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How Can We Rescue the Family?
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Soccer, dance lessons, school activities—involvement options for families today seem to have no end. But how do all those "family" commitments affect local church ministry? Is it possible to put too much emphasis on the family?

Next time you visit your Christian bookstore, notice how many books are available on the family. What you'll see is graphic evidence of the explosion of evangelicals' interest in the family. You could say we're obsessed with the family.

You might think people would be tired of hearing about the family, but that's not the case. People regularly tell me they wish we would offer more material on the family. My series of messages on *The Fulfilled Family* is consistently one of the most popular topics on our radio broadcast.

With all the material available to help families, why are so many Christian families in trouble?

May I suggest that our preoccupation may be part of the problem? We have become so engrossed in the family itself that we are losing our perspective on why the family is important to God and where it really fits in His kingdom plan.

I don't mean this as criticism of any of the valuable ministries that exist to help the family. Many of them fill a much-needed role, articulating biblical principles for family life. I thank God for them.

But not all teaching that claims to be pro-family is genuinely biblical. In fact, some of the popular ideas that have attached themselves to Christian pro-family movements are clearly a threat to the true purpose God designed for families.

It's amazing how many Christians believe, for example, that the family is *always* a priority over ministry. I know parents who have bailed out of any form of Christian service, thinking extracurricular church activity is an automatic threat to the sanctity of the home. They have become so absorbed in family activities that they don't have time to exercise their spiritual gifts. Several people have told me they don't attend Sunday evening church services because they set that night aside for "family time."

Those are revealing attitudes. Have we lost our sense of the family's real mission? Could it be that our infatuation with the family has actually fostered a kind of self-indulgent diffidence toward our spiritual responsibilities?

The family *is* high on God's list of priorities. The sheer volume of biblical teaching about family relationships demonstrates that. God wants children to honor their parents (Ex. 20:12), husbands to love their wives (Col. 3:19), wives to submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22), and parents to train their children properly (Prov. 22:6). But Scripture never suggests that we should elevate the temporal family at the expense of God's family. We dare not turn our backs on the kingdom for the sake of our families (Luke 9:61-62).

Christian families are not an end in themselves. They exist to further the work of the kingdom. They do this by being a testimony to the unredeemed and by showing hospitality and service to all, especially those who are of the household of faith (cf. Gal. 6:10).

Too many today see the family as a shelter exclusively for family members, a retreat from the world. They wall themselves in, even from the church. They concentrate on temporal, self-focused, self-gratifying concerns.

Study, for example, the trends in "Christian" family therapy. Today's counselors seem to major on the externals—having date nights, affirming one another's dignity, participating in a sport or a hobby together, or better sexual techniques. They make children the center of the family, stressing the importance of stability and privacy, well-organized and exciting family activities, and on and on.

There's nothing wrong with most of those things—in their proper place. But we have emphasized them to the point of overkill, producing an almost narcissistic perspective. We assume that a mutual obsession with family members' needs will hold the unit together.

All those things are external props; they will not rescue a falling family. They may even deflect a successful family to the path of failure.

Real help comes when we see that the family exists for a purpose outside itself. Our families are healthy only to the degree that they understand their primary function in this world is not to be fulfilled within themselves. True family solidarity is a by-product of together exalting Christ, obeying His word, and being spiritually vigorous.

The family that knows its spiritual and redemptive purpose does not need external props. It has a supernatural cohesion. Its members have no option but to stay together and build meaningful relationships, not for their own sakes, but because they are compelled by the highest of goals.

Put another way, people who understand that their family's chief aim is to testify of Christ and His life-changing power have no option to get divorced, commit adultery, abuse one another, or otherwise self-destruct. Do you want to keep your children from rebelling? Begin by teaching them from the earliest age that the family's most important calling is to exalt the name of Christ in the community by living in obedience to Him.

It is right that we strengthen our families. But let's not attempt to do it with gimmicks or self-centered efforts. Let's live not only for each other, but for the Lord. In living for Him, we will end up fulfilling one another. May God give our families a supernatural sense of their purpose, and may we be a testimony for Him in the midst of a hostile world and a needy church.

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