well-Being, 2001 states, "Children in father absent homes are five times more likely to be poor. In 1999, 8 percent of children of married couples were living in poverty, compared to the 42 percent of children in female-householder families."<sup>9</sup>

Compounding the issue is the fact that single mothers are not only more prone to experience poverty, but the severity of their poverty is greater. Also, single mothers are more likely to experience persistent poverty. Bane and Ellwood (1983) conducted a study that showed that during the late 1970's the average length of time a child spent in poverty in a single-mother home was seven years compared to the 4.6 years for children who lived in two-parent families. For black children the difference was even greater. Twelve years was the average for black children of single-headed female homes compared to six years for two-parent households.<sup>10</sup>

As in the case of Curtis' family, divorce usually places a greater economic strain on the mother than on the father. The mother is generally left with the children, and women's earning power and opportunities are generally slimmer than they are for men.

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<sup>8</sup> Curtis Kimbrough, *How I Got Over!* (Portland: AYWN Publications, 2001), 13-17.

<sup>9</sup> Wade F. Horn and Tom Sylvester, *Father Facts* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Gaithersburg, Maryland: The National Fatherhood Initiative, 2002), 131.

<sup>10</sup> Althea C. Huston, *Children in Poverty: Child Development and Public Policy*, Sara L. McLanahan, Nan Marie Astone, and Nadine F. Marks, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54.

So the divorced woman is hit with a double dilemma. One, she has to raise the children on substantially less income than what she had when the husband was present. Second, she loses half of her support network and has to find other avenues to adequately care for the children while she works a job that usually inadequately supports her household. Studies show that following a divorce, a woman and her children's income drops about 40 percent. Their living standards fall about two-thirds below their previous levels. On the other hand, the man's income dips only 15 percent, and he is slightly better off the year following the divorce than he was the previous year.<sup>11</sup>

Hence, the child support wars rage. In my ministry I have had numerous conversations with struggling mothers who are trying to get the dad to pay at least a portion of child support. And the things that some men do to avoid paying child support are quite disturbing. Studies show that fathers are generally obligated to pay 17 percent of their income for one child and 25 percent for two. In 1991 \$11.9 billion was paid while \$17.7 billion remained uncollected. If court orders matched fathers' ability to pay, the amount owed would be close to \$50 billion.<sup>12</sup> Dead-beat dads are difficult to resuscitate, and children are suffering while the mothers and legislation struggle to make these fathers provide monetary resources for their offspring.

Poverty is an evil in the lives of children because of the positive things it excludes them from. In many cases poverty forbids children from growing up in a healthy environment with decent housing. Curtis' story illustrates the inability to provide a place

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 37, 38.

<sup>12</sup> Kris Kissman, "Noncustodial Fatherhood: Research Trends and Issues," *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 1-2 (1997), 78.

to live in a safe and healthy environment. A family with means is not going to live in a complex where families constantly fight, kids openly do drugs in the hallways and violence is commonplace outside the front door. Most of us would try to get our family out of that environment the same day we entered it. The child in poverty is not afforded that option, nor is his mother. They simply have to stick it out and make the best of a situation where the odds are greatly stacked against them. In many instances poverty also forbids them good medical and health care. L.V. Klerman listed several conditions that are found more in poor children who were a part of a household whose income was less than \$10,000 annually. In children of families whose income was \$35,000 annually, these health issues were less frequent. Klerman found that children who are poor are more likely to experience:

1. Infectious diseases, such as rheumatic fever, hemophilus influenza, meningitis, gastroenteritis, and parasitic diseases. Other diseases for which there are vaccines are also more widespread, due to a lower immunization status. Also AIDS is found more often in poor children because of the mother's drug use.
2. Vision and hearing problems are found more often in poor children, as well as dental problems.
3. Psychosocial and psychosomatic problems are greater in poor children. Studies show that there is a link between income and some of the emotional and behavioral problems.
4. Lead poisoning is also problematic. Inner city, underprivileged kids have the highest levels of Pb-B levels in their blood.
5. Lastly, poor children have the greatest rate of intentional injuries. Families with incomes under \$15,000 experience a higher rate of physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Also they experience a greater degree of emotional and educational neglect.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 140-142.

The problem of poverty is that not only does it make a child more vulnerable to a plethora of carcinogens, but it also limits his or her ability to break out of the vicious cycle. Children of poverty have fewer opportunities and many will lack the necessary substance to succeed in a world where dollars and cents can affect their welfare and destiny.

### **Teen Pregnancy**

Charnetta is another very gifted and talented young woman who attends Life Change Christian Center. Like Chanessa, she too was raised without the healthy involvement of a father in her life. She experiences the pain described in the previous paragraphs. However, Charnetta mentions something else that is highly significant. In their song, *Daddy's Girl*, she talks about her father and his drug addictions. She talks about the times he gave her gifts only to come and take them back the next day to buy drugs. She talks about going to the jail to visit her father, and the problems and the turmoil associated with those weekend visits. However, it is not so much what she saw that hurt her, but what she lacked. She writes,

I represent the Bobbie-socks, butterfly berets/ poke-a-dot shirts, with the jordache jean set, with polo on my chest/ blue member only jacket still profiling with my knicker pants and vest/ but the quest to my identity went deeper than how I dressed/ I was confused with the presentation of my father concepts/ to be known of but not seen was pretty hard to digest/ Heroin was the monkey that jumped on my father's back/ strapped him to a needle and put a pipe on his lap/ once he brought me a stereo/ but the next day he stole it back/ I got jacked/ only to be a witness to my father almost overdose on crack/ yet the purpose of these words is not what I saw but what I lacked/ ***I had a tendency to confuse love for sex/ turned a lie into truth and had a problem with commitment/*** My family activity

was a weekly visit to a prison/ this is how my younger days was spent/ my example of a father was a drug addicted pimp turned convict.<sup>14</sup>

What she lacked was genuine unconditional love from a good male role model. The result was twofold. First, she had a tendency to confuse love for sex, and second she had a problem with commitment. These two elements alone usually lead to teen pregnancy and single motherhood.

Charnetta's tendency to confuse love for sex is not uncommon among teenage girls who have grown up with no father in the home. In their study on the effects of father absenteeism on female development and college attendance, Krohn and Bogan state, "Adolescent girls raised in fatherless households are far more likely to engage in promiscuous sexual activity before marriage, to cohabit, to get pregnant out of wedlock and to have an abortion."<sup>15</sup> McLanahan states that the teen birth risk for girls in average two-parent white families with some college education is 8 percent, while the risk for one-parent average white homes is 22 percent. In black homes the average risk is 26 percent for two-parent households and 40 percent for average one-parent families.

McLanahan lists risk factors for girls whose parents are disadvantaged, meaning the parents have less than a high school education. For one-parent homes these numbers are more staggering and closer together for whites, blacks and Hispanics. The risk factors for teen pregnancy among this demographic for whites are 19 percent for two-parent and 44 percent for one-parent households. For blacks, there is a 29 percent teen pregnancy

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<sup>14</sup> Hutson and Jackson, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Franklin B. Krohn and Zoe Bogan, "The Effects Absent Fathers Have on Female Development and College Attendance," *College Student Journal*, vol. 35 Issue 4, December 2001 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.ephost@epnet.com>; Internet; accessed 17 October 2002.



risk for two-parent and 45 percent for one-parent households. For Hispanics it is a 24 percent risk for two-parent homes and a 46 percent risk of teen pregnancy for one-parent homes.<sup>16</sup> A teenage girl with a father has a lesser risk of becoming a mother than the teenage girl who does not have a father in the home.

Charnetta's song also speaks of a problem with commitment. Without commitment there can be no lasting relationships, let alone a long-term marriage. Studies show that girls who have little contact with their fathers, especially during adolescence, have great difficulties forming lasting relationships with men. In some cases, they may shy away from males altogether, or they become sexually aggressive. Krohn and Bogan say that girls with involved fathers learn how to act in relationships with males because they can use the father-daughter relationship as a model.<sup>17</sup> In our community there is not the pattern of shying away from men, but in many cases the aggression is displayed. Often I see a young woman having multiple children by different men. Commitment is not even in the picture. Hence the cycle is perpetrated over and over again. Another girl child that will be born without an involved father risks becoming pregnant as a teen as much as or perhaps more than her mother.

### **Crime & Violence**

CBS aired on *60 Minutes* an interview with a young man in prison named Sanyika Shakur, a.k.a., Kody Scott, "The Monster." Shakur was a notorious gang leader in South

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<sup>16</sup> E. Mavis Hetherington, *Coping with Divorce, Single Parenting and Remarriage: A Risk and Resiliency Perspective*, ed. Sara L. McLanahan, (Mahaw, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999), 122.

<sup>17</sup> Krohn and Bogan

Central Los Angeles. At the time of the interview Shakur was twenty-nine years old. For at least sixteen of his twenty-nine years, he was involved in crime and violence. He earned the name “Monster” at age 13 when he stomped a robbery victim for twenty minutes leaving him in a coma and permanently disfigured. His life of crime consisted of robberies, murders and other sorts of illicit activities. During the interview Kroft questioned Shakur about his reason for living a life of delinquency and violence. Kroft said to him, “You don’t have the typical excuses or reasons, you didn’t grow up in the projects, you had a very strong mother and your father is...” At which point Shakur abruptly replied, “Absent! Missing in action....” Shakur’s biological father was a professional football player. His father’s fame meant nothing to Shakur because he went on to say, “While my father was on the football field, I was on the streets and he never came.” At this point, Shakur with his hands chained, placed his head down and began to rub his face on his shirt to wipe away his tears.<sup>18</sup> This is the only time Shakur showed any type of remorse or sorrow in the interview, even when asked about the number of people he killed and other gruesome details. No tears flowed. Only when asked about his father did he cry and forsake his “cool” demeanor. To say that the absence of Shakur’s father was the total driving force behind his life of crime and violence is a debatable statement. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the absence of his father factored into the equation.

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<sup>18</sup> Susan Faludi, “Ghetto Star ‘Monster’ Kody Scott and the Culture of Ornament,” *LA Weekly*, 8-14 (October, 1999) ([laweekly.com](http://laweekly.com)).

Over the last several decades, social scientists have indicated a link between adolescent crime and father absence. In a study by Rodney and Mupier they state that violent children are 11 times more likely not to live with fathers and six times more likely to have unmarried parents. In many cases they assumed that children who are in this category are being raised in non-nurturing environments and lack the blessing of an effective masculine role model.<sup>19</sup> In the same fashion African American boys who live in father-absent homes or who are in situations with poor parent relationships were found to exhibit low self-esteem, field-dependant behavior and hypermasculinity.<sup>20</sup> A father's presence helps to curb criminal behavior.<sup>21</sup> David Popenoe makes several observations linking the rise of juvenile crime to fatherlessness. He states that since 1960 the crime rate has soared in America by 550 percent with youth making the greatest statistical contribution. Referring to data from the National Father Initiative, Popenoe states that in "America, 60 percent of all rapists, 72 percent of adolescent murders, and 70 percent of long-term prison inmates come from fatherless homes."<sup>22</sup>

Serving as a pastor, I have had to deal with a number of young men who have committed serious crimes, ranging from murder to petty thefts. In most of these cases, these African American young men have no or very limited father involvement in their

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<sup>19</sup> Elaine H. Rodney and Robert Mupier, "Behavioral Differences Between African American Male Adolescents With Biological Fathers and Those Without Biological Fathers in the Home," *Journal of Black Studies* vol. 30, September 1999 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.ephost@epnet.com>; Internet; accessed 17 October 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Deborah A. Salem, Marc A Zimmerman and Paul C. Notaro. "The Effects of Family Structure, Family Process and Father Involvement on Psychosocial Outcomes Among African American Adolescents," *Family Relations* 47, October 1998 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.ephost@epnet.com>; Internet; accessed 17 October 2002.

<sup>22</sup> David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (New York: Martin Kessler Books/The Free Press, 1996), 62,63.

lives. In his article *All My Friends are Dying*, Larry Elder views illegitimacy as a problematic ill that is negatively affecting our society. He makes a correlation between fatherlessness and crime as well. He contends that one of the primary reasons for crime, especially among young blacks, is absentee fathers. He writes, "Absentee, noninvolved fathers are the primary reason behind the Department of Justice statistics showing that 32 percent of young blacks possess criminal records versus the percent of their white counterparts."<sup>23</sup>

In our church, a large portion of families either have a male family member in jail or have had a male family member incarcerated. The reality of this statistic hits home. I am also disturbed because of the possibility of future implications. Currently, 62 percent of all African American children live in single-parent homes. Ninety percent of those homes are female-headed and 40 percent are under poverty level, according to the 2000 U.S. Census Data. If past performance is indicative of future behavior, the years to come will produce a great deal of concern in crime among youth.

When a father is present in the home, he has the opportunity to help shape and develop the child's life in an up close and personal way. He has the opportunity to be a good role model for the child. He has the opportunity to teach his child empathy, respect and wholesome social values. When the father is absent, this natural platform for training is drastically altered. In a study by Lee Beaty, he discusses the effects of paternal absence on male adolescents and peer relationships. He states the greatest negative impact occurs on the child's life when the father leaves prior to age five, and that the greatest impact is

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<sup>23</sup> Larry Elder, "All My Friends Are Dying", *Human Events* 57, 21 (June 2001).

on boys. He writes that when these children grow older they tend to exhibit tendencies that cause them to be more dependant upon their peers and more ambiguous about masculinity, to disfavor competitive games and sports, and to engage in more aggressive behavior towards females. For boys whose fathers are absent there is clear evidence that they are prone to take less satisfactory behavioral paths. The rationale for these tendencies is the lack of an appropriate male role model in early childhood.<sup>24</sup>

In the same study Beaty also mentioned a study by Lamb which makes reference to how paternal absences affect relationships among adolescent boys. He stresses the point that peers supply a strong role model for boys. This is a crucial insight because if a young person's peer network espouses a criminal and violent element, that youth is going to be influenced to engage in antisocial behavior. However, if the father is present, there is a chance he can speak and influence the child positively, and thus slow down the rise in juvenile crime and violence. The ancient sage writes,

My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them. If they say, "Come along with us; let's lie in wait for someone's blood, let's waylay some harmless soul; let's swallow them alive, like the grave, and whole, like those who go down to the pit; we will get all sorts of valuable things and fill our houses with plunder; throw in your lot with us, and we will share a common purse"-- my son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths; for their feet rush into sin, they are swift to shed blood. How useless to spread a net in full view of all the birds! These men lie in wait for their own blood; they waylay only themselves! Such is the end of all who go after ill-gotten gain; it takes away the lives of those who get it (Prov. 10:1-18).

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<sup>24</sup> Lee A. Beaty, "The Effects of Paternal Absence on Male Adolescents' Peer Relationships and Self-Image," *Adolescence*, 30, 120, Winter 1995 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.ephost@epnet.com>; Internet; accessed 17 October 2002.

In my community we have too many young men losing their lives for ill-gotten gain. We need fathers to take them as little boys and not simply tell them to stop, but to model and show them how to not ever get involved.

### **Education**

Fathers play a key role in the educational success of their children. Children do better in school when their father is present. Evidence clearly shows that when two parents are present, a child has a much greater chance of succeeding in school. Children in one-parent households statistically have lower grade-point averages and a lesser desire to go to college. One reason for the increased success rate is children of two-parent households are more likely to stay in school. The dropout rate for children in single-parent homes is greater than two-parent homes. For single-parent homes the high school dropout rate is 29 percent compared to 13 percent in two-parent families.<sup>25</sup> Also, children living apart from their biological parents are four times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than those children living with both parents.<sup>26</sup> A child cannot excel in school if he or she is not in school, and fathers along with mothers are an integral part of helping a child stay in school.

A second reason why a father is essential to a child's education is that he minimizes distractions. In early years the gnawing distraction of the pain of not having Dad around can be an issue that moves a child's concentration from the classroom setting

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<sup>25</sup> Sara L. McLanahan, "Growing up without a Father," Cynthia R. Daniels; ed., *Lost Fathers* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1998), 86-87.

<sup>26</sup> Rodney and Mupier

to trying to solve adult problems in an adult world, which he or she has no power to change. This creates emotional distress that is hard enough for adults to work through, let alone children. If the father is present and involved in the child's life, that particular emotional dissonance is absent and it allows the child to function more effectively in school.

In an article entitled *Fatherhood in the Twenty-First Century*, the authors reiterate this point by making a couple of observations. They state:

1. During middle school years children whose fathers are involved in their education do better academically and enjoy school more.
2. In adolescence closer ties with fathers are associated with more desirable educational, behavioral and emotional outcomes.<sup>27</sup>

The presence of the father minimizes the distraction and pain of not having a father and allows the child to enjoy school more.

The father's financial contribution also plays a role in his children's education. In her paper entitled, "Life Without Father: What Happens to Children?" McLanahan states that in 1995 the U.S Census reported that the median income level for two-parent homes was \$50,000, while under \$18,000 was the median for single-mother households which make up more than half of those living in poverty.<sup>28</sup> A child is impacted because the poorer a child, the poorer the quality of education. The better schools are generally located in more economically affluent neighborhoods. You hardly ever hear of a parent intentionally sending their child to a struggling inner city school in order to enable them

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<sup>27</sup> Natasha J. Cabrera, Catherin S. Tamis-LeMonda, Robert H. Bradley, Sandra Hofferth and Michael E. Lamb, "Fatherhood in the Twenty-First Century," *Child Development*, 71 (Jan/Feb 2000), 128.

<sup>28</sup> Sara McLanahan, "Life Without Father: What Happens to the Children?" (15 August 2001) [A working paper] Princeton University.

to get a good education. The income level of the parent affects where a child attends. The absence of a father diminishes the family's income, which in turn increases the risk of a negative educational experience for the child.

In a study on the effects of father absenteeism on female college students, Krohn and Bogan show that women who grow up without a father in many cases will forgo college for a paycheck.<sup>29</sup> The women have watched their mothers struggle for years and beg for money in court for child support, and so they vow they will never allow themselves to be placed in that position. Getting a job and a paycheck represents freedom for them. As a result they reduce their value in the market place and in many cases end up with jobs that do not pay very well.

Finally, fathers can help with behavioral problems. A few years ago a film came out called *Lean On Me*. It was the true story of a man by the name of Joe Clark. He transformed a delinquent high school into a place of learning and education. In order for the transformation to occur, the first tall order Clark faced was to bring discipline to the school. The teachers could not teach because the kids were totally out of control. Once the kids calmed down and learned to behave correctly, the teachers were able to teach them. As Zimmerman, Salem and Notaro state, fathers play a key role in reducing problematic behaviors in their children, especially boys.<sup>30</sup> When the father is absent, the child is more apt to be in the principal's office, skipping school, in fights, and in trouble with the law. If a father is present, he can help direct the child in the correct way.

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<sup>29</sup> Krohn and Bogan, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Salem, Zimmerman, and Notaro, 16-17.



Chances are the child will be able to function at school, and more teachers will be able to be teachers and not correction officers.

### **Mother-Child Relationship**

If a father is absent, the relationship a child has with his or her mother can be affected. McLanahan states,

A father's absence may also affect the quality of the mother-child relationship. The economic hardship and insecurity of single motherhood can bring on depression and psychological distress, thereby interfering with good motherhood. Even among middle-class families, the departure of the father can trigger disruptions in the household routines such as meals and bedtime, and undermine discipline. With their time, energy, and spirit stretched thin, some single mothers become too lenient and others become too rigid or strict. Neither mothering style bodes well for children.<sup>31</sup>

A person only has so much to give before he or she is stretched too thin. In Curtis' story his mom was not home much of the time because she had to work. Though she did a great job with her kids, there were things she wanted to do and times she wanted to be with them, but could not because of the other demands. Just recently, I was involved in a situation where a couple of young girls got into a squabble with a local convenience store owner. We ended up having to call the girls' mother. The mom left her job and came to the store to straighten out the situation. When we were leaving the store, the mom was not only troubled by the incident, but also expressed with great disappointment to her young daughter that this incident cost her a specific amount of money. That is a lot of

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<sup>31</sup>McLanahan, 4.

pressure. That type of pressure can and does affect a mother's relationship with the children. When a father is present he can help buffer some of the stressful aspects of parenting, thus giving the mom a much needed break to recoup and interact with the kids in a more refreshed and less stressful fashion.

### **Conclusion**

Father absenteeism is a significant dagger, inflicting injury on our children. It is obvious from the data that other factors such as the environment, culture, poverty and education play a role in the problems I have discussed. However, the fact cannot be denied that the absence of fathers does make a massive contribution to the social and psychological mayhem that is impacting our children. Issues such as psychological pain, poverty, teenage pregnancy, violence and educational problems all have seeds of absentee fathers in their soil. By understanding how father absenteeism impacts children, we are better able to do something about it. Knowing is half the battle. Now that we are aware of some of the impacts of father absenteeism on the life of the children, we are prepared to consider what to do about it. For Christians, gaining a biblical perspective on fatherhood is a necessary starting point, which is the burden of the next two chapters.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON FATHERHOOD: THE OLD TESTAMENT

#### **Introduction**

In chapter 14 of John's Gospel, Philip petitions Jesus to show him and the other disciples the Father. Jesus responds to Philip's request by pointing to himself as an exact representation of the Father. He boldly tells Philip, "If you have seen me you have seen the father" (John 14:8). In our culture there are many people who have not seen the Son. In other words, they have not yet had the experience of living in a vital relationship with Jesus Christ. Therefore, they may have an unbiblical perspective of God the Father and of the role and responsibilities of earthly fathers as well. It is easy for a person's definition of the father concept to be colored by his or her own experience with a father, whether it is in a positive or negative light. Sigmond Freud believed this. He wrote: "God is in every case modeled after the father, and that our personal relation to God is dependent upon our relationship with our physical father, fluctuating and changing with him, and that God at the bottom is nothing but an exalted father."<sup>1</sup> While I disagree with Freud's basic premise that God is no more than an exalted father, I do agree with him on the notion that an earthly father can help to color a child's view of God the Father.

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmond Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmond Freud*, vol. 13, *Totem and Taboo* (London: Hogarth Press, 1913), 244.

Also, culture plays an important role in coloring one's perspective on fathering. In some segments of our culture, a father is defined as a hardened dictator who rules over his wife and kids with an iron fist. In other segments of our society the father may be viewed as a nonessential part of the family unit. Hence Philip's request for Jesus to show us the Father has merit, especially in light of the fatherless crisis facing our society today.

There are several reasons why a biblical perspective on fatherhood is needed. First of all, there is a need to have a clear picture of God as father. We have a tendency to define God as father by anthropology as opposed to biblical theology. It is very easy for us to say God is like this or that based upon our experience, cultural values and mores. The danger of our assumptions is that in some cases the Scriptures may not verify our claims. A biblical perspective will allow God to define himself to us as father through his own Word. Second, a biblical perspective on fatherhood will enable us to discover the attributes God possesses as father and will aid earthly fathers in understanding what attributes are necessary for them to be good fathers as well. Third, a biblical perspective on fatherhood will enable fathers to determine the basic responsibilities or duties that are required of them by the Scriptures. Finally, and most importantly for this study, a biblical perspective will aid the faith community in understanding their responsibility in helping to father the fatherless.

To accomplish the task of gaining a biblical perspective on fatherhood, this chapter will examine a few key aspects of fathering in the Old Testament. The areas to be covered are as follows: (1) God as Father in the Old Testament; (2) the attributes of God

as Father in the Old Testament; (3) the roles of earthly fathers in the Old Testament; and (4) the responsibility of the faith community to the fatherless in the Old Testament.

As these areas are explored, the goal is that we will be able to see the Heavenly Father more clearly and have a better biblical understanding on what it means to be a good earthly father as well.

### **God as Father in the Old Testament**

In *The Promise of the Father*, Marianne Thompson identifies four primary ways God is revealed as father in the Old Testament. One strand of revelation states that God is the father of Israel. He is the founder, and he is the one who initiated and brought the nation of Israel into being. Second, he is seen as the father who gives an inheritance to his first-born son, Israel. As a good father, God's inheritance provides hope for his children in their present situation and provision for their future. Generally in the Old Testament, God's inheritance for Israel is in the form of land. Third, he is revealed as the loving, compassionate father who at times is required to discipline his children when they walk in disobedience. Fourth, God is seen a few times as the one who makes a father promise to the king.<sup>2</sup> The implication of the father promise is that it portrays God as a father to an individual as opposed to being a father to the nation. These four dimensions that Thompson highlights provide scaffolding for developing a biblical understanding of God as father in the Old Testament. To begin, I will discuss God as the father, initiator, founder, and begetter of the nation Israel.

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<sup>2</sup> Marianne M. Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 40-48.

It is interesting to note that nowhere in the book of Genesis is God revealed or mentioned as father. In Genesis, he is revealing himself as the God of their fathers (i.e., the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). However, there is no direct reference to God himself being a father to anyone. Although he is the Creator in Genesis, he is not viewed as the Father. In fact there are only eleven places in the Old Testament where God is designated as father.<sup>3</sup> Exodus 4:22-23 provides the first reference to God as father in the Old Testament. Though the word “father” is not mentioned in the verse, the language suggests a metaphor of a father and son relationship. The Scripture reads, “Then say to Pharaoh, This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, Let my son go, so he may worship me. But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.” Jeremiah 31:9 also speaks of Israel as being God’s son, only in this passage the fatherhood of God is not metaphorically implied. He states, “They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son.” In a biblical context, it is key to note the fact that God was responsible for Israel being his son. God was responsible for calling, choosing, delivering and blessing Israel. Israel’s formation and selection was divinely initiated. Israel did not choose Yahweh; Yahweh chose Israel and formed the nation. Isaiah 64:8-9 reiterates this point by describing God as the potter and Israel as his creation, the work of his hands. Isaiah says, “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 20.

the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people.” Stressing the same point, but in the form of a reprimand is Deuteronomy 32:6, “Is this the way you repay the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?”

The beauty of God’s forming a people for himself is that they are formed for a purpose. Yahweh formed Israel to communicate his purpose on earth and to demonstrate his love for humanity. God’s purpose was to redeem all humanity unto himself in the context of a loving and vital relationship. This is a radically different viewpoint compared to the other religious beliefs in antiquity who had a concept of gods as fathers, but the gods of those beliefs were not of the same character, power, and goodness as Yahweh. In comparing the gods of antiquity to Yahweh, Miller states,

In many of their myths, in any case, fathers present problems. Their marginality, cruelty, incompetence, or powerlessness, more often than not poses dilemmas to which mother, son or daughter deities must respond either by defending themselves or taking action upon the universe in their stead. Only in the biblical myth, it seems is there a divine father who is a major force of good in the world.<sup>4</sup>

God then as father is the begetter of his children for a reason. Not just to produce, but for a purpose. Fatherhood is purposeful. Because Yahweh is a good father, his function as father does not stop with simply initiating a people; he is also committed to providing an inheritance for his chosen son Israel.

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<sup>4</sup> John W. Miller, *Biblical Faith and Fathering: Why We Call God “Father”* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 43.

Second, God is revealed as a father who provides an inheritance for his son, Israel. Thompson stresses this truth by stating the following,

For to think of God as a head of a clan or a family also implies that God bequeaths an inheritance to his offspring. Not only does the God who is father call people together, but the relationship does not end there. For just as a human father provides an inheritance to his firstborn son, so God provides Israel, God's "firstborn," with an inheritance.<sup>5</sup>

In the Israelite community passing on the blessing or inheritance to the firstborn was significant. The act of the father passing on the blessing to his eldest son was a major part of the ancient concept of paternity. Concerning the importance of the bequeathing of a father's inheritance to his son, Hamerton-Kelly writes,

The father's blessing passed on to his eldest son is a major part of the ancient concept of paternity, as the drama of Isaac, Jacob and Esau testifies (Genesis 27 and 28). In Genesis 27 and 28 Jacob receives his father's blessing, albeit by treachery (unlike Moses in Exodus 3), lives his life in power and blessing and presumably passes it on to his descendants.<sup>6</sup>

The blessing or inheritance in ancient times was viewed as a way to be assured of blessing and success in one's life and endeavors. The question must be asked then, as to what type of inheritance Yahweh provided for Israel. While there is some variance in the nature of the Israel's inheritance, in most instances the inheritance is viewed as land.<sup>7</sup>

Several Scriptures speak of land as being Israel's inheritance. Exodus 32:13 says, "Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever."

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<sup>5</sup> Thompson, 43.

<sup>6</sup> Hamerton-Kelly, 30.

<sup>7</sup> Thompson, 44.



Leviticus 20:24 reiterates the inheritance theme, “But I said to you, “You will possess their land; I will give it to you as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey.” I am the LORD your God, who has set you apart from the nations.” Numbers 26:52-56 speaks of God’s inheritance of land to Israel as well.

The LORD said to Moses, The land is to be allotted to them as an inheritance based on the number of names. To a larger group give a larger inheritance, and to a smaller group a smaller one; each is to receive its inheritance according to the number of those listed. Be sure that the land is distributed by lot. What each group inherits will be according to the names for its ancestral tribe. Each inheritance is to be distributed by lot among the larger and smaller groups.

While land was the typical inheritance for Israel, God himself was their inheritance as well. All the tribes with the exception of Levi were to receive portions of land. For Levi the inheritance was different. They were to receive no land as an inheritance due to the fact that God himself was to be their inheritance. The word of the Lord to Aaron in Numbers 18:20-21 articulates succinctly the Lord as being the Levites’ inheritance. The Scripture states,

The LORD said to Aaron, “You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites. I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the Tent of Meeting.

It is interesting to note here that not only is God the Levites’ inheritance, but God also refers to Israel as being his own inheritance (1Sam.10:1; Is 19:25; Jer.10:16). This shows that there is a unique relationship between God and Israel. The uniqueness of this relationship demonstrates that God values his relationship with his people. His people are a precious and valuable treasure in his sight. In the context of this relationship, God the father will continue to provide for his people in a loving and faithful manner. In

a like manner earthly fathers have a responsibility to provide for their children's daily necessities and future inheritance. Perhaps a father cannot leave his children a monetary inheritance, but he can leave them with good values, love and other blessings that are essential for a quality life.

Third, God is revealed in the Old Testament as a loving and compassionate father who requires obedience and honor from his children. There were definite expectations and responsibilities that Israel was to keep as God's chosen people. One such expectation was to honor God as father. In Exodus 20:12 the children were required to honor their earthly fathers and mothers. Accordingly, God is worthy of the same parental honor that is required of children towards their natural parents. In Malachi 1:6, speaking of God, the prophet Malachi writes,

“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” says the LORD Almighty. “It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name. But you ask, ‘How have we shown contempt for your name?’”

When Israel failed to honor and obey God by following his commandments and ways, often God provided opportunities for Israel to correct the situation. When God's attempts to correct were ignored, though he is a loving God, as a father he disciplined his children. Proverbs 3:11-12 speaks to the idea of God as a father who disciplines his children.<sup>8</sup> The sage writes, “My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.” From the historical accounts God's discipline proved to be very painful for

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 45.

Israel. In many cases the punishment involved affliction surrounding the inheritance given to them by God. Deuteronomy 8:10-22 provides a description of the cost of disobedience and the impact it would have on their inheritance. In essence, these Scriptures state that when the blessings of God are poured out on the people, they are not to forget him. The failure to remember God and the willful participation in idolatry would lead to punishment for Israel.

God's name was also to be honored. Nonchalantly calling God "father" and doing all the evil one could do was not acceptable. As my mother would say, "You're my son and you need to behave like you are my son!" God disapproved of Israel calling him father and not keeping their end of the bargain (Jer. 3:4-5, 19; Deut. 32:6)<sup>9</sup> Israel was to honor God's name in their relationship with one another, by acting faithfully towards one another in the community. Since Israel all had the same father (Mal. 2:10), they were to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of being part of God's family and being called God's children. God then as a father demonstrated the importance of fathers to be compassionate and to require moral living. Fathers also are to be honored and respected.

Fourth, Thompson mentions one more aspect of the fatherhood of God in the Old Testament. This reference points to the covenant God made with Israel that focused on the promise to the king.<sup>10</sup> To illustrate this point Thompson gives two examples. One is the declaration of Nathan, the prophet, to King David. Nathan tells David concerning his son in 2 Samuel 7:12-16,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 47

The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.

The second example, and probably the most poignant in terms of illustrating the father-son relationship as it relates to the father and king relationship, is found in Psalm 2:6-8.

The Scripture reads, “‘I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.’ I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.’” The significance of the father promise to the king is that it shifts the focus off a nation and places it on a given individual.<sup>11</sup> Hence God is not just the father of an entire nation, but he is the father or begetter of one individual. Generally in the Old Testament, God was referred to as father only in a corporate sense. For God to refer to his relationship to a single individual as a father was a radical departure from the norm. Though God was the father of all Israel, at this point he placed an emphasis on the individual. This speaks to us of the responsibility that a natural father has to his own individual children.

In review, God in the Old Testament is revealed as the initiator of his son, the nation Israel. Second, he is a father who provides an inheritance for his people. Third, he is a loving father who requires loving obedience, and he is a father who disciplines when

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

obedience fails. Finally, he is shown as a father of the king, thus showing himself as a father of an individual as well as a nation. These four aspects of God as father inform natural fathers of their responsibility to not only biologically father their children, but to provide for their children's daily necessities, moral education and psycho-emotional needs. The father is to meet these needs in the context of a close and personal relationship with their children.

### **Old Testament: Attributes of God as Father**

There are several Old Testament attributes of God as father. While it is evident from the Old Testament Scriptures that God is a father who disciplines his children, he is by no means portrayed as a harsh, authoritarian despot. God is viewed as a loving, compassionate and caring father. The theme of God being a father of love, compassion and care is woven throughout the tapestry of the Old Testament. Some of the beautiful strands that form this tapestry are interlaced through several key passages. One such passage is found in Hosea. Referring to God's loving paternal nature the verse reads,

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.  
But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them.  
I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them (Hos 11:1-4).

Hosea portrays God not as a strict authoritarian father, but as a father who loves his child. God is a father who taught Israel to live and to walk by lovingly taking them by their arms and guiding them step by step. He is father who healed his people because of his love for them.

Using the metaphor of an earthly father's compassion for his child, Psalm 103:13-14 continues the theme of stressing God's love and compassion for his children. The Scriptures reads, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust." Two final Scriptures worth mentioning are Isaiah 63:16 and 64:8. The verses state, "But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name." "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." In relation to the two previous verses concerning the compassion and love of God, Thompson explains that though God was the begetter of Israel, he was also a father who has compassion and mercy toward his sometimes wayward firstborn. She writes,

Interestingly, at Isaiah 63:16 and Isaiah 64:8 the Targum translates "father" as "he whose mercies are upon us more than a father's upon a son," thus not only avoiding anthropomorphic implications of God actually "begetting" offspring but also highlighting one of the characteristic activities of God captured in the epithet Father. As a father to Israel God is merciful, compassionate and abounding in steadfast love.<sup>12</sup>

In his thesis, *The Fatherhood of God*, Wenzel points out that God's love as a parent is also emphasized in the metaphor of a mother's love for her children.

He utilizes Isaiah 42:14, 49:15-16 and 66:13 to illustrate his claim.<sup>13</sup> The three references read,

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<sup>12</sup> Thompson, 45.

<sup>13</sup> David R. Wenzel, "The Fatherhood of God" (Master of Theology thesis, Western Baptist Seminary 1990), 42.

For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back.  
But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant.

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.

As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.

The mother metaphor expresses God's love by showing that he is the one who gave birth to his son, Israel, through travail and pain and tears. Second, his motherly love will not allow him to ever forget the baby upon his breast, nor the child he has borne. He will never forget his offspring or fail to have compassion toward the child of his birthing. Finally, as a mother he will provide the ongoing comfort for his buffeted child. Like the father metaphor, the mother metaphor provides a powerful insight into the loving, compassionate and merciful parental nature of God. Often care and compassion are viewed solely as female/mother responsibilities. In Scripture we see God modeling fatherhood as tender and compassionate.

Not only is God a loving and compassionate father, he is also a faithful father. The faithfulness of God as a parent is communicated in Psalm 27:10. God's faithfulness as a parent is superior to natural parents in that it is possible for a biological mother or father to abandon his or her children. God, on the other hand, will not abandon his offspring. When natural parents do abandon their children, God will receive the offspring. This Scripture states, "Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me." Though not framed in a parental motif, Lamentations 3:22-23 speaks of God's faithfulness in poetic terms, "Because of the LORD's great love we are not

consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” God’s faithfulness makes him a reliable father. Quoting Tennis, Wenzel writes,

Do not abandon God the Father, because God the Father is a reliable male symbol in the lives of men and women. Holding on to that reliable Father God can be a way of informing and challenging the status quo. For human fathers are experienced as unreliable. Divorce and custody statistics and preoccupation with work are the most obvious illustrations of a father’s abandonment of children. By contrast, God as a father does not abandon.<sup>14</sup>

The faithfulness of God as a father is of no little significance, especially in the light of the father crisis facing our culture today. Fathers are not supposed to abandon their children. A father’s responsibility is to care for his sons and daughters. However, in spite of the unfaithfulness of earthly fathers, the heavenly father will always be a constant.

A final attribute of God as father has to do with justice. The Old Testament portrays God as a God of justice. Isaiah 30:18 states this notion succinctly as the prophet writes, “Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!” The Psalms reiterate the theme of God and justice in such verses as Psalm 9:16: “The LORD is known by his justice; the wicked are ensnared by the work of their hands.” Psalm 86:14 echoes the point as well, stating, “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you.” The book of Job also contains some powerful references deepening the reality of the justice of God (Job 8:3; 34:12; 37:23).

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 38.



Primarily in the Old Testament the notion of justice had to do with the idea of acceptable and adequate behavior. Acceptable and adequate behavior was metered by God's standards as revealed through the Law and the Prophets.<sup>15</sup> When the people of God upheld these standards in the various facets of their life and conduct, justice was upheld. The failure to uphold the divine stipulations perpetrated injustices and caused harm and pain to the wronged parties and the community as whole.

One particular area where God placed extreme importance and emphasis was justice to the fatherless. Speaking of God's own personal commitment to obtaining justice for the fatherless, Deuteronomy 10:18 reads, "He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing." Psalms 10:17, 18 and 65:5, 6 state,

You hear, O LORD, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more.

A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.

God's revelation to Israel of himself as a God of justice with particular concern for the fatherless and socially less fortunate was not simply given to Israel for information alone. God's revelation of himself was given to them to imitate. Taylor indicates that there are more than forty Old Testament Scriptures that make ministry to the fatherless an object of true justice for Israel. For Israel, justice to the fatherless meant the following:

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<sup>15</sup> Richard S. Taylor, ed., William H. Taylor and Kenneth J. Grider, asst. eds., *Beacon Dictionary of Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1983), 297.

1. Economic empowerment (Deut. 24:17-21; Job 31:17; Prov. 23:10; Mal. 3:5).
2. Advocacy (Deut. 24:17; Job 31:21; Ps. 82:3; Is. 1:17; 10:1,2; Jer. 5:28).
3. Acting in mercy toward the fatherless ( Job 29:12; Hosea 14:3; Zech. 7:10).<sup>16</sup>

As the Israelite community made sure they were merciful to the fatherless by providing food and shelter and by representing them in court and on the major issues affecting their lives, the paternal justice of God was ensured.

In summary, the attributes of God as revealed in the Old Testament portray God as a loving and compassionate father who is faithful and dependable to his children. God is a father who demands justice for the fatherless. God's paternal justice demands that the community of faith meets the needs of the fatherless in a holistic fashion – mind, body and soul. These attributes are necessary for earthly fathers to have as well. Children need fathers who are loving and compassionate. Children need fathers who are not perfect, but faithful. Also, fatherless children need a community to administer justice when a natural father is not present. The church must then fill its role as a surrogate father by helping provide for a fatherless child's needs.

### **Old Testament: Roles of Earthly Fathers**

In his book, *Biblical Faith and Fathering*, John Miller points out several functions of fathers in the Old Testament. He utilizes the Hebrew rituals such as the redemption of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 212.

the firstborn, circumcision and the Passover to emphasize paternal obligation and responsibility towards the father's children.

The redemption of the firstborn is found in Genesis 22 where Abraham is instructed by God to take his one and only son whom he loves and offer him up as a sacrifice. Miller states that in the act of offering one's firstborn son to God as an act of devotion was a widespread practice in antiquity.<sup>17</sup> Many worshippers of various pagan religions considered it a moral responsibility to offer to their gods their firstborn son as a sacrifice to prove their devotion. It should be pointed out here, however, that human sacrifices had no place in Yahwehtic sacerdotalism. In Exodus the morbid theme is continued through the putting to death of the firstborn of all of Egypt (Exodus 12:21-34). Exodus 13:11-16 again reiterates the theme of the redemption of the firstborn by stating,

After the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites and gives it to you, as he promised on oath to you and your forefathers, you are to give over to the LORD the first offspring of every womb. All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the LORD. Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons. In days to come, when your son asks you, "What does this mean?" say to him, "With a mighty hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed every firstborn in Egypt, both man and animal. This is why I sacrifice to the LORD the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons." And it will be like a sign on your hand and a symbol on your forehead that the LORD brought us out of Egypt with his mighty hand.

Compared to Abrahamic sacrifice, Exodus places a different spin on the ritual. When the child asks the father what the meaning of the sacrifices is the father responds

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<sup>17</sup> Miller, 72.

theologically to his son by explaining the activity of God in the lives of his people.

Concerning this shift Miller explains,

In other words, through this ritual the hard won insight (already embodied in the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of his first-born), that God wants our devotion not that we kill our sons, was brought to dramatic, confessional experience here, however, within the framework of the story of Israel's liberation from Egypt. Just as the tragic death of Egypt's first-born was ritually alluded to in the offering up of the first-born of the flocks, so the memory of the redemptive preservation of Israel's first-born during the same sequence of events was kept alive by the rite of the son's release. In this way the truth was dramatized that Israel's God is a "redemptive father" (Is 63:16) whom Israelite fathers should emulate in the care of their children.<sup>18</sup>

In Jewish tradition the act of redemption is still performed today. On the child's 31<sup>st</sup> day he is brought to the rabbi in the presence of family and guests. When the father approaches the altar with the child he is asked if he desires to leave the child or redeem him. If the father chooses to redeem the child, he hands a special coin to the rabbi and the rabbi pronounces three times in the presence of the company of people, "Your son is redeemed." Afterward the child is returned to the father.

The implications of this ritual are riveting. For one, the father publicly acknowledges that he accepts full responsibility for his son before God and the people. Second, the son grows up knowing that his dad had a choice to leave him or redeem him. Knowing that he has a father who wanted him and chose him has great spiritual, emotional, and psychological implications throughout the child's life. Just as God redeemed his son, natural fathers are expected to do the same. In an age where many children do not even have a father's name on their birth certificates, the importance of

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<sup>18</sup> Miller, 73.

this ritual cannot be underestimated. Fathers today need to communicate to their children and to the world how much those children mean to them. Children need to know that Daddy loves them, not simply because of biological responsibility, but because they have great value in and of themselves. The redemption rite says to the child, “My father wants me and he is not ashamed to tell the world.” Fathers must communicate to their children that they are wanted. This is a responsibility that no father can afford to neglect. As long as a father is able he must tell his child, “You are mine, I love you and I want you.” The time to begin the message is when the child is born.

Circumcision is another ritual that has powerful father-son relationship implications. Unlike the firstborn rites, circumcision was performed not simply on the firstborn son, but upon the birth of every son. According to Miller, circumcision was not a rite performed by the Israelites alone. He states that many other extra-biblical peoples circumcised their sons as well. The difference was that the other cultures performed the circumcision as a rite into puberty that involved a community celebration. The circumcision event was viewed as a transition from adolescence into adulthood, and community involvement was seen as crucial for its validation. In the Israelite community with the exception of a few occasions (Gen. 17:23), circumcision was not conducted at puberty nor was it a public ritual. Circumcision was conducted at infancy, and it was a private affair between a father, his son and God (Gen. 24:2; Lev. 12:3). What is significant in terms of the circumcision rite as it relates to fatherhood is that the father did not wait until the child reached puberty to prepare him for all the nuances of adult life.

The father was required to start preparing the child for adulthood while he was still an infant. Miller writes,

In other words, the biblical father does not wait until his son is an adolescent to prepare him for the decisive transition into adulthood, marriage and a family of his own. He pledges himself to be involved in this end almost from the day of his son's birth. Circumcision is the mark of this paternal covenant between a father and his son.<sup>19</sup>

While I feel Miller may overemphasize the father-son aspect of the covenant of circumcision, his point, however, is very well taken. The father has a lifelong opportunity to spiritually influence his son's life. Though the interpretation of the rite is somewhat strained, the implication is still powerful. Specifically, beginning at infancy the father is required to place a mark on his child that will last a lifetime. The father commits to guiding the son into adulthood.

Children today need a father's mark on their lives. In the rite of circumcision the father marked the child's flesh for life. The significance of circumcision was that the father marked the child for God's sake. Fathers today need to mark their children's lives for God. In a world where negative and evil forces constantly seek to influence children in wrong directions, a father has the opportunity in the privacy of his relationship with his child to mark the child's life with a biblical worldview and values. Circumcision provided the father with the first opportunities to significantly impact his child's life. Fathers today must take advantage of the opportunity and fulfill their God-given responsibility to their children. The reality is, if fathers fail to mark their children, other influences will.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 76.

Finally, Miller discusses the rite of the Passover as it relates to fatherhood. The Passover feast was one of the most celebrated feasts in the Israelite community. The feast had its origin in the exodus of Israel from Egypt (Ex. 12:1-13:6). Prior to their departure, Israelites were required to sacrifice a lamb and spread the blood over the doorpost so that God would pass over each home and not destroy their firstborn as he would the firstborn of the Egyptians. Also, they were instructed to eat unleavened bread. The absence of the yeast in the bread was because they would not have time to prepare the bread as usual with their rapid departure from Egypt.

The father played an important role in the context of the Passover celebration. In preparation for the Passover, fathers were required to select, kill and roast the animals. They were also required to smear the blood over the doorpost. What is unique about the Passover is that it was not only a male-to-male ritual. It involved the entire household, wives and daughters as well as sons. Through the Passover meal the family was gathered within the confines of the four walls of their homes. They ate a meal together that has enormous theological meaning and fatherhood significance. The father was to function in a priestly role by saying a prayer with the family and explaining the theological significance of the meal to his entire family. In relation to paternal significance Miller writes,

Just as Yahweh acted for salvation, so does the father. He too must save his family from destructive forces that threaten it. While Yahweh is the ultimate redeemer, the father must act too (if their families are not to perish) by gathering their families around them within the intimacy of the four walls of their respective houses.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 79.

He concludes by underscoring the importance of Passover and the father's role in the celebration:

No other ritual drama plays as forcefully as does this one the interplay between God the father and the Israelite father in the care of his children. It is the culmination and embodiment of the other two rituals. If the redemption of the first-born and circumcision are adoption rituals initiating the father as custodian, guide of his sons in particular, passover expands that role, year after year and makes it visible and accessible to the whole family. Through it fathers in Israel, as in no other culture we know of, appropriated to themselves an identity as redemptive caretakers, with permanent stake in the life of their families.<sup>21</sup>

The Passover speaks deeply into our society's current father drought. Namely, if the father is to function as a redemptive caretaker, it helps a great deal for the father to be present in the home. If the father is absent, it is much harder for him to have the intimacy and teaching opportunities with his children than if he were eating a daily meal within the four walls of his home with his little ones. The Passover teaches fathers today that they are to be close to their children, or present. It teaches that they are to provide resources not only for the child's natural needs, but also their spiritual ones. Fathers are to work to maintain the continuity of their homes because the home is a hallowed classroom to teach their children about the salvation of God.

The role of teacher is another important function of fathers in the Old Testament.

The parental teaching mandate is articulated clearly in the Shema,

These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you. Hear,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 78,79.



O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates (Deut. 6:1-9).

The teaching role, however, was not designated only for the father. The father and mother were to teach their children in a cooperative effort (Prov. 1:8; 23:22; 31:26). The Old Testament model for parental instruction was designed for both parents. Regarding the Old Testament teaching model Miller states, "This particular model requires a home where both the father and mother are present and both are completely familiar and at ease with the religious heritage, so they can share it in an informal, relaxed and friendly manner in the course of daily life."<sup>22</sup> Concerning the parents' responsibility as teachers and the employed teaching methodology Taylor writes,

Parents are the primary agents of moral and religious education. In His covenant with Israel God clearly commanded parents to teach their children. His laws, first by making them part of their own lives, and then orally, visually, and continually impressing them on their children that they might fear the Lord.<sup>23</sup>

As the parents taught the children through various techniques as described above, the children were required to respond by honoring their parents and putting into practice what they were taught. Thus through the mother and the father, the children were to learn about Yahweh. It goes without saying that the marriage union is crucial for such education to occur. From God's perspective, a married and present father is more effective in teaching his child than an absent one. The implication of this God-given role

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, 383.

to fathers today is straightforward. A father and a mother are to assume full responsibility as the principal teachers concerning God. To teach his child about God, a father has the responsibility to first live the Word and then teach it to his child. Part of living the Word is having a good marriage with the child's mother. For in the context of the marriage relationship the child is educated best when instructed by both the mother and the father.

The redemption rite, circumcision, the Passover and teaching all speak volumes in addressing children's needs and the father's responsibilities. Essentially, these rites show that a child needs to have sense of a belonging (redemption rite), they need to be influenced in a godly fashion (circumcision), they need provision for their natural and spiritual life (Passover) and they need to be instructed in the ways of the Lord (teaching). As the father fulfills his responsibility, the child's needs will be met.

### **Synopsis**

The Old Testament portrays God as a Father who is responsible for the existence of his firstborn, Israel. God's responsibility as a father for Israel does not simply stop with the creation of his son, but as a father he is also responsible to provide for Israel's needs. The provision of God to Israel comes in the form of providing an inheritance, discipline and his presence. The provision of God flows from his divine character and attributes, which are love, faithfulness, and justice. God's concern and love for children are also expressed in the expectations and roles he placed upon the community and natural fathers. The community was expected to minister to the needs of the fatherless by providing economic assistance, advocacy, and showing mercy. Fathers were to

acknowledge, influence, provide and teach their children through the redemption rite, circumcision and the Passover. The attributes of God and the responsibilities that fathers were expected to perform in the various rituals provide an excellent job description for today's fathers to follow.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE ON FATHERHOOD

#### Introduction

While God is revealed as father in the Old Testament, he is even more profoundly revealed as such in the New Testament. Jesus himself is the principal revealer of the Father in the New Testament. The Father and Son relational dynamics are mentioned over one hundred and nine times in John, four times in Mark, forty-two in Matthew and fifteen in Luke.<sup>1</sup> Volumes could be and have been written on this aspect as found in the Gospels. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will narrow the scope to show how Jesus paints an understandable portrait of the Father by examining some specific aspects of his life and ministry. The areas to be discussed are his personal relationship with his father and his preaching and teaching. A brief exploration of these facets of Jesus' life and ministry will help to paint a broad enough understanding of God as father to aid in the discussion of this work.

Next, it will be important to view portions of the Pauline Corpus and key passages from other epistles in order to enrich our understanding of God as father in the New Testament. Not only will the epistles enrich our understanding of God as father, they will

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 71.

also help to clarify our understanding of the responsibilities of earthly fathers to their children and illuminate the importance of the faith community in the life of the fatherless.

### **New Testament: The Father-Son Relationship**

A quintessential hallmark that defines the Father-Son relationship in the Gospels is love. In the Gospels, God is shown as a father who loves his son and the Son is a child who loves his father. The notion of God as a loving father who loves the Son in an unconditional manner is diametrically opposed to some of the father-child ideology in circulation today. In some literature the primary role of the father is to balance the unconditional love of the mother and to teach the child about restrictive love and earning love.<sup>2</sup> God as a father in the New Testament is a father who loves his children, not because of merit but because of his nature. This is demonstrated initially in the Gospels through the Father-Son relationship.

During Jesus' inaugural baptism, all the Synoptics (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Mk. 1:11; Lk. 3:22) make reference to the Father's voice resounding from heaven, uttering the words, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Like the Old Testament in the redemption rite, God the Father publicly acknowledges his Son and declares his love for him. A point worth noting is that the Father bestows his love on his Son prior to his preaching a sermon, prior to his working any miracles and prior to his dying on the cross. The Father's love is not bestowed on the Son because of his

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Ancona, *Crisis in America: Father Absence* (Cormack, New York: Nova Science Publishers Inc., 1998), 2-5.

accomplishments, but because of love itself. Mariannne Thompson speaks of the nature of the love exhibited in the Father-Son relationship:

While the primary characteristic of the Father-Son relationship is the life that constitutes their relationship, that relationship is further characterized in John in terms of love. Even as the life of the Father is given to the Son and so through him to others, so, too, the love of the Father is bestowed on the Son and through him to others. Again we note all the striking concentration on the father's activity, here expressed as the fundamental relationship of love, in and through the Son.<sup>3</sup>

In John's Gospel several portions of Scripture solidify and amplify the fundamental relationship of love between the Father and the Son. In John 3:35, the Father loves the Son and has placed everything into his hands. In John 5:20-21, the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Finally in John 10:17 the Father loves the Son because he lays down his life. Ultimately, the love the Father has for his Son is passed on to others through the Son. As individuals place their faith and trust in the Son, they too will be participants in the love demonstrated between the Father and his Son (Jn. 14:21, 23; 16:27). The Father's love will be in them (Jn. 17:26), and they like the Son will be expected to share the love with others and model that love in the relationships within the community.

Healthy dependency is another trait of the Father-Son relationship that is portrayed in the New Testament. The aspect of dependency is crucial because it implies that the one who is being trusted will be absolutely faithful, reliable and dependable. As a son, Jesus Christ was dependent upon his father. Concerning Jesus' dependency upon the Father, John 5:19-20 states, "Jesus gave them this answer: 'I tell you the truth, the Son

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<sup>3</sup> Marianne M. Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 138.

can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” These verses imply a couple of important thoughts concerning Jesus’ dependency upon the Father. For one, Jesus depends on the Father for empowerment. He can do nothing by himself. He must be empowered by the Father to act. Second, Jesus depends upon the Father to model the desired behavior. Hence he only does what he sees the Father doing. In that respect the Father serves as the supreme model for the behavior the Son is to emulate. Finally, the willingness of the Son to receive the Father’s empowerment and the willingness to emulate the Father in obedience is solidly in place. Further commenting on this verse Merrill C. Tenny writes,

The Son is dependent on the Father. He does not act independently apart from the Father's will and purpose. Throughout this Gospel Jesus continually asserted that his work was to do the will of the Father (4:34; 5:30; 8:28; 12:50; 15:10). Equality of nature, identity of objective, and subordination of will are interrelated in Christ. John presents him as the Son, not as the slave, of God, yet as the perfect agent of the divine purpose and the complete revelation of the divine nature.<sup>4</sup>

Another passage that sheds light on the issue of dependency in the Father-Son relationship is found in Matthew 11:27, “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” In his work on *The Fatherhood of God* David R. Wenzel points out several ways dependency is fleshed out in the context of mission. First, he says that the Son is dependent upon the Father for the substance of the mission. The Father has committed all things to the Son for the fulfillment of the

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<sup>4</sup> Merrill C. Tenny, “Commentary on the Gospel of John,” Frank E. Gaebelin ed, *The Expositors’s Bible Commentary*, Vol.9 (Grand Rapids: Regency, 1981), 64-65.

mission. The Father is the originator of the substance Jesus is to give to others. Therefore, Jesus is dependent on the Father for what he is to reveal. Also, Wenzel points out that he is dependent upon the Father to reveal him to others.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the onus is on the Father to draw humanity to the Son (Jn. 6:44).

The flip side of the dependency model is that the Son is not only dependent upon the Father, but the Father is also dependent upon the Son. The Father chose the Son to show the world his salvation, love, and nature. Therefore, as the Son is dependent on the Father for the substance of ministry, the Father is dependent upon the Son to be his divine representative on Earth. Notice that this relationship consists of interdependency, not a hierarchical motif. The Father has a specific function and the Son has a specific function. To accomplish their goal they both work in harmony with each other. This whole notion of dependency is very significant in light of today's father crisis. Our heavenly father is a dependable father and therefore can be trusted and emulated.

Essential to the notion of dependency is unity. This is an important dynamic in the Father-Son relationship. In John's Gospel, several Scriptures speak directly to the unity between the Father and the Son:

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one (Jn. 10:28-30).

I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name the name you gave me so that they may be one as we are one (Jn. 17:11).

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<sup>5</sup> David R. Wenzel, "The Fatherhood of God" (Master of Theology thesis, Western Baptist Seminary 1990), 47.



My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (Jn. 17:20-23).

The “*oneness*” in this Father-Son relationship is not simply a legislated unity, but it flows from the context of their relationship that is based on love. Though the Father and Son are one nature and substance, each had their respective function to fulfill (Jn. 1:1). Their unity allowed them to *be one* and to *act as one*. In response to their unity Tenny writes, “The unity of the Son and the Father was manifested in the deep love that each sustained for the other and by the perfect obedience of the Son to the Father and the perfect response of the Father to the Son.”<sup>6</sup> Once again the unity exhibited in the Father-Son relationship is held up as the goal for the community of faith. The Son wants the community of faith to participate in the unity that exists between himself and his father.

Finally, the relationship between the Father and the Son was a “working relationship.” The Son was sent to complete his father’s work (Jn. 4:34; 5:36). The work consisted of giving life where death was present. The Son’s preaching, working of miracles, and ultimately his crucifixion and resurrection were the result of a joint effort between the Father and the Son. The Father working through the Son and the Son working with the Father served to accomplish this redemptive objective. In John 5:17-18, Jesus says to his opponents, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.” In response to the divine collaboration Thompson says,

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<sup>6</sup> Tenny, 164.

The signs of Jesus are the work of God as Father because they are life-giving. The living Father grants life through these works, and it is the character and work of God—and God alone to give life. Because the signs confer life, then Jesus' works are the works of God. Because Jesus' signs impart life and embody God's life-giving character, one should believe the works (10:38; 14:11), that is, see in them God's own works of healing and restoration (5:19-21, 36; 6:32; 9:3, 33; 10:25, 32, 37-38; 14:8-11; 15:24). God's Fatherhood, God's life-giving power, is actually affected through the work of the Son. It is as the one who gives life that God is Father. Through the work of the Son, the Father's life-giving power becomes embodied, rather than remaining a cipher or idea, and thus God's identity as Father is concretely realized through the work of the Son.<sup>7</sup>

As in the case of love, dependency and unity, the working relationship between Christ and the Father serve to show a picture of the Father, a father who works in conjunction with his Son in the context of relationship to reveal his love and life to the world.

In the nuances of the Father-Son relationship are elements that fathers should work for and pray to develop in their relationship with their children. A father's relationship with his child needs to be permeated with love and unity. In the context of the Father-Son relationship, an authoritarian, heavy-handed paradigm is squelched. Instead a healthy dependency and a working together is modeled. Fathers need to understand that they need their kids as much as the kids need them. As fathers take the time to work with their children, a beautiful harmony can be established that will be a blessing to them and their children.

### **New Testament: Characteristics of the Father Revealed Through the Teaching and Preaching of the Son**

Through his preaching and teaching Jesus reveals biographical information about the nature and character of our heavenly father. Much of what Jesus teaches, preaches

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<sup>7</sup> Thompson, 145-146

and models concerning the Father is viewed through the context of the kingdom of God. God Almighty is the Father of the kingdom who is concerned for his children, not simply on a national level, as seen in the Old Testament, but also on a personal and community level as it relates to the community of faith formed and being formed in Jesus Christ. In his expose' on the kingdom, Jesus articulates several remarkable qualities of our heavenly father. This is by no means an exhaustive treatment of the kingdom of God or the fatherhood of God. It is a simple, brief overview that paints a clear picture of some of the attributes of God as father. The several aspects of Jesus' teaching and preaching concerning the character and function of God the Father are: God is "Our Father," God is a providing Father, and God is a merciful and loving Father.

In the New Testament Jesus introduced a new paradigm in his usage of the term "Our Father." Jesus' usage of the term in his prayers and teaching is quite different from that of the Old Testament. Joachim Jeremias makes this observation. He explains that while the community prays to God as father and individuals may speak of God as heavenly father, "There is as of yet no evidence in the literature of ancient Palestinian Judaism that 'my Father' is used as personal address to God."<sup>8</sup> Concerning early Judaism Hamerton-Kelly expresses the same sentiments: "Therefore although early Judaism differs from the Old Testament by invoking God as father, this invocation does not indicate a personal intimacy with God, of the kind which is the hallmark of Jesus' use of 'father' in his prayers."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 29.

<sup>9</sup> Hamerton-Kelly, 54.

One key word that gives tremendous insight into Jesus' use of the term "father" is the word *Abba*. In Mark 14:36 Jesus cries out to his father using the word *Abba*. Jesus' usage of the word denoted an intimacy between a father and child. The word also implied a trusting and obedient surrender to the will of God on the part of the child. Reiterating Jesus' usage of the term and providing definition as well, Colin Brown states, "The use, unthinkable to the pious Jew, of the childish and familiar term *abba* in prayer is an expression of the unique relationship of Jesus to God. It expresses not only his attitude of obedience and trust to the Father (Mk. 14:36), but also his incomparable authority (Matt. 11:25 ff.)."<sup>10</sup>

In Matthew 6:9 Jesus invites his disciples to participate in the same family relationship by instructing them to pray saying, "Our Father." By saying, "Our Father," Jesus places the disciples in relationship to him as well as to God. The relationship is to be intimate to the point of asking God to meet our needs, and also it requires obedience to forgive as God forgives. The usage of "Our Father" also ties the community of faith together under one heavenly father who will provide for all and who expects everyone to live as his children in accordance with the principles of his kingdom. The notion of "Our Father" has powerful implications in terms of today's fatherhood crisis. God is a universal father and if children place their trust in him, they will have a father who will be intimate with them and present to them.

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<sup>10</sup> Colin Brown ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Regency, 1986., 615.

In the context of the kingdom of God, God is a father who provides for his children. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus reveals God as a father who provides. In Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus instructs his listeners not to worry about life. He contends that life constitutes more than our daily necessities. He therefore specifically tells the hearer not to worry about food or clothing. His rationale for the neglect of worry over self-preservation is that the Father in heaven will take care of those needs for you. He reasons that if God takes care of the birds of the air and clothes the flowers of the field, will he not take care of his children as well? God will and does take care of his children.

The underlying reality of God as a father is omniscience. His ability to know all things does not only function in deep and weighty matters of the universe, but in all things pertaining to the intricate needs of his children. D.A. Carson states,

Essentially it is thoroughly pagan, for pagan gods allegedly thrive on incantation and repetition. But the personal Father God to whom the believers pray does not require information about our needs. As a father knows the needs of his family, yet teaches them to ask in confidence and trust, so does God treat his children.<sup>11</sup>

God knows the needs of his children and he will provide for those needs. As a good father, God will provide good gifts, the Holy Spirit, and daily bread for his children (Mt. 7:9,11; Lk. 11:13). In light of God's ability and willingness to provide, his children are to distinguish themselves from pagans by not running after material things. They are instructed instead to pursue God's kingdom and his righteousness through lifestyle and confident prayer.

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<sup>11</sup> D.A. Carson, "Matthew" *The Expositors's Bible Commentary, Vol.8*, Frank E Gaebelein, ed. (Grand Rapids: Regency, 1981), 166.

God as a loving and merciful father is another theme in the kingdom context. God's mercy and love is shown in his response to his children and his creation. As a merciful father, God is concerned for the little children. Hamerton-Kelly comments on the stability of the family and the worth of children in New Testament times. He writes,

Since the New Testament is a product of the Greco-Roman world as it is of Judaism, we must consider the family structure in the larger world. The family was much less stable at the turn of the age than it had been before. Indeed, that situation has been compared with our own; the rate of divorce was high, the reputation of fidelity low. Children were a nuisance, and infant exposure, a rudimentary alternative to abortion was widely practiced. The evidence we have shows that while children in general were undesirable, female children were more so than male.<sup>12</sup>

As a merciful father, each of God's children's whereabouts and protection is of great concern to him as well. Scripture illustrates this point.

What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost (Mt. 18:12-14).

See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven (Mt. 18:10).

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them (Mt. 10:13-16).

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<sup>12</sup> Hamerton-Kelly, 57.

Jesus said to his disciples: Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves (Lk. 17:1-3).

God's care and mercy for his little ones are obvious. Scripture teaches that his kingdom consists of people who are childlike and his concern and attention are directed to his little ones.

God's mercy and love are also seen in his willingness to forgive the sins of his children. God is a forgiving father (Mt 6:12,14,15; Mk 11:25; Lk 23:34). One poignant illustration is found in Matthew 18:22-35. In this passage Peter asks the Lord how many times is he required to forgive a person in a given day, to which Jesus replies, "As much as you need to." Jesus goes on to tell a story of a man who was forgiven a debt for which he lacked the means to repay. As a result of his appeal for clemency the merciful king exonerated him from his debt. Following the release the forgiven man found someone who owed him a few cents and viciously demanded payment. The king then revoked his previous ruling towards the man. The story implies that while God is a forgiving God, he also demands the children of his kingdom to be forgiving as well.

Finally, as a father, God is loving and merciful, both to those who are a part of his kingdom and to those who are not. Matthew 5:44, 45 states, "But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." The essence of God's love and mercy is seen in the instructions he gives to his children to follow. The disciples are instructed to love their enemies and to

pray for them. They are to emulate their father in heaven who causes the sun to rise upon the just and the unjust. The goal of the passage, however, is to ultimately achieve the salvation of the enemy in order that God can cause the Son to rise upon them and thereby allow them to experience the full mercy of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

From Jesus' preaching on the Father three important functions of natural fathers are illuminated:

1. Fathers need to be close and intimate with their children. Just as we call God "Abba," Children need to be able to relate and call their fathers "Dad" in the context of a loving, wholesome relationship.
2. Fathers need to provide for their children. Part of providing is knowing what to provide. God the Father knows what we need before we ask. While natural fathers are not that smart, as they relate with their children they can find out what the child needs and with God's help provide for the need. In some cases provision may be love and support; in other cases it may be discipline.
3. Fathers need to be merciful to their children. Children need more than one chance. At times fathers will be required to forgive their children for their mistakes just like the children will have to forgive the fathers at other times.

The attributes of God the Father revealed through the preaching of Jesus are traits natural father should seek to emulate.



## **New Testament: Paul on God as Father**

In many of his letters, Paul uses the designation of the father image as a central theme in his doctrine of God. The use of God as father in his writing serves to unite the community of believers together as one family. The family has been assembled through an adoption process initiated by God the Father and realized or brought to fruition through Jesus the Son. For Paul, God is a father who adopts spiritually orphaned children and gives them all the rights and privileges of legitimate sons and daughters by making them joint heirs with Christ. Concerning the use of father and the theme of adoption Hamerton-Kelly writes,

More significant than an early date is Paul's closeness to the theology of the historical Jesus, shown by the fact that he places the father image at the center of his doctrine of God's nature and work. He does this primarily by presenting the Christian life as a membership by adoption into the family of God. The letters to the Galatians and the Romans contain the most explicit statements of this theme.<sup>13</sup>

In his discourse to the Galatians, Paul begins a discussion on Chapter 3 with Abraham, who was the father of Israel. Within the context of the Abrahamic metaphor Paul reminds the readers of God's promise to Abraham that he would bless his seed (Gal. 3:16-18). Paul then explains that the seed is Christ. The significance is that through Christ God has formed his household. This implies that neither the law nor one's pedigree is enough to make someone a member of the Father's household. Family membership and offspring rites are realized in the Father through the Son. Galatians 3:26-29 states:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 83.

belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

In Christ we are all the Father's children. As children of God there is no favoritism based on ethnicity, social status or gender. In Christ all in the community of faith are equals.

Like the model Old Testament father, God provides an inheritance for his children because we are all heirs to the promise.

For Paul the reality and assurance of our status as adopted children of the Father is culminated in the witness and the work of the Spirit.<sup>14</sup> The Spirit of the Son cries out, "Abba" Father. Paul writes,

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, *Abba, Father*. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory (Rom. 8:15-17).

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, *Abba, Father*. So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir (Gal. 4:4-7).

This cry, "Abba, Father," is not based upon a heady or purely intellectual response. It is an intimate cry based upon the individual experience of faith – the experience whereby God makes the believer to know in the depths of his or her person that God is their father indeed.

Paul also used the designation of "father" for liturgical purposes. Concerning Paul's liturgical usage of God as father, Hamerton-Kelly points out several observations.

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<sup>14</sup> Thompson, 125.

First, he makes the point that Paul began all his letters with the greeting which designates God as father in relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ. The greeting, “Grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” is used in a number of passages (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3 etc...). Second, he stresses the point that the same formula is used in the giving of thanks (1 Thes. 1:2-3), in the making of an oath (2 Cor. 11:31), as an acclamation (Phil. 2:11), for intercession (1 Thess. 3:11-13), as a benediction (Rom. 15:6), in a baptismal liturgy (Rom. 6:4) and finally as a creed (1 Cor. 8:6; 15:24).<sup>15</sup> The significance of Paul’s use of God as father in all these instances conveys a reality that existed in the lives of the early believers on a private and public level. God was a living and real father to them in their experience. He was the one who adopted them and made them heirs through his Son. He was the one who placed in their hearts the cry of the Spirit. He was more to them than just dogma or doctrine. He was their father. Hamerton-Kelly captures this beautifully when he writes, “The early Christians did not talk about God as Father, they talked with him.”<sup>16</sup>

In the mind of Paul the understanding of God as father was a reality he communicated as a central theme in his teaching. Under the fatherhood of God he shows how the community of faith is united together as one family. Paul stresses that regardless of pedigree, sex or ethnicity, all believers have access to all the blessings and grace that are provided for them by their heavenly father. The children are assured of the reality of this relationship by the cry of the Spirit in their hearts that rings out saying Abba, father.

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<sup>15</sup> Hamerton-Kelly, 89-90.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 80.

The reality of God as father is also communicated in forms of worship, liturgy and prayers.

Children need to live in this reality as well. They need a family to belong to and they need a father they can call their own. This reality needs to be internal as well as external. Just as God the Father assures us internally that we are his and we are a part of his family, I believe every child is entitled to that assurance from their father or some other father figure in their life. Children need to know they belong and are wanted by someone, and they need to be assured of that reality inside and out. In cases where children do not have a father, the church should meet that particular need.

### **New Testament: Roles of Earthly Fathers**

While there are a number of principles in the New Testament that indirectly give insight to the roles of fathers, there are, however, only two verses which speak directly to the role of earthly fathers with their children. The verses are Colossians 3:21, “Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged,” and Ephesians 6:4, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” In reference to the first part of the command, Miller points out that the first responsibility of the father is to keep his authority, anger and actions in check in order not to frustrate the child. He says,

It is not significant, perhaps that what was identified in the first of these sayings as a chief problem in fathering is a certain over-severity or capriciousness that might be discouraging to children or arouse their anger. Fathers take care that you be not overly severe. One recognizes in this a continuation of that struggle against

the unregulated power of fathers (*patritia potestas*) that was begun (within the communities shaped by biblical faith) in the time of Abraham.<sup>17</sup>

The implication is that a child does better in an encouraging environment than in a hostile one. For that environment to be encouraging, the father must manage himself first before he can properly influence and instruct his child in a healthy manner.

Second, the verse indicates that fathers are encouraged to play a significant role in the education of their children. They are to raise them in the instruction and the training of the Lord. This command goes against the ideal of the father being simply the breadwinner in the home. He is required to be more than a money supplier. God expects the father to be actively involved in his children's lives by providing guidance and teaching them to serve and to follow the ways of the Lord.

Though marriage is not mentioned directly as one of the roles of fathers, the Scriptures present marriage as the only legitimate vehicle for procreation. In Ephesians 5:22-6:3 the context of a father's role toward his children is delineated in the context of marriage. Husbands are instructed to love their wives (Eph. 5:22). Though my grandfather was not a theologian or a Bible scholar, he gave me some advice that I believe is pertinent to this issue. He always said to me, "You can love your kids by the way you treat and love their mother, your wife." My grandfather was saying that if you keep your marriage intact, the kids will have the benefit of a father and mother, both of which they need. Do everything you can to build and keep your marriage healthy in order

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<sup>17</sup> Miller, 97.

that your children can grow up in a healthy and nourishing environment. One role of the father is to continually seek the health and well-being of his marriage.

### **New Testament: Role of the Community as “Father”**

The community of faith was to play an important role in fathering the fatherless. Like the Old Testament where provision for the fatherless was woven into the context of the law, God once again places the same responsibility on the New Testament community. James articulates the expectation clearly. He writes, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (Jas. 1:27). Gaebleen explains the verse this way:

The kind of religion that God our Father accepts is the kind that exerts a positive influence on one's life. Notice that this verse does not give us a definition of religion. Instead, it presents a concrete way of insisting that genuine religion is a life-changing force. One's religion, then, should be more than external; it must spring from an inner spiritual reality that expresses itself in love to others and holiness before God. James next describes a specific example of love--the care of orphans and widows. The verb *episkeptesthai* also appears in Matthew 25:36, 43 with reference to visiting the sick, not merely to make a social call, but in order to care for their needs. This is faith expressing itself through love (Gal. 5:6).<sup>18</sup>

One aspect of the community's proof of religion or its relationship with God is its response to orphans. It is not enough to be sentimentally sorry, but action is required to help alleviate some of the suffering an orphan many experience due to the absence of parents. This care of the orphans is an expectation and responsibility assigned to the

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<sup>18</sup> Zondervan Reference Software. Version 2.6, Zondervan Corporation 1989-1998.

community of faith. It is significant to note here as well that in first century Palestine a child was considered an orphan if he or she only had a mother.

Fatherhood was also to be modeled and mentored by leaders within the Christian community. In 1 Timothy 3:1-5 and Titus 1:5-8 the characteristics of a leader are defined. The necessary qualities for a leader included the ability to refrain from corruption and vices such as heavy drinking and violence. Also, they were to have the ability to lovingly manage their own households well. The rationale is that if they cannot take care of their own families, how can they take care of God's family. While the verses do not directly address fathering, good leadership is evident by healthy relationships and by fulfilling responsibilities in the home.

Mentoring as spiritual fathering is mentioned in the New Testament. Mentoring can be a way to provide fathering for the many children who lack a father's presence in their lives. Probably the most popular example is that of Paul and Timothy. While Paul was not Timothy's biological father, he was his spiritual father in the gospel. Paul addresses Timothy as his son. He writes,

For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord (1 Cor. 4:16-17).

Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith (1Tim. 1:18, 19).

To Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord (II Tim. 2:1).

As a spiritual father, Paul mentored Timothy by wholeheartedly following Christ, by teaching Timothy what God had taught him, by praying for him and encouraging him through his struggles. For Paul, mentoring was not one-dimensional. Paul's life was enriched by Timothy's life as well. There were times where Paul expressed a need for Timothy as much as Timothy had a need for him (Rom. 16:21; 1Cor. 4:17; 2 Tim. 4:21). The mentoring was not one-sided; it was symbiotic. Therefore, the community of faith has a responsibility to provide for orphans and to mentor them.

### **Synopsis**

In the New Testament, God is revealed as father principally through Jesus. In the context of the Father-Son relationship many admirable qualities are exhibited. Love is the hallmark of the relationship. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father. Through that love a healthy dependency is modeled, unity exists and they work together to accomplish a goal. Also, through Jesus' preaching he proclaims God as a father who is accessible to us – "*Our Father*" who provides for our needs and who bestows mercy on his children. As a merciful father, God forgives us our sins. These qualities of the Father as revealed by Jesus are worthy traits for natural fathers to incorporate in their relationships with their children.

Paul stresses that God as a father has placed each of his children in a family where they can belong: the community of faith. Also he states that God has given each child an inner witness that declares God is his or her father and that he or she belongs to his great household. The importance of Paul's insight is that it illuminates the need that we all



have to belong. Children especially have this need and it can possibly be heightened when a father is absent.

The roles of earthly fathers are clear. From a biblical perspective, fathers have the responsibility to provide an environment of encouragement for their children. They are to avoid embittering or exasperating their children. Also, they have the responsibility to train their children in the ways of the Lord. The community has a responsibility as well to the fatherless. The quality of the community's religion is determined by their ministry to the orphans and widows. There are a number of ways the community can fulfill that responsibility, but one effective way is through mentoring as modeled in the relationship between Paul and Timothy and others in the Scriptures.

### **Conclusion**

The Old and New Testaments leave no room for speculation or assumption concerning the role of fathers. The biblical data states unequivocally that the father's role is essential and integral for the development of every dimension of a child's life. Fathering, therefore, is not simply biologically fathering a child, but requires that the father take an active part in raising the child as well. Hence, the Scriptures clearly articulate the attributes a father should possess, and they show the responsibilities he is to fulfill in the life of his children. When fathers neglect their responsibilities, their children suffer and in many cases great needs occur. The following chart sums up the biblical roles and necessary character attributes for fathers. Also, the chart highlights some of the needs of children that are not met when fathers fail to hold up their end of the bargain.

<b>Biblical Overview Of Fathers' Responsibilities and Children's Needs</b>	
<u><i>Roles &amp; Attributes of Fathers</i></u>	<u><i>Needs of Children</i></u>
Be loving, faithful and merciful. <i>Imitate the attributes of God in the Old and New Testaments.</i>	The need to feel treasured and loved. The need for emotional security and well-being.
Embrace and model justice. <i>Understand the concept theologically and model it behaviorally.</i>	The need for moral upbringing and guidance.
Assume full responsibility for their children. <i>Redemption rite, Paul's exposé on adoption into the family of God.</i>	The need for a sense of identity and belonging, to be a part of a loving family and community.
Provide for their children's needs. <i>Passover, the model of God as a providing Father.</i>	The need for provisions flowing out of a relationship with a father who is accessible and present.
Educate and train their children to function effectively in society. <i>Passover and both Old and New Testament mandates given to fathers.</i>	The need for instruction and teaching to develop life skills.
Aid the child in developing his or her relationship with God. <i>Circumcision, Passover, teaching responsibility.</i>	The need to be taught about God so they can develop their own relationship with God the Father.
Provide discipline, encouragement and accountability. <i>Old and New Testament exhortations.</i>	The need for boundaries and accountability.
Model a godly life for the child to follow. <i>Mentoring.</i>	The need for a tangible godly father (male) role-model.
Form and maintain the marriage bond with the child's mother. <i>Old and New Testament exhortations, unity and dependency.</i>	The need for security and the benefit of having both a father and mother in the home.

In conclusion, from the Old Testament to the New Testament God is portrayed as a good father who provides for the needs of his children. He is a father who works and blesses his children in a context of a loving and intimate relationship. It is the intent of God that natural fathers raise their children in a loving harmonious relationship as well. In the context of a father's relationship with his children he is expected to be a teacher, a provider, and an encourager to his children. In the case that a father is not present, God has made it clear that the community of faith is to take up the slack and minister to the

fatherless to ensure that they receive justice and that their everyday needs are met. The community is the buffer and “dad” that is to prevent a child from being harmfully affected by father absenteeism. So, what can the church do to minister to the fatherless? The next chapter will hopefully provide some answers.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### STRATEGY FOR FATHERING THE FATHERLESS

#### **Introduction**

Considering the enormity of the fatherless crisis and the magnitude of the contributing factors that characterizes its problematic existence in our culture and churches, where then do you start in addressing this issue and meet the needs of those in your ministry context? As a pastor that can be a difficult question to think about, let alone try to answer. The reason for the difficulty is the awareness in our churches of limited resources in terms of finances, people and energy. Many times it is as if we are faced with feeding the multitude, and after assessing the situation, it seems we are lacking the loaves and the fishes. Also, being a pastor myself, I am acutely aware of my own limitations. Generally, I always seem to have more on my plate than I can manage – the demands of the current ministries in our church, community activities, travel, counseling, building projects and sermon preparation – not to mention the needs of my personal household which already present a sizable enough challenge. Therefore, a strategy needs to be formulated that is realistic and doable in the context of a busy ministry setting. In the face of some of the challenges listed above, there are several strategic steps that can be taken to make a difference in the lives of the fatherless.

## Objectives for Fathering the Fatherless

The strategy to father the fatherless encompasses several objectives. These objectives indicate the target audiences and intended goals. They are as follows:

1. ***Educate and empower the congregation:*** Obviously, as a pastor you cannot father all the fatherless yourself. The congregation must corporately place its hands under the burden and lift the load in a collective effort. For that to happen there is a need to create a greater corporate understanding of the fatherless crisis impacting the church and community. Our congregation is aware of the crisis on an experiential level, meaning that there are many single moms and fatherless children in our church. Generally those who have the experiences are the ones who are struggling. The issue must be articulated in a way so an awareness and definition of the problem from a psychological, social and biblical standpoint can be grasped and felt by the whole congregation. I believe the more informed the congregation is, the more empowered they will be to respond and act in a compassionate and helpful manner. So, one objective is to educate and empower the congregation concerning the issues and problems caused by father absenteeism – education not simply for information, but for equipping the congregation for ministry. As the congregation learns about the issue they are empowered to act and make a godly impact on the lives of the fatherless.
2. ***Empower single mothers:*** In our church, close to 30 percent of all our family units are headed by single mothers. This percentage is slightly higher than the

21.8 percent of single mothers in our community. Single mothers have a great challenge before them. The task of raising children with two parents and two incomes is difficult enough. From the studies we know that in most cases, though not all, single mothers have less economic strength than two-parent homes and single men. This alone contributes to the stress of having to be not only mom and dad, but also the provider. In many discussions on the Christian family the single-mother household is left out of the dialog. We need to understand that these mothers have the awesome responsibility of raising children by themselves, and that they will welcome any positive help and reinforcement that is available. Also the stigma needs to be removed from the single-mother households. They have enough to endure without the extra pressure of being viewed as social misfits. Single mothers need to be empowered and included in the story and life of the community so that they can be healthy and whole in order to raise their children to be healthy and whole, despite the absence of a physical father. The objective then is to help single mothers minister to their children by empowering them to be the persons and parents God has called them to be.

3. ***Father the fatherless children in our congregation.*** Children are fatherless for a number of reasons. Whether the case is death, divorce or voluntary abandonment, the pain is still felt by the child, even without the force of all the data that shows the negative effects of father absenteeism on children. Common sense says that if a man was necessary to father the child, he is

necessary to help raise the child as well. Unfortunately, many men do not understand this simple truth. The evidence of this is seen on our streets and in churches. In our church there are a number of little children who do not have the positive influence of a father in the home. On a number of occasions I have had little kids call me “Daddy” and ask me if I would be their daddy. I understand why they ask. They have no father in the home, and in their own childlike way they are reaching out to fulfill their need for a dad. The church cannot afford to allow the little ones in our midst to lack the touch and influence of a godly male in their lives. In our church we have more than enough men to minister the love of God as a father to each of the children. My objective is to ensure that a few times a month each one of these children has some type of positive male influence touching their lives.

4. ***Educate the fathers to be fathers to their children.*** There are men in our churches who have fathered children elsewhere and some have minimal or no contact at all with their children. That scenario has to change. Many times these men have just committed their lives to the Lord, and they fail to understand their God-given responsibility of being fathers to their children. Even though their children may be out of sight, they cannot afford to allow the children to be out of their minds or hearts. However, we do understand from the data that the relationship between the fathers and the children are complicated by divorce or by antagonistic relationships with the mothers. The fathers, however, cannot simply allow these obstacles to negate their desire or

responsibility to father their children. Even if it means their activity or involvement in the children's lives is on an abbreviated scale, they still must do something. The objective is to help the fathers in our churches who have children elsewhere to do something for their kids. Whether it is to pray for their children on a daily basis, pay child support, or even reestablish broken relationships, the goal is to see these fathers serve the Lord by adequately ministering to their children.

5. ***Strengthen marriages.*** An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure.

Marriages are the best context in which to raise children and to prevent father absenteeism. If couples can get married and stay married, we will have less fatherless children in the church and in the community. Studies have shown that divorce and premarital sex are primary causative agents in the perpetuation of fatherlessness. In light of these two things the objective is twofold. First, the goal is to strengthen marriages in our church on both sides of the fence. One side of the fence is pre-ceremony and the other side is post-ceremony. Second, teens and unmarried individuals need to be encouraged not to have sex and procreate until marriage. Existing marriages need to be enhanced and strengthened in order to reduce the chances of separation or divorce. Every marriage that stays together and every couple who chooses to wait until marriage to have children means that there will be fewer children who grow up without a father in the home.



These objectives by no means form an exhaustive list of possible responses. Issues such as adoption and foster care have not been mentioned, just to name a couple. However, the objectives cited above do provide a doable and realistic starting point for a church to aid in reducing the repercussions of father absenteeism in its ministry sphere.

### **Ministry Strategy**

There are many ways to accomplish the previous ministry objectives. For the purpose of this study, I suggest four ministry tools: creating a ministry task force, preaching, mentoring and prayer. These four tools, I believe, will greatly help the church to father the fatherless. These tools have nothing to do with finances, and they are tools that probably already exist in most churches. They are tools that can be utilized and implemented regardless of the size of the church. Typically, every church will have a couple of people who have a heart for children. Every church will have a pastor and gifted lay persons who preach and teach, and every church can pray. With a little adjusting of these tools that are already present, an effective ministry can be implemented to father the fatherless.

### **Ministry Task Force**

The formation of a ministry task force is crucial for the church's success in ministering to the fatherless. The pastor cannot place the responsibility of this burden on him or herself, nor does he or she have the ability, time or energy to fulfill such a ministry alone. A task force is therefore needed. When considering a ministry task force

that is to function in such an important and necessary ministry, several components are essential – the first of which is the formation of the team.

The composition of the task force should be five to seven people who represent a cross section of the church. I would suggest that the task force be comprised of at least one of each of the following people:

1. A single mother who understands the struggle of father absenteeism
2. A teenager or young adult who has experienced the impact of father absenteeism
3. A married couple who can give insight to the nuances of a family where a father is present
4. A nonresident father who can help bring understanding and sensitivity from the perspective of an absent father
5. A pastoral person who can help shape the strategies from a pastoral perspective. This can be the senior pastor, though it is not necessary. Another pastoral person in the congregation can be adequate for the task as well.
6. Persons that have a deep passion and commitment about the issue of fatherlessness

If you are unable to find these types of people, just use the people that God has blessed you with. They will do a fine job.

Equally important when forming the team is the character of the people to be selected. While their backgrounds are helpful, their character is also a critical component. In forming the task force, you want to choose people who are first of all faithful to God,

and then faithful to the church and able to work well with others. This task force will perform a vital ministry in the church and the members of it need to be people of character to ensure their credibility among those they are serving. In our church we have a simple guideline sheet that states the qualifications for serving in ministry. It is short, simple and to the point. Guidelines do not have to be a three hundred-page book on church discipline, but they need to be something which clearly delineates expectations so that everyone is on the same page. For example, the requirements for task force members could be as follows:

1. Complete basic membership instruction as provided by the church
2. Be a member of a small group
3. Live a morally clean life as delineated by the Scriptures
4. Contribute financially to the work of the church
5. Be faithful in attending worship services
6. Have a good reputation as a Christian

This list provides some basics, but it can be revised according to the values and the vision of your church. For our church these guidelines work well. Once the task force is formed, the people need to be trained.

The education process does not have to be boring, nor does it need to be a monologue featuring the pastor as a talking head. There are several ways the task force can be educated regarding nuances and repercussions of father absenteeism. One way is to listen to the stories of people within the congregation who have been touched by the effects of father absenteeism. On one night of the week with food present, the task force

could meet and invite several people from the congregation to come and share their story for a couple of minutes. They could simply ask them to respond to the question, “What was your life like without a father?” As the members of the congregation share their stories the task force members can learn by listening, watching and feeling what their brother or sister is communicating. Also, it is important to listen to the stories of those on the task force. Their stories will be very informative as well. After all the stories have been shared, debrief the team. Find out what they learned from the stories and how that learning has affected them.

Next, instruct the task force to conduct a group research project. Assign each member a topic regarding father absenteeism. The goal is not to write a research paper, but simply to make the task force aware of the issues by becoming familiar with the available literature. I suggest that the following areas be possible assignments. Have each person do one of the following:

1. Find three causes of why fathers abandon their children and give a brief explanation of each.
2. Identify three ways kids are sociologically affected by father absenteeism.
3. Identify three ways children are psychologically affected by father absenteeism.
4. Determine how many people in church have experienced father absenteeism.  
(To do this a simple survey with two or three brief questions could be developed and given to the congregation.)

5. Find ten passages that speak about father absenteeism and the role of the church in the lives of affected children.
6. Find ten Scriptures that tell what kind of father God is to his children.

I suggest you make three books available to the task force. These books will help them answer the questions quickly and in a credible, informative manner. Suggested books might be:

1. Popenoe, David. *Life Without Father*. New York, Martin Kessler Books The Free Press, 1996.
2. Horn, Wade F. and Tom Sylvester, *Father Facts Fourth Edition*. Gaithersburg, National Fatherhood Initiative, 2002.
3. This study would be helpful as well.

After everyone has had sufficient time, bring the team together and have each member share what they learned from their assignments. The discussion should provide a rich and informative dialog that deepens the understanding of the entire task force on the issues surrounding father absenteeism.

The study and interviews will help the team develop ideas for addressing the problem. Some possible tasks are designed to connect resources to the need. The children in our congregation who are without a father's influence in the home have a need for fathering, and single mothers have need for help and support. Nonresident fathers need help to be more effective and active in the lives of their children. The team can also network with ministries within and outside the church to provide resources to meet those

needs. Also, their task is to function as a barometer of accountability to make sure the church is fulfilling its responsibility by ministering to the fatherless.

Networking will be crucial. In order to meet the needs caused by father absenteeism in the church, the task force will need to network with ministries in and out of the church. In our church the synchronization of several ministries is key to ensure that needs are met. For Life Change Christian Center ministries, we need to network to the single moms' ministry, small groups, men's ministry, youth ministry, caring hands, children's church and the prayer team. Some of these ministries provide places where the need is evident and where opportunities to serve those affected by father absenteeism are available. Others provide the resources to minister to those needs. For example, many single mothers need help with repairs and things around the house. The single mothers' ministry can make the task force aware of some of those needs. The task force might then solicit the help of the youth ministry to do yard work or ask some of the men with special skills in the men's ministry to lend a helping hand. If there is a need for food or some type of financial need the caring hands (food, clothing, etc.) ministry can help. The teachers in the children's church are aware of children who could use some positive male influence. The task force can network the children's church with men's ministry and some of the mature young adult males so they can step in and help. The extent of how the networking is fleshed out will be determined and implemented by the task force. Their job in essence is to connect the dots.

Also, the task force will need to utilize other resources outside the church. For example, there are a number of teaching resources that could help non-resident fathers to father their children better. A few excellent resources are:

**The National Fatherhood Initiative:** This organization provides a wealth of information, including the latest statistics and trends surrounding fatherhood.

Also, they provide curriculum, seminars and workshops that address the needs of father absenteeism and fathers. They can be reached at [www.fatherhood.org](http://www.fatherhood.org).

**Matthew Parker at Rosedale Park Baptist Church School of Ministry:** This church provides curriculum geared toward African American fathers. They can be contacted at (313) 538-1180.

**National Center on Fathers and Families:** This organization provides a myriad of information that will aid fathers and families. They can be contacted at [www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu](http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu).

The task force can make these resources available to the men's ministry so they can help those fathers who are absent from their children. They can provide curriculum that strengthens resident and nonresident fathers in the church. There are many resources they can bring into the church to help the church be more effective in this area of ministry as a whole. They can help the church form support groups for fathers, single moms and even marriages. Networking is a critical function of the task force. It is essential for empowering the church to serve the fatherless effectively.

Finally, the task force will serve as the accountability factor. They will have the responsibility to make sure the church is fulfilling the strategy developed. They can aid in

keeping ministries on target in their ministry to the fatherless. Also, they can help and support the pastor in his or her responsibilities in ministering to the fatherless. I suggest that the pastor submit to the task force his or her plan for preaching, mentoring and prayer for accountability sake. One way to achieve accountability is for the task force to evaluate the church progress on an annual basis. In the same way a mission committee helps the church to stay accountable to the mission of reaching other parts of the world, the task force will hold the church accountable to reach the part of the world called the fatherless.

## **Preaching**

Preaching is one of the pastor's most strategic tools in helping to inspire, educate and mobilize the congregation for ministry to the fatherless. Preaching serves as a powerful tool to help the church began to wrap its arms around the issues surrounding father absenteeism. While there are some in the congregation who may understand the nuances of father absenteeism on an experiential level, preaching allows you to enrich the conversation with sociological and psychological information placed within a biblical framework. Through preaching you can contextualize the issue of father absenteeism by articulating the problem in the vernacular of your own community. When preaching on the subject of father absenteeism, I want to cover all of the previously listed objectives. Therefore preaching on father absenteeism is needed to achieve the following goals:

1. Educate the church on the problem of father absenteeism.
2. Make the church aware of the effects of father absenteeism on children.



3. Empower single mothers as individuals and parents.
4. Stress the importance of marriage as it relates to father absenteeism.
5. Address the father's responsibility to his children.
6. Make the community aware of its responsibility to the fatherless.
7. Present God as the supreme Father for every person and child.

To accomplish this preaching goal, I recommend preaching a seven-week series entitled "Fathering the Fatherless." Following is a template that could be used to achieve the goal.

Week One:

***Sermon Title:*** Daddy, Where are You?

***Scripture:*** 1 Corinthians 4:15

***Emphasis:*** Make the church aware of the father crisis. Discuss some of the causes (see chapter one) and give the church hope that they can be a part of the solution.

Week Two:

***Sermon Title:*** What Dad Leaves Behind When He Goes

***Scripture:*** Jeremiah 31:29

***Emphasis:*** Discuss the affects of father absenteeism on the children.

Utilize portions of the data provided in chapter two of this study. Give hope and encourage those in the congregation who may be suffering. Place on the minds of fathers the importance of staying close to their children.

Week Three:

***Sermon Title:*** God, the Single Mother's Secret Weapon

***Scripture:*** Deuteronomy 10:18

***Emphasis:*** Assure the single mom that she is not alone. Validate her and assure her that God and the church are standing with her. Give examples from Scripture of how God helped and strengthened single mothers in their time of need. Also, encourage other segments of the church to be sensitive to the needs of single moms. They may be the vessels God uses to bring aid to single moms, and single moms may be the vessels God uses to bless them as well.

Week Four:

***Sermon Title:*** Your Home, Something Worth Fighting For

***Scripture:*** Nehemiah 4:14

***Emphasis:*** Having a good marriage and raising kids present unique challenges. No matter how great the challenge, your home is worth fighting for. A husband and a wife staying together in a healthy manner is the best they can give to their children. Give tools to fight with (communication, love, prayer etc.).

Week Five:

***Sermon Title:*** Dads Who Play by the Rules

***Scripture:*** Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21

**Emphasis:** Discuss some of the responsibilities that Scripture requires fathers to fulfill. Use both Old and New Testament. Chapter three of this study contains much information regarding the roles of father in the Bible.

Week Six:

**Sermon Title:** Church, They're Your Kids Too!

**Scripture:** James 1:27

**Emphasis:** Explain to the church its God-given responsibility to minister to the fatherless. Create a case using the Old and New Testaments and give some practical ways the church can get involved. It may be good at this juncture to have the task force share its plan of action with the church, and then validate it as the pastor, giving the church the charge to get moving.

Week Seven:

**Sermon Title:** We Call Him Father

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:45 –7:21 (Choose those verses that talk about the attributes of God as Father)

**Emphasis:** Not everyone has had a positive experience with his or her father. Many men have given fatherhood a bad name. In this sermon you want to stress that God is a good father who loves and cares for his children in a way that is superior to and beyond any earthly father. You want to proclaim that he is a father who is trustworthy and reliable (see chapter three).

At the conclusion of the series, *Fathering the Fatherless*, the church should have a good overview of the issue of father absenteeism and also understand that they have a responsibility to act and make a difference in the lives of those whose dads are missing. The issue of fatherless is not going to vanish; therefore, you will have to preach on the topic repeatedly. The sermons listed above could easily be expanded for future preaching on the subject.

## **Mentoring**

Mentoring is another useful strategy for fathering the fatherless. Leighton Ford defines mentoring as “a relational experience in which one person (mentor) empowers another (mentoree) by sharing God-given resources.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout Scripture, there are numerous examples of mentoring. In the Old Testament there was Elijah and Elisha. In the context of that mentoring relationship we have Elisha’s famous request for a double portion of Elijah’s mantle. He had to spend time with the older prophet and follow him closely enough to receive the divine empowerment that he so desperately wanted and needed (2 Kings 2:9-13). In the New Testament there was Priscilla and Aquila who mentored Apollos and led him into a deeper and fuller relationship with God (Acts 18:24-26). There was also Paul and Timothy. Paul referred to Timothy as his son in the faith and empowered Timothy’s life and ministry through his lifestyle, his teaching, his prayers and his encouragement (1 Tim. 1:2, 18; 6:20). Jesus, however, is the prime example of a mentor. He took twelve disciples and gave them everything he had in order

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Stanley, Leighton Ford, Tom Hawkes, *Mentor Training Seminar* (Charlotte, NC: Leighton Ford Ministries, 1996), 3.

to empower them to do the Father's will. He shared with his disciples the resources of his Word, the resources of his Spirit and the resources of his very life. Through the mentor experience, the mentorees became something they would not have otherwise been without the input of the mentor in their lives.

Mentoring benefits the lives of the children and young adults in a number of ways. First, mentoring aids in the mentoree's character formation. The mentor has an opportunity to explore the mentoree's strengths and weakness. When these areas are discovered, the mentor can help the person grow and mature by affirming the mentoree's strengths and helping him or her to develop in areas of his or her weakness. For example, some of the young men I have mentored in our church have struggled with having a good work ethic. One week they have a job, the next week they quit because they are tired or simply just do not feel like going to work. One young man would get sick every time he got a job. This went on for a couple of years. Finally, after many conversations, times of prayer, accountability sessions and a number of straightforward reprimands, Bob turned a corner. He has currently been working the same job for over a year. He feels great about the accomplishment, and so do I. When he sees me he holds his head high and says, "Pastor, I've got a year under my belt." The reality is he has more than a year under his belt. He has learned the value of discipline and commitment, and he is now in the place to share what he has learned with another young person or child about the value of honest work.

Next, mentoring helps mentorees to set and accomplish their goals. Another young man whom I have mentored for a number of years had a dream to complete his

education. We sat down and talked about his dream on a number of occasions, and we mapped out a plan of action. Today he is fulfilling his dream, and I have the privilege of watching him achieve it and providing support and encouragement to him along the way. Finally, the mentor will grow as a result of the process. The mentor will discover that the child or young person he or she is pouring into will in essence pour back into his or her own life as well. Personally, I can honestly say that each of the young men I have mentored have added something positive to my life as well. For example, if I am challenging them concerning their work ethic, I am forced to look at my own. I have to make sure I practice what I preach to them. The young man I encouraged to fulfill his dream of going to school has in fact been one of my greatest sources of encouragement during my doctoral work. He has constantly told me I can do it and to hang in there. There is a reciprocal process that occurs; the mentor benefits as much as the mentoree.

Mentoring requires that the mentor give of his or her resources to the mentoree. The mentor takes the things he or she has learned in life, such as knowledge, wisdom and experience, and freely gives them to the mentoree. The mentor makes a personal investment from the vaults of his or her own substance into the life of the mentoree. It is this investment that empowers. To empower the mentoree, the mentor must be a good listener and questioner. I believe that to affect someone's heart, you have to listen to his or her heart. Listening and asking good questions will aid in the process. Empowering requires that the mentor be intentional about the process and plan for where he or she wants to go. It is more than just taking the mentoree out for an occasional Coke. The mentor spends time with the mentoree to help that person develop his or her individual

strengths and weaknesses. For this to occur, a deliberate strategy is needed. As in the case of Bob, our plan was to make sure he was out looking for a job. When we met he had to report on his progress. If he failed to fulfill his obligation, I wanted to know why. When he landed the job, we discussed the fact that he needed to stay at the job for a year, regardless of the pay. The money was not the issue; his character was. So it is important that you have a plan of action with the person you mentor. The plan is to be developed as a joint venture. A good mentor will spend adequate time with the mentoree and will serve that individual in the Spirit of Christ with love, with prayers, by being transparent and by having a willingness to receive as well as give. On the other hand, the mentoree must have a spirit to learn and receive from the mentor. The mentoree must be open and honest and be willing to work and to commit to the mentoring relationship.

In light of the problem of father absenteeism there are children and young men and women in our churches who desperately need a father's input in their lives. The church can give these individuals that necessary father input through the vehicle of mentoring. The church has a great opportunity to impact children and youths through mentoring from birth through the late twenties. A harsh reality exists. If the church will not mentor these children, the streets will. The outcome of that exchange is not beneficial for the child or the overall welfare of the community. The good news is that we do not have to allow the streets or any other negative force to mentor our children. We can do it! Through the vehicle of mentoring, the church has the opportunity to help people rise above their misfortunes and become the persons God intended them to be.

There are several ways your church can be mobilized to mentor the fatherless.

1. Teach and preach on the subject. Topics such as servanthood, discipleship, empowering others, the joy of giving, and leadership can help to place a foundation in the church for mentoring. The more you equip the people, the better they will be able to do the work of the ministry. You could preach several messages on “Jesus the Disciple,” and place the series in a workbook form. Then you will have your own resource to train your task force, and your task force will have a tool to train and equip potential mentors in the future. If you have small groups in your church, you could make mentoring a lesson topic for the quarter. If you would prefer to use materials other than your own, there are number of good resources to help you equip your task force to equip others to be mentors. Here are a few resources:

- Leighton Ford, Mentoring Training Seminar. Leighton Ford Ministries, 6230 Fairview Road, Suite 300. Charlette NC 28210 (704) 366-8020
- Geoff Gorsuch, Brothers! Calling Men Into Vital Relationships. (Colorado: Nav Press, 1994)
- Larry Kreider, The Cry For Spiritual Mothers & Fathers. (Pennsylvania: House to House Publications, 2000)

2. Set an example. The congregation can be encouraged to follow your example as a pastor. Be realistic – you cannot mentor every needy person in your congregation. However, you can take the time to mentor one or two individuals. As you mentor a couple of people, you will provide a good example for others to follow.



3. Have a simple strategy for mentoring. For example:
- a. **Identify** a person that needs mentoring. In this strategy the task force will be the matchmakers, the ones who will match mentors with mentorees within the congregation.
  - b. **Information gathering.** Learn about the person you are mentoring. Ask questions about his or her life. Find out what his or her ambitions and spiritual passions are. Discover his or her likes and dislikes. Find out what he or she hopes to glean from the mentoring relationship. Share about yourself as well.
  - c. **Invent a game plan.** What will be the duration of the mentoring relationship and on what level will it occur? Will it be short-term or lifelong, passive or intense? Set up your meeting times and develop a plan of action for the goals you and the mentoree hope to accomplish.
  - d. **Invest.** Pour into the life of the mentoree from the vaults of your life. Give him or her anything you have to enrich his or her life for the cause of Christ.
  - e. **Intercede in prayer.** Pray for the person you are mentoring and pray with the person you are mentoring. Prayer is vital and essential for spiritual growth and development. The mentoring process will be greatly aided through prayer.

This process is simple and it provides a person with enough structure to adequately mentor someone. The task force could train mentors by giving them tools to facilitate each strategy point.

4. Utilize the task force. The task force will be the primary vehicle for ensuring that those in the congregation who desire and need mentoring will receive it. The task force can facilitate the training of potential mentors within the congregation, utilizing some of the above suggestions. Also, the task force will be responsible for linking together mentors with mentorees. They can also be challenged to mentor others themselves. Once again the task force, not the pastor, is the driving force that leads the congregation in the task of mentoring.

It is important to remember that mentoring centers on relationship. Good relationships require trust, accountability, love, commitment and a willingness to give time. These qualities also form a good mentoring relationship. While there are many technical aspects to mentoring, the relational components are all important. If a person knows that you genuinely love them and are concerned for their well-being, you will have a great opportunity to affect that individual's life deeply for the sake of Christ. Ease the mind of the congregation from the pressure of having everything figured out at the outset. Encourage them to simply get involved in the lives of those in need. They can learn as they go. The little morsel they feel they have to give through the context of a mentoring relationship can provide a feast for some father-starved child. Just taking the time to be with a person can have a great impact.

## Prayer

Prayer is the most important aspect of the strategy. I believe if anything is going to have kingdom and eternal consequences, prayer must be a part of the process. The ability of focused and concentrated corporate intercession to impact the fatherless situation cannot be overstated. Prayer releases the power, aid and grace of God to work in a given situation. As E.M. Bounds states, “Prayer has all the force of God in it.”<sup>2</sup> Understanding the magnitude and the enormity of the problems surrounding father absenteeism, a force greater than ourselves is needed to minister to affected individuals.

In the book of Acts several accounts of the force of corporate prayer are illustrated. One such example is found in Acts 4:23-29. In this instance the apostles were jailed for speaking in the name of Christ. When they were released from jail, they were threatened and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus anymore. Upon their release, the apostles’ first order of business was to communicate to the community of faith what had just transpired. The community’s response to the immediate crisis was prayer. The Scripture says, “They raised their voices together in prayer to God” (Acts 4:24). The community engaged in corporate prayer, and God answered in a miraculous fashion. The place where they were praying was shaken, and they were all filled with a supernatural boldness. Also, God worked miracles to meet the needs of hurting people and to strengthen the community in its ministry task.

I believe if the church will corporately pray for fatherless children, single moms and broken fathers, God will work. Just as the account in Acts, God will work miracles in

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<sup>2</sup> E.M. Bounds, *The Reality of Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 43.

the lives of the people for whom we pray, and he will continue to give the congregation the wisdom and strength it needs to minister to the fatherless. So then, how does a pastor mobilize the congregation to pray for the fatherless? Here are several suggestions:

1. Utilize the task force. Encourage them to be creative and develop ways to engage the congregation in prayer. Allow the burden to rest on their shoulders, not the pastor's. Also encourage the task force to assign one person as the prayer captain for the team. This person can make sure the task force prays and keeps the prayer agenda on the mind of the other team members.
2. Utilize the your current times of corporate prayer. The pastoral prayer on Sunday mornings could be a time where the congregation is encouraged to pray for the fatherless. If your church has regularly scheduled prayer times, intercession can be injected for prayer for the fatherless.
3. Develop a prayer card. This is simple. Place a couple of passages pertaining to ministry to the fatherless. You can place the names of families in the church who have father needs. Also, you can pray for marriages or whatever else pertains to the issue. Be creative and design the card to fit the needs of your particular congregation. Make sure everyone receives a card, and encourage the people to pray using their prayer card.
4. Concerts of prayer. The concert of prayer is a concept used to pray for missions. It involves taking a designated period of time and dividing it into individual segments with specific emphasis given to smaller aspects of a bigger picture. You could have a concert of prayer at your church to pray for

the fatherless. For example, once or twice a year you could designate one of your evening services or small group times to be used for a concert of prayer for the fatherless. The prayer time needs only to last an hour. Within that hour, divide the time into six ten-minute segments. Each one of these segments will have a different emphasis. One segment may be to pray for children whose fathers are absent. Another segment could be to pray for strength and aid for single mothers, and another segment could be to pray for marriages. For each segment you would have different people lead the prayer and focus time. They would simply share a passage and encourage the congregation to pray together for a few minutes on that particular focus point. I suggest that a concert of prayer be a job of the task force. Allow them to plan and facilitate the entire process.

Finally, as a pastor you must personally pray. While the congregation is praying for the fatherless on a corporate level, you cannot afford to neglect your personal responsibility. In your own private devotional times make praying for the fatherless a regular focal point on your prayer list. Pray for the task force team, and pray for the children, mothers and fathers in your church. Pray for marriages to be rich and vibrant. God will hear your prayers. Like Paul who travailed for Christ to be formed in the lives of the Christians in Galatia (Gal. 4:19), you have the privilege of travailing for the fatherless in your congregation. Your prayers will work to form wonderful things in the lives of those affected by the repercussions of father absenteeism.

In conclusion, the utilization of a task force, preaching, mentoring and prayer are useful and effective tools for helping the local church to father the fatherless who are sitting in the pews. Though many more resources and support systems are definitely needed, this strategy provides the pastor with a realistic and doable place to start. The temptation the pastor will face is to merely talk about the issue. However, I encourage you as pastors to be doers of the strategy and not talkers only. Work with your task force, and encourage them to be creative and diligent to implement the strategy they have worked so hard to develop. The need is great, so be patient and with God's help over time, many lives will be powerfully affected because your church made the effort and took the time to minister to the fatherless.

## CONCLUSION

From the information presented in this study, it is clear that contemporary American culture is facing a challenge called father absenteeism. The sociological data indicates that 24 million children live absent from their biological fathers, and the numbers continue to grow. Contributing to the number of fatherless children is the fact that children living in single-parent homes has tripled from 9 percent to 27 percent during the time period of 1960 to 1995, with African Americans having a higher percentage than whites and Hispanics.

The reality of father absenteeism is not something new. Through the centuries fathers have been displaced from the home for a number of reasons – the primary one being war. What is deeply troubling, however, is that today the father flight is not caused primarily by a national crisis, but by volitional choice. Many fathers now are willfully choosing not to be a part their children's lives. In the minds of many social scientists, this trend alone is responsible for a large number of the social ills affecting our youth and our society. They have termed it as one of America's most urgent needs. While the evidence does not indicate father absenteeism as the only cause for many of the delinquencies and injuries affecting our youths and families, it does indicate that father absenteeism is a principal and very powerful negative force in our lives.

The evidence clearly shows that when a healthy and functional father is in the home the children do better. Psychologically, they do not have to cope with the pain of wondering where dad is and all of the emotional traps associated with that reality. In general, they do better in school and in their development of social skills. Girls are better equipped to have wholesome relationships with males, and boys exhibit less inappropriate aggressive behavior. Having a father in the home also decreases a girl's chance of becoming pregnant as a teen and lessens a young male's chance of being incarcerated. From an economic standpoint, families do better financially when both parents are in the home. When a mother is left alone to raise the children, her income is significantly less and the vicious ills of poverty have a greater chance to harm the family.

Throughout this century the traditional family structure has changed significantly. Marriage has suffered as an institution. In the minds of many in our culture, marriage is one option among many for a relationship between a man and women that will produce children. Cohabitation and artificial insemination are other options. Along with that change has come confusion about the roles of mothers and fathers. This change and accompanying confusion creates questions about a father's role and responsibility. Scripture teaches primarily that a father should be loving and intimately involved on a daily basis in the lives of his children. In the context of a loving and nurturing father-child relationship, the father has the responsibility to ensure that the child is taught in the ways of the Lord. He is to provide encouragement and discipline in order for the child to grow in a whole and healthy manner. Scripture states that the father can best parent his children in conjunction with his wife.



Life is not perfect and the ideal situation of having a father in the home is simply not going to be the case for many people. However, Scripture presents God as a heavenly father who desires an intimate relationship with each one of his children. The depth and nature of the relationship God desires to have with his children is modeled in the relationship between the Father and the Son. The three powerful characterizing aspects of the Father-Son relationship are love, unity and dependency. The beauty of the Father-Son relationship is that at every turn the invitation is extended for whosoever will to come and to be a full participant in the divine union. The implications of this reality are huge. God is willing to be a father to whoever needs one. He is also a father who requires obedience and honor from his children, and he is a father who never abuses, hates or abandons his child. As a father, God is eternally faithful to his children.

Scripture clearly states that the community of faith has a responsibility to help father the fatherless. From a biblical perspective, true religion involves ministry to the fatherless. In light of this, the local church needs to insure that this ministry occurs within its local context. The pastor can play a key role in facilitating ministry to the fatherless by forming a task force to study the issue and delineate a workable strategy for the church to follow. He or she can also move the ministry to the fatherless forward by preaching, mentoring the youth and by systematically empowering single mothers, absent fathers and married couples with the tools necessary to be successful in parenting their children.

While father absenteeism is a significant problem facing our culture and the church, we simply cannot sit and do nothing. Each statistic represents a child whom God loves and from whom he desires the best. If a father's presence significantly lessens the

pain and increases a child's chance for a whole and healthy life, then the church needs to do all it can to ensure that fatherly influence for any child needing a father. The good news is that we have a heavenly father who is willing to empower anyone who wants help in fathering the fatherless. The question must be answered: Will you be one of those people?

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