

The Campus Minister and Family Life in the Eighties

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I

Campus ministers are strategically placed to shape family life in the 80's. Last Monday (June 2, 1980) George Gallup released a poll on family life that the White House Conference on families had commissioned. It is worth looking at carefully. I think you will see evidence of its importance in the coming days. One thing the poll discovered through the careful sampling of Americans around the country is our attitude about family. Those polled were asked what is the most important, or one of the most important things in life. 8 out of 10 answered family, (which speaks well for the importance of family life). 4 out of 10 Americans said they were deeply troubled about the future of their own families.

Family is important, then, but there are storm clouds on the horizon, and people are anxious about what is going to happen. 91% of the people polled said they would welcome more emphasis on family life in the future. 8 out of 10 people polled said they saw the high cost of living as the most important problem families face. Those polled also listed other things which they believed were threats to families. 60% listed alcohol and 59% mentioned drugs as harmful to families. 40% saw the decline in religious and moral values as extremely harmful to family life. One of the most interesting facts, in light of TV's popularity, is that TV was seen as a harmful effect on family life.

There is a great deal of concern and interest about families today, therefore, and it is good to take a look at the role of campus ministers and family life. I think campus ministers are some of the most important people in Southern Baptist life, and my own experience as a student shaped my appreciation for campus ministers. While at the University of Tennessee, the campus minister there spoke to my needs, both personally and theologically. He helped me in those formative years of my life, a time of brashness and ego and serious doubts, by speaking to my needs-encouraging me when I was down and puncturing the balloon when my ego got a little too big. I became convinced then, and I feel this way now, that

campus ministers in Southern Baptist life are some of the most influential people around. I think campus ministers are especially strategic in the area of family life. It seems to me that one of the best hopes that we have for changing the scene as it relates to family in this country is not through therapy for families who already have serious problems, (although I think we should give a lot of energy to therapy) but our best hope, it seems to me, is enrichment, education for living, preparation for family life. You work with students who are preparing for family life. While it is true that they are members of families, many of them are also in the process of preparing for marriage and parenting. You have a great opportunity to help us in the future to enrich relationships before problems develop. You have the opportunity to speak to the great joys of a happy marriage - to speak to the realities of intimacy - to speak about love in all its dimensions - to help students prepare for these kinds of family relationships before they get enmeshed in ties that are almost doomed from the start.

I want to say a word about campus ministers and their own family life. It seems to me that one of the ways you relate to students concerning family is as a model yourself. Some of you are married and some are not. Some of you have children and some do not. So I am talking about modeling in its fullness, in its diversity, in its richness. What I'm saying to you is that you are going to be viewed by students in relationship to your own manifestation of family life. They are going to look at you and your family relationships, and they are going to give attention not only to what you say, but they are going to give attention to the ways you live out family. Thus, you have the opportunity, and it is an awe-some opportunity to be a family model for your students.

Let me share an additional idea. I think it is extremely important, as you counsel with students who have problems, that you do so out of the context of a strong family life yourself. If you have serious problems, such as accepting your own sexuality, or in your sexual relationship with your mate, you must be aware of the problem and the dynamite that comes when you try to do counseling while having extreme difficulties yourself. You must first get help personally, and you must practice referring people who come to you until you can get help. People who have serious marriage problems or serious problems with their own sexuality and try to counsel other people who are having the same kind of problems, are playing with dynamite. One of the most important things I can say to you

is to know yourself and, your own needs, and if you have serious problems, do something about them before you seek to counsel other people.

Companion to that idea is the need for us constantly to remind ourselves about what time it is in our lives. I understand this a lot better at age 41 than I did at age 31. We need to be aware of what is going on with us personally in our own development, because it affects our family life, and our relationships in general. You are a campus minister and you are going through passages in your life and you have to stop and think about how they affect your relationships from it with your family and your students. A good word for counselors is take time to see what is in your own life and how it is affecting your relationships.

II

Let me share several possible scenarios about family life in the future. The worst possible scenario is that the mobility, the pluralism of values, the anonymity of our society, the stress that families are facing, the bad role modeling we are seeing, will combine to doom family life as we know it. Some people are saying that except for the first couple of years in child rearing we don't need families, that the family will wither away and be replaced by other institutions. Divorce statistics and surveys demonstrate the unhappiness with family, and a variety of illustrations are offered to point up the fact that family life is doomed.

The best possible scenario is that family life is not doomed, but is entering its golden age. Given the pressures that families face, the family will serve as "portable roots" for us. The changes that are taking place are simply the sparks to provide the best possible times for family.

I doubt that we are in the worst possible time - there is too much evidence that many people are happy with family life and they want greater happiness. On the other hand, I do not think that we are entering into the golden age for families either. The problems that so many families face and the likelihood of incredible difficulties in the future, make it fairly certain, it seems to me, that we are not ready to go to a golden age soon. Rather, I believe we're going to have a mixed scenario in the future, and that things are going to be up and down related to family life. It is very possible, as we give attention to our own family life that we as campus ministers working in the Christian community and the other structures of society can strengthen the institution of family. We have an opportunity to bring about change for good, an opportunity to make

family life strong. I see a picture of hope, but I also see some trouble signs. Family life is going to be mixed, and we must work energetically to try to strengthen families everywhere.

I think what we need to do in the midst of all this is try to understand the principles for dealing with families, principles that come to us from the scriptures. The biblical view of the family is vitally important to us as we try to understand both professionally and personally, how to structure our own family life. The Bible teaches two major ideas about family life. The first is that family life is very, very important. The institution of family is ordained by God as we see in Genesis 1:27-31. Again, in Genesis 2 the establishment of family is a great time of celebration, as Adam says "Wow! Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!" (This is a loose translation!) The fact is, the Bible takes the family very seriously. God gave great dignity to family life and approved the human family by sending His own son to live as a human with a father, mother, brothers, and sisters. The Bible teaches us that the family is extremely important. I won't preach a sermon this afternoon, but if I were to preach, my text would come from I Tim. 5:8 where Paul is in the midst of a discussion about the way the early church is neglecting widows. He gives the warning that if we neglect our relatives, especially those of our own household, we have denied the faith and are worse than unbelievers. That's a tough test for orthodoxy!! We can be absolutely correct doctrinally and be worse than infidels by neglecting our own families! We can be so proficient in our work as campus ministers, always being on time, staying late, meeting every need on campus, being loved by everyone, and yet be worse than unbelievers.

The second major idea about family in the Bible is that family is not ultimately important. There is a real danger in making our family our idol. There is real danger in being concerned about the shape of our houses and making them our temples - there is real danger in the obsession with possessions that go in these houses. There is real danger that we will focus so on having good vacations, getting new gadgets, gimmicks, improving our relations with each other, all of which are fine in themselves, that we will make all these the highlights of our family life and neglect what should be ultimately important, namely our relationship with God.

There is a great danger that we will make our children our idols. Children cannot bear the burden of divinity that we parents keep trying to thrust upon them. They will be disappointed in themselves if we teach them that they are little gods. We will be disappointed in them if we think of them as little gods. Sooner or later the disappointment is bound to come. The Bible teaches us that if we give ultimate importance to our relationship with God then our

other relationships will take on their proper perspective. We will be genuinely fulfilled and happy and joyful in family life as we ultimately relate to Him, because He will bring quality to family living. I think that's what we have to teach students and understand ourselves.

My father died at the end of last December. We buried him on the last day of 1979. He had a heart attack and lived three weeks before he died. Just before he died he called the family around him and said, "I think I'm going to live for ten more years, but in case I don't I want you to know that I love you." Then he said, "You know why our family loves each other so much? The reason we love each other so much is because we have God's love in our hearts." That's the secret! God's love. Let's face it. We're often unloveable. As David Mace has pointed out, an intimate relationship like marriage and family calls out the worst in us at times. So the way we are able to love each other is to call on God's love in our hearts that enables us to love one another in family. Our family relationships are based on grace - a gift of God's love - not on works - not on chain of command - not on some legalistic structure or over-under relationship - it is mutuality and a sharing submission to Jesus Christ within our hearts and in our relationships, which can indeed enable us to love one another. That's Good News for the 80's! It's good news on the campus, and it's good news for us individually as campus ministers.

III

In the light of what the Bible teaches us about family, that we are enabled by God's love, there are some areas to which we need to help students give attention. We can help students relate in family by helping them to incorporate worship in their family setting. I think a lot of us run on empty as we go through life. If we are to be giving and growing, we need spiritual nurture and worship resources to recharge us, and I think that's the key to family life. You have a good opportunity as campus ministers because people expect you as ministers to say something about worship. Don't let them down! It's a good opportunity for them to develop the discipline of worship, so they will know where they are going. Jean Paul Sartre died recently, and you may remember he said in *The Word* that he saw himself going through life as a "traveler without a ticket." What worship does for us is to keep us from being travelers without a ticket, especially in family life. So there must be attention among students to develop cultivating, nurturing, worshipping, spiritual resources.

We can help students prepare for family life in the 80's by helping them understand the process of moral decision making. Paul Simmons has already told you about some of the tough moral decisions families are going to have to make about life, death, birth - the kind of decisionmaking that requires a careful understanding of how to decide what is right and wrong. You cannot give students all the answers because a lot of problems they will face haven't even come up yet. We need to give them an understanding of a method or process that will enable them to sharpen their ability to decide what is right or wrong, to understand how to use the principles in the Bible which can help them face these problems that haven't surfaced yet, but will be coming in the 80's and 90's. I think we overlook the family as an important place for developing not only values and character, but also for developing the ability to decide what is right and wrong.

In the third place, I think it is important to help students prepare for family life by providing them education concerning human sexuality. I am not talking about the genital expression of sexuality alone, but to sexuality in its broadest sense. Everything, about a person that has to do with being male or female. That is the kind of education we need. There's a great vacuum right now in our society related to male and female roles. There is an incredible need for a responsible word about being truly free as a male or female human being. There are women's liberation movements - many different kinds of movements and some of them are very wholesome and positive, and some of them are bad. I hear people say that women's lib has gone too far but the truth of the matter is women's liberation has not gone far enough!!

What we need is not just to try to follow movements that are helping women get a piece of the action, to get caught up in the power struggle - get caught up in the dehumanizing institutions - jump on treadmills with the men who are also being dehumanized. What we need are male and female human beings who are liberated to try to change these institutions, and to try to change these power structures that are so dehumanizing. The lib movements are not going too far, they are not going far enough! If we can come with a word of liberation from Jesus Christ, we can turn things upside down. We can avoid shoving women into the same kind of unhealthy and manipulative structures that men are caught in. All of us can work together to try to humanize institutions, to try to be the human beings God created us to be - truly free in Jesus Christ. We need to speak to the great vacuum, the frustration, anger, and the enormous hostility, that comes from people who are not truly free as males and females in our society.

Another area of concern is to help students enrich their marriages. I went to a Marriage Encounter with my wife several years ago which was very liberating for me, because I had a good marriage already. The experience helped strengthen our marriage. The marriage enrichment movement does just that — helps marriages become better marriages, more fulfilling marriages. The most effective thing it is doing is to help couples improve their communication, by enabling them to talk about feelings. Much of our communication is the Archie Bunker type — put down communication. A lot of our humor is not very funny. There is a lot of that kind of communication in our families. If we put each other down in our family communication we become defensive and find it very difficult to deal with problems that we have to face as a family. On the other hand, if in family we can cultivate the ability to share our feelings, we have moved from putting others down and making them defensive to making ourselves vulnerable to others. Thus, we open the door for continuing dialogue and sharing. I think one of the keys to developing an intimate relationship is to develop the capacity for sharing feelings with one another. Males in our society are frequently taught that we should not share feelings because we demonstrate weakness when we talk about our feelings. If you are able, men, to develop the capacity to share feelings in your communication I think you will be giving students the key to communication. I think communication is the key to a rich and healthy relationship. So education, based on the communication of shared feelings is extremely important.

We need to help students find ways to cope with the violence in their society. The 80's could be called the Age of Anger because there is so much anger in our day - anger in our country about the economy, anger about the technological changes taking place with which people cannot cope, unhappiness because their wants have been unrealistically raised by TV commercials and their wants do not coincide with their budgets. I saw a man get out of a car and beat on the windshield of another car because the car had cut in front of him. He couldn't break it, but he didn't care; he just kept beating and beating on the windshield. I thought that man is acting out what a lot of people feel — tremendous anger which often leads to violence. We must help students to learn how to acknowledge their own anger, help them know how to curb their anger, so that it will not break out in violence.

One more word in our work of preparing students. We must help students prepare to face crises. Do you remember what you were like when you were a student? You probably haven't suffered a great deal, you were going to conquer the world, you had all that confidence and brashness and no crises had come along in your

life to temper you and help you perceive that life is a great deal more complex than you thought it to be. We need to help students anticipate crises - not that we ought to puncture their spirits - on the contrary - but help them be aware of crises that are going to come. When my wife and I lost our first son we were not ready for that. When we talk to students about death and chronic illness, crises that come, we can help them prepare by finding resources which will enable them to anticipate and deal with crises. In so doing, I think we will strengthen them as they look to the 80's.

Campus ministers have a unique opportunity to claim a generation for Southern Baptists at a time when we need the energy and vigor, the enthusiasm of students in our denominational life. You have the opportunity to claim for us a generation of healthy families in a time when this country needs strong and healthy families to become involved in shaping the eighties for God and for good. I wish you well as you meet this challenge.