

SECTION 2

RENEWAL WITHIN THE FAMILY

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By Dr. David S. Bishop

God loves the family.

Several years ago while in a time of intense seeking of God concerning the church I was pastoring. I received what I felt was a word from the Lord. I didn't hear an audible voice and I didn't carry on a conversation with God. But what I sensed has become a conviction that has motivated my ministry. It was simply this. When I stand before Almighty God, He is not going to ask me how many church building projects I completed or how many positions of leadership I was allowed to fill in life. What I think He will ask me is two-fold: *What kind of difference have you made in your community and are you bringing your family with you?*

As to the former, I cannot escape from the oughtness of the Great Commission ... to win and to disciple. Frankly, I believe it is possible to win a city for God and I want to be a part of seeing that happen. I believe the God of Jonah still lives.

As to the latter, I believe the family is indescribably precious to God. There is not a member of a family anywhere that is a throw-away to God. As to my family, I have told the devil he cannot have any one of them for they are God's and they are mine. If he tries to take them, I will contend with him for them ... and we (God and me) will win! I believe the God of the Apostle Paul still lives who counseled the Philippian jailer, *Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved X you and your household* (Philippians 16:31).

Spiritual renewal can never be man's work alone. Dr. Lamar Vest in his book, *Spiritual Renewal: The Pain and the Glory*, reminds us that spiritual renewal is a dynamic happening. It is a vibrant movement brought about by an act of the Holy Spirit. It will never come through human efforts. He goes on to say, *It is noteworthy that none of the great spiritual awakenings of the past were started by a group of ecclesiastical leaders who called a conference and announced, >Now let's get busy and have spiritual awakening.= Quite the contrary to that, spiritual awakenings are ushered in by simple people who get so hungry for a move of God they can't eat, sleep or be content until they experience a fresh, explosive move of God. Our plans and programs may help get us in the right frame of mind and spirit, but they will never bring about renewal. *Renewal is a gift of God to desperate, spiritually hungry people* (p. 14).*

That's the way renewal came during the Great Awakening that swept the eastern seaboard of our fledgling country during the mid 1700's. The first generation of Puritan pastors and laymen had been godly men for they sacrificed much for religious freedom. Yet, religious fervor declined during the

second and third generations. They lost what was called the power of godliness and became but formally religious. Their main interest was gaining gold rather than godliness. They followed what was perceived to be an Old Testament model. In remembering Abraham's growing wealth, they sought to be only pious enough to be prosperous. Social honor, money and the founding of a dynasty, like Abraham's family, became the focus.

Into this lukewarm mix, the prophetic Cotton Mather poured his godly soul through work, preaching and writing. He denounced what was happening with the words, "Piety hath begotten prosperity, and the daughter hath devoured the mother!" He understood, however, that the culture could not be kept Christian through an Old Testament form of legalism. Enforcing Puritan laws would only create rebellion and formalism. He felt a New Testament approach was necessary where vital Christian laymen would leaven every part of society with biblical values. He spent 490 days and nights of prayer for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit which would give power for such a task. In a sense, he was the first Pentecostal protestant because he was praying for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit like the one which energized the early church. This outpouring began to occur in 1727, the year of Mather's death.

Was it worth it? Indeed it was! That move of God became known as the Great Awakening and it turned New England and surrounding areas inside out as lay people were once again gripped with a sense of the reality of God's glory and the seriousness of sin. Its impact was felt as far south as Georgia and the Carolinas and as far east as the country of England. And it revitalized the American family with spiritual fervor.

Where are priorities today? What is the condition of the church? And what is the state of our families? In many, perhaps most, Christian households, the bulk of energy and attention is given to surviving in the American rat race. The counsel of our Lord seems to be foreign in such households: *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.* (Matthew 6:33).

TODAY'S FAMILY NEEDS SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

Today's family is in trouble. The picture in the America of the 90's is not a pretty one. It shouldn't be necessary to underscore the national condition with statistics, but there's a good chance the truth is more shocking than we have dared to acknowledge.

Consider these statistics that reflect American morality. Of white marriages in the 1940's, only 14 percent divorced. Today, a generation later, that figure is at least 50 percent. Between 1970 and 1992, the percentage of babies born out of wedlock leaped from 11 percent to 30 percent. By contrast, illegitimacy in Germany is only 15 percent, in Italy 7 percent and in Japan 1 percent. In addition, cohabitation has increased six-fold since 1970.

As to divorce, social architects of the new age have proposed divorce as a citizen=s right; a civil liberty, rather than a social ill. Such a shift in thinking has had widespread ramifications. In America today, half of our children will witness the breakup of a parent=s marriage. Of these, close to half will see the breakup of a parent=s second marriage. Another ten percent of these will witness yet another parent=s marriage breakup. Studies show that a child is worse off having a divorced father than a dead father.

There are voices in our society who denigrate the traditional family unit while championing the cause of the single parent. I tiptoe carefully through this minefield for there is already much pain and many exploded dreams. I don=t wish to add to that pain. Yet, the decline of the traditional family model and the moral climate of America contribute greatly to the problem. Today only one third of whites and one fourth of blacks and Hispanics say they Astrongly disapprove= of having a baby outside of wedlock. Disapproval is even weaker among younger women and the well educated. Statistics indicate that the single best predictor of the degree of violence in a given community is the proportion of single parent families. As the number of unattached males rises, violence toward women increases. As Afatherlessness= grows, the status of women plummets.

As sad as this picture is, there is still much more. I have not mentioned child abuse and molestation, spousal abuse or domestic violence. But while statistics are graphic, they are cold. They give some insight but they don=t always portray genuine injustice. Our lives are not lived in a data file, they are lived in the daily grind where people try and sometimes fail. Statistics don=t always given the human side of motivations, failed opportunities, shattered dreams or failed resolves.

The tragedy is that much of the problem has crept into the church. We no longer find ourselves exempt from society=s family ills. The Bible writers expected the believer and the church to be a Achange-agent= in society. In too many quarters, rather than being a catalyst for positive change, the church=s beliefs and practices have been altered by the thinking of society. This is not what Paul intended when he wrote in Romans 12:2: *ADo not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God=s will is X his good, pleasing and perfect will.=*

GOD HAS MADE PROVISION FOR THE FAMILY=S SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

The good news of the Gospel is that there is help when we fail and there is renewal when spiritual vitality has lapsed. As a pastor, one of my greatest joys has been to give hope to the downtrodden and crushed. At times that hope may seem out of reach. The hurt may have seemed too great or the failure too devastating, but the help is always there.

I am reminded of Debbie. It wasn=t her real name but I wish to protect the innocent. She came to us hurt, afraid and ashamed. There had been a careless lifestyle, broken promises ... and she was

pregnant. Her parents were greatly disturbed. What do you do when you are young, you've complicated your life, the future looks grim and you are not sure there is even hope? Thankfully, hope is one of God's renewable commodities. My wife and I were able to lead Debbie to the renewal there is in Jesus. We were there when the little Felicia was born. We officiated when the baby was dedicated where I reminded the church of the responsibility we all bore to this child and the single mom. We were there when the mommy resumed working and little Felicia grew. We were there when mommy married. And I was there for several Grandparents' Days when I would receive a Happy Grandparent's card. Although unrelated by blood, the card would often read *ATo the World's Greatest Papa.* Isn't it wonderful that renewal can be real?

Frankly, spiritual renewal is God's will for all who have failed. When David sinned with Bathsheba he prayed: *ACreate in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me ... Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me* (Psalm 51:10, 12). The Prophet Habakkuk's prayer put it plainly: *ALord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds. O Lord. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy* (3:1).

Spiritual renewal is wrought through God's provision alone. It comes to those who commit themselves to Him, His working, His way and His timing. *ADo you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint* (Isaiah 40:28-31).

Spiritual vitality is kept vibrant through a daily renewal of the spiritual mind (Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 4:16; Ephesians 4:23). Three disciplines are necessary: yieldedness to God, internalization of Scripture and putting the Word into practice. Parents must realize the importance of these disciplines as models and as mentors. They must point the way for the family and lead the family in the expression of holy practice.

DISCIPLINES THAT ARE ESSENTIAL FOR FAMILY RENEWAL

1. There Must Be the Priestly Role of the Father in the Home

The Levitical priest in the Old Testament filled his office by divine appointment. He had a two-fold responsibility. First of all, he represented the people before God. When worshipers came to present their offerings, he prepared the way for them to stand in Yahweh's presence. Secondly, he represented God to the people. It was his responsibility to see that they understood what was expected of them as the people of God.

The father's priestly role in the family offers striking parallels. He, too, has been divinely appointed to his task. God holds the father accountable for the family in a way in which He does not require accountability of the mother. While parental responsibility is joint responsibility, the father is the one who must give an account to God for his family. It is because of this accountability that God has given him the authority of headship. He is to be under God's ordained authority with his household under that same headship. He is to be the spiritual covering for the family. He is to bear his family daily to the Lord in prayer, covering their daily needs and pleading the blood of Christ over their lives.

In addition, he brings his family into the presence of God and represents God to his family. One of his responsibilities is to read and teach the Word to his family. It was a pattern God gave to godly fathers in Deuteronomy 6 when he said, *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.* The model of teaching proposed was one of incidental instruction. No matter the occasion, the place or the timing, whenever an opportunity to instruct in the ways of the Lord was presented, it was to be seized upon. Such instruction still produces excellent results.

2. There Must be an Embracing of True Parental Authority

True parental authority is based on God's Word. Sociologists and anthropologists have devised various theories concerning the origin of the family. The fact of the matter is, the family was God's idea. In Genesis 2:18 the Bible records, The Lord God said, *It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.* And again, *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh* (verse 24).

If parental authority is going to be valid, it must find that validity in Scripture. Proverbs 4:1, 2 says, *Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding. I give you sound learning, so do not forsake my teaching.* Again the wise man said in 6:20-23, *My son, keep your father's commands and do not forsake your mother's teaching. Bind them upon your heart forever; fasten them around your neck. When you walk, they will guide you; when you awake, they will speak to you. For these commandments are a lamp, the teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life.* Proverbs says in 13:24, *He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.* And, finally, there is the classic, *Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it* (Proverbs 22:6).

Two major issues bring parents to the counseling office X authoritarianism and permissiveness. Authoritarians tell the child, *My way or the highway.* Permissive parents say, *Have it your way, Honey, can I drive you anywhere?* Sadly, both approaches miss the mark. They leave the child feeling unloved, insecure, unapproved of and unrecognized because of operating in an irresponsible

way. They erode the child's delicate self-image and sense of self-worth. Allowed to go to extremes, both approaches lead to serious family dysfunction.

True parental authority is fair but firm. Within the firm-but-fair approach there is honesty, great flexibility and freedom to fail. Children have freedom to think, ask questions and express their feelings in an appropriate way. There is an opportunity to make choices within limits. While love is unconditional, real love is balanced with limits. The limits are there for the safety, well-being and proper training of the child, not merely for the convenience of the parent. When these choices are made, there must be integrity of living by the choices whether as consequences or rewards. In all of this, every child will need lots of hugs followed by plenty of talk.

3. There Must be a Return to the Distinctive of Pentecostal Families

The power of the Holy Spirit which energized the New Testament church greatly impacted the family. Jesus demonstrated family loyalty, yet He taught that commitment to Christ could bring division (Matthew 10:35-37).

First century believers were intense in their worship. Their new-found faith was all-consuming. Daily they worshiped at the temple and broke bread from house to house. Miracles were common, and persecution was frequent. All these factors affected family life. In essence the life of the family was the life of the church. In many cases (perhaps most), the entire family was involved in the work of the church (Acts 16:31-34). Despite an early experiment in communal living, individual family responsibility was emphasized.

The early church was birthed in Pentecostal revival. The identifying feature was the manifestation of power resulting from the infilling of the Spirit. Daily they saw the literal fulfillment of Jesus' promise, *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you...* (Acts 1:8). How deeply family life must have been influenced by the dramatic multiple conversions which took place. Whole families were caught up in the power of the moment and committed themselves to the faith (Acts 2:42-43).

The power of the Spirit in the early church was manifested through the working of miracles. Lives being delivered, the sick being healed and dead bodies being raised, as well as the perfecting of human relationships. Paul emphasized that being filled with the Spirit would cause a believer to be submissive in the husband/wife relationship: *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord ... Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ...* (Ephesians 5:21, 22, 25).

4. There Must be a Return to the Distinctive of Intensity in Worship

New Testament writings indicate an intense involvement in worship on the part of early Christians. Undoubtedly much of the worship activity involved the entire family because most worship services were held in homes. Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison gives an interesting look into early church family life and faith (Acts 12:5-17). When Peter was imprisoned, an all-night prayer meeting was called at the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. As the families were praying together, a knock was heard at the door. Rhoda, one of the young ladies present, came to answer. Upon hearing Peter's voice and without opening the door, she ran excitedly to tell the others. They didn't believe her story but humored her, saying it was probably his angel. However, as Peter continued knocking, they let him in and were astonished at the miraculous answer to their prayers. That this was probably a home prayer meeting and not an official church service is indicated by the fact that no major church leaders were present (verse 17). What an incredible impression this must have left upon the family members attending.

5. There Must be a Return to the Distinctive of Practical Holiness

In His teaching Jesus underscored the importance of integrity and moral purity. He frequently called attention to the corruption and hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. An important focus of his message was emphasis upon selflessness and sincerity in a person's relationship with God and with others.

Of particular concern to the Apostle Paul was the tendency of the church at Corinth to be impacted by the influence of the world. He reiterated the Old Testament admonition to, *A come out from them and be separate ... touch no unclean thing ...* (2 Corinthians 6:17). He went on to admonish, *ASince we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates the body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God* (7:1).

The call for holy living in the early church was nowhere stressed more strongly than in family relationships. Primary focus was given to the fidelity of the marriage bed (Hebrews 13:4); the fulfilling of parental responsibilities (through nurturing relationships) (Ephesians 6:4) and the care of deprived family members (James 1:27). One of the qualifications for church leadership was effectiveness in family relationships. Personal holiness was seen as being most credible in the confines of the home (1 Timothy 3:2-5).

As it was with the early church, so must it be today. An encounter with Christ must impact the individual with the most force at the level of primary relationships ... those found in the home.

CONCLUSIONS OF THE MATTER

Indeed, many contemporary Christian families need a spiritual awakening. The good news is that spiritual renewal can come and it is worth it no matter the cost.

God has provided the basis for family renewal. We do not have to be overwhelmed by negatives that confront us in our world. This is a time to be impacted by the positive reality of scriptural truth (Psalms 2:1-4; 24:1; 103:19; Matthew 16:18; 28:18; Romans 12:1, 2; 2 Peter 1:3, 4). Should the Lord tarry, we have been given everything we need to build a heritage for the next generation that is as solid as the Rock of which Christ spoke ... as lasting as His love ... and as sufficient as His grace.

When we stand in eternity, it will mean everything to have the family together. Such a reality will stand as a tribute to God=s grace and to the family=s diligent devotion. Every effort expended toward that end will seem as nothing compared with the sheer joy of spending eternity together with God.

What kind of answer are you preparing to give should He ask you on that day, AAre you bringing your family with you?≡

Dr. David S. Bishop is the Senior Pastor of the Westmore Church of God in Cleveland, Tennessee. He has served the Church of God as General Executive Council member, West Coast Christian College Board of Directors chairman, Theological Seminary Pastoral Advisory Council member, Ministerial Development Board member, District Overseer; and many other boards, councils and committees. He has had several long-term pastorates and is a noted speaker for conferences, camp meetings and convocations in the United States and abroad. He has authored numerous books, chapters and articles for publication.

For more information on this subject, please contact:

Dr. David S. Bishop
Westmore Church of God
P.O. Box 3442
Cleveland, TN 37320-3442
423/479-3415
Fax: 423/559-5646
E-mail: westmore@chatt.mindspring.com
