Evangelizing **Whole Families**: The Value of Families in the 21st Century
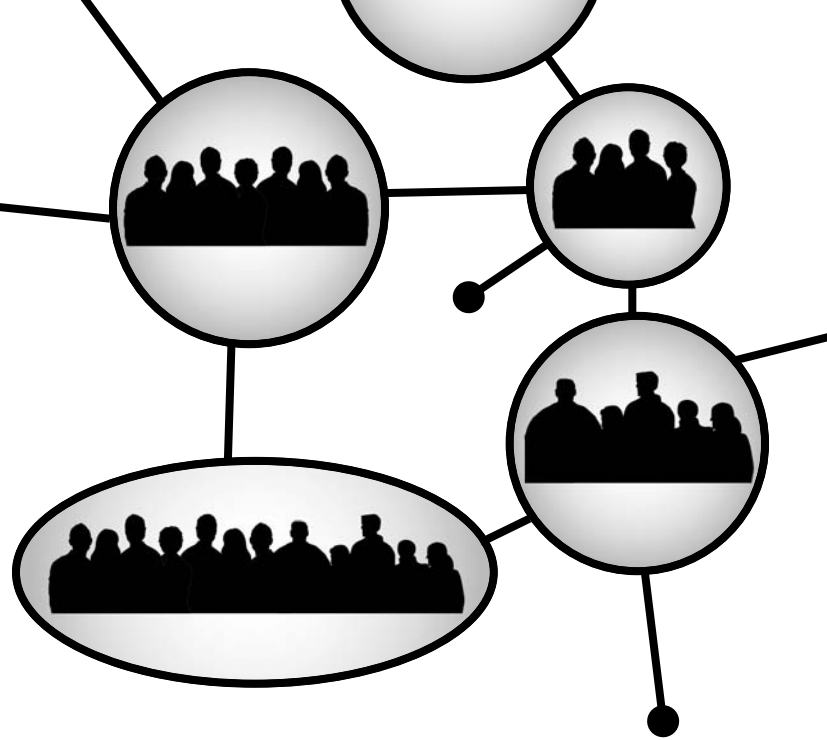
ALEX SMITH

Trends Renewing Emphasis on Family in the Twenty-First Century

Down through history until the Industrial Revolution of the 1800s, the major pattern of families was the extended family, more than the nuclear family. The clan, tribe and extended networks of family webs were generally self-sufficient, supporting the members through hunting, gathering, gardening and animal husbandry. Everything they needed for food, clothing and housing, they produced together. They married, raised their own children, cared for the aged generations and buried their own dead.

By the mid-1800s the Industrial Age had arisen. Manufacturing cities became the major population and work centers, drawing the masses from the rural and tribal areas. As families left their villages and kin, these nuclear units became free of the controls and restraints of the village and ancestors. They also became exposed to and often involved in social evils that they would never have considered participating in back in their traditional familial settings. As Communism dawned, Karl Marx saw the family as an antiquated structure and predicted

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it, along with capitalism, would vanish. He was wrong. His experiment in encouraging casual dating and easy divorce, as well as the later "free love" movement went awry. In fact, after the Revolution of 1917 Joseph Stalin stopped those kinds of practices and declared the family to be "the basic cell in society."

Everything, including economics, styles of living, and means of employment, changed in this new world of industrialization.

Farming families especially, were drastically affected. In 1900 ninety percent of Americans lived off the land by farming. They also lived on their own land. In 2000 less than ten percent in the USA were farmers. Over time this mobility during the Industrial Age caused a break up of many extended families, as nuclear families became the dominant economic earning units in the cities of industry. Up until the early twentieth century, grandparents lived in, with or next to the members of their extended families. In the latter half of the twentieth century that pattern increasingly changed to isolated, independent units of living, often hundreds of miles apart. By then most extended families did not live together or even nearby.

However, in recent decades that is now changing. The pendulum is swinging back slowly. In November 2008, Britt Hume reported on television's Fox News that four thousand households in America now have three or more generations living together. In *Grandparents under the same roof*, Hume noted that the decade between 1990 and 2000 experienced thirty-eight percent increase of this

phenomenon of three or more generations living together. This trend of multi-generational domicile indicates a new feeling and sense of people needing family.

Significantly in "The Family: At Home in a Heartless World," Rowland Croucher affirms the extended family model. He writes that "no (nuclear) family can provide for all the needs of its members. I believe it's time to re-tribalize. The extended rather than the nuclear family is the best model (and always has been). As we live in 'community' incarnational love is experienced again and again; we are loved in spite of our faults and failings and even our sinfulness" (1994:3).

Historical Change of Approach Following the Reformation

Another kind of change seems to have become detrimental to the extension of the church and its pioneer outreach in virgin missions following the 1700s. Prior to the Reformation, much pioneer church growth occurred, mostly from in-gatherings of whole families, clans, tribes and peoples. Historians like Kenneth Latourette (1953:100) and Stephen Neill (1973:31-77), as well as missiologists such as Bishop Waskom Pickett (1933:37f) and Donald McGavran (1970:173f; 296f), affirmed that from the earliest centuries of the church, family, group and people movements were foundational to the extension of the church. Stephen Neill's chapter, "Conquest of the Roman World, A.D. 100-500," indicated that the key to the extension of the church was the movement of the gospel from people to people and country to country until the whole of the Roman Empire was reached. Writing about Asia Minor to Emperor Trajan about 112, Younger Pliny "was dismayed by the rapid spread of the Christian faith in the rather remote and mainly rural province of Bithynia in northwest Asia Minor." Pliny made note of "many in every period of life, on every level of society, of both sexes… in towns and villages and scattered throughout the countryside." The "evidence of Pliny is unimpeachable; we seem to encounter here one of the first mass movements in Christian history" (1964:31). Here was an obvious major family movement. Near the end of the fourth century in the time of John Chrysostom, the population of Antioch was not less than a half a million and "half the inhabitants at that time were Christian" (1964:32). Neill reported that "The church of North Africa was a church of bishops. Every town, almost every village, had its bishop," in contrast to the rest of Christendom, where "bishops were located only in the cities," and were few in number (1964:38).

Armenia became another Christian kingdom, reached through witness from Cappadocia. Tradition says that when Gregory the evangelist and wonder worker became Bishop of Cappadocia "there were only seventeen

Christians in the city, but when he died thirty years later there were only seventeen pagans" (Neill 1964:53-54). Armenia became the first known case in which the conversion of the king was the first step in the conversion of the whole country. King Tiridates accepted Christianity as the religion of his state. The families of aristocracy and common people followed en masse. A second factor was the association of the church with the language and thought of the people, for Gregory preached in Armenian. The third element came as the New Testament was translated into that language in 410 (1964:54).

Another case occurred through Patrick who returned to Ireland in 432 staying until his death in 461. At the time of his return "Ireland was almost wholly, if not entirely, a heathen country." By "the time of his death, Ireland was largely a Christian country" (1964: 56). In 493 Clovis, King of the Franks married a Christian princess of Burgundy. She did her best to convert him. Later, in a crisis, "Clovis swore that, if victory was his, he would become the servant of the God of the Christians. He kept his vow; on Christmas day 496, he was baptized with three thousand of his warriors." (1964:58). In 596 Pope Gregory the Great sent Augustine to Canterbury, England. King Ethelbert of Kent had married Bertha, a Christian princess from Gaul. Augustine's preaching converted the king and by the end of the year Augustine baptized 10,000 Saxons (1964:67-68). Among the Franks and other Europeans, Boniface had a particular practice or habit, "When a group, often under the influence of a chieftain or ruler, had decided to become Christian, it was customary to baptize" them "without any long delay" (1964:77). Thus for more than a thousand years the church expanded across nations through massive family movements.

The Reformation of the 1500s faced a different situation than the early pioneer settings which were mostly among unevangelized people groups. Primarily, the reformers were dealing with largely nominal, already churched communities. Throughout the Dark Ages moral corruption and unbiblical practices had saturated the church, resulting in spiritual weakness and large-scale nominalism. Under these conditions the primary focus of the Reformation was *within* the churched communities across Europe. In these Christianized populations the call for renewal of personal faith and individual salvation was rightly warranted. In that context a change of emphasis to the individual was correct. The Reformation thereby brought renewal and revitalization to the existing church. Faced with the consequent Roman Catholic Counter Reformation, much energy of the Reformers, at least until 1648, was spent in "fighting for their lives" (Neill 1964:220).

As Ralph Winter pointed out, the Reformers did not organize new mission structures comparable to the

former missionary training monasteries. In fact, they discarded the monastic system (1999:226f). It was likely that Christian meditation, frequently nurtured in the monasteries, also ceased to be practiced around that period. This was one weakness of the new movement. Thus the Reformation did not spawn major missions across cultures to new unevangelized populations for more than another two hundred years (Pierson 1999:263). There was little thought of missions (Neill 1964:220-226). During the seventeenth century a few exceptions arose in Europe, notably the Moravian mission movement, which started in 1732. Consequently when William Carey and others launched the Protestant modern mission era in the late 1700s, the Reformers' pattern of converting "individual by individual" was carried over as a dominant evangelistic and mission strategy. Unfortunately this re-newed pioneer outreach to frontier unreached peoples did not generally return to the earlier biblical model and his-torical pattern of evangelizing whole families, tribes and ethne. At the restarting of the major mission enterprise, a definite change in methodology seems to have occurred.

In his 1970 article R. Pierce Beaver succinctly noted this changed emphasis of mission strategy following the Reformation. The aim of seventeenth-century Protestant missions of the Dutch, British and Americans was that peoples like the East Indians and Native Americans "would be converted, *individually* receive salvation, and be gathered into churches." In reaching the Native Ameri-cans at Martha's Vineyard, Thomas Mayhew followed "a slow, individual, personal approach." Beaver summarized nineteenth-century missionary strategy of the Protes-tants as being "aimed at individual conversions, church planting, and social transformation" through actions of "evangelism, education and medicine" (1999:244, 249).

When did the family approach change to an individual one? At the point when Reformation mission to unevangelized nations was restarted almost three hundred years later. The Reformers' theology and practice in reaching out to new un-reached peoples did not return to the earlier biblical family approach. Instead a theological shift to individual evange-lism, individual salvation, and calling to individual personal holiness were emphasized. The move from biblical theology to systematic theology helped advocate this ignoring of fam-ily evangelistic approaches too. Calvin's *Institutes*, as well as synthesized or summarized creeds, or shortened theological tenets, like the *Westminster Catechism*, tended to focus on the individual growth and not on evangelizing and discipling whole families and their entire extended families.

Nevertheless, God's Spirit often overruled in His harvest and spontaneously gathered some whole family networks, tribes and people groups into the church, especially in the non-Western world. One wonders how much greater the ingathering might have been and how much speedier evangelization accomplished had family and group evangelistic approaches been the intentional method of modern missions, particularly among Hin-dus, Buddhists and Muslims.

Modern illustrations of family and people movements include the Mizo, Naga, Karens, Toba Bataks, Karo Bataks and many others who transferred their allegiance to Christ as family after family came into the church fold, until a large majority had become Christians.

Myths and Objections on the Family Group Approach

Myths and ignorance concerning individual evangelism or conversion abound. Some sound quite plausible, but deeper scrutiny often explodes the myths. The *first* objection is "salvation is only an individual thing, not a family thing." Individuals can and do convert but, among resistant populations, usually will lack the solidarity of the group's backing, often essential for survival and added growth. Individual converts can soon become social misfits, or fringe people in society. Where a movement of families or multi-individual, mutually interdependent decisions of small or large unified groups occur, stability is more likely than that of several scattered individuals. Strong individu-als sometimes can be innovators and catalysts to reach their own family networks, if motivated to do so.

A *second* retort says "Students are so receptive we should go for them now and not worry about their families." Asian youth in universities have some freedom to choose. But what about after they graduate? Who chooses their wives, work and jobs? Mostly the parents and elders come back into force after graduation. Even student churches do not remain student oriented forever.

Thirdly, "Youth work and children's ministry are superior because they build for the future generation. The old generation is 'dyed in the wool,' of the old way, and can't change." Again in Asia the family structure and its control indicate that most children have no power of decision or control of action until adulthood. So while we should not neglect the youth we are wiser to reach them along with their families.

Fourth, some advocate "Children and youth are more important because they are easier to reach and mold. Save a child and you save a life. Save a broken adult or family and you have no end of troubles to solve." Gener-ally, conversion and growth in family groups provide the best stability, normality and strength for youth. They should be cherished and reached, but this is best done in the context of the whole family. Taking deliberate steps to reach out to the families of interested scholars and

children is a vital strategy. The worst sin of evangelism is to reach a child, but neglect his or her family, which is their nurturing ground and controlling entity.

Fifth, some say "It is better to have a few individuals who are genuine Christians than whole families that need so much work that you never are sure that they will become strong." There is no guarantee that "our" isolated individual believers are holier, stronger or more stable than those in family groups.

Sixth, "Separating individual believers from their unsaved families is biblical, better and builds them stronger in face of opposition." They are to "come out from among them and be separate." This misinterprets the Word. History proves these views are wrong, on all counts. Co-dependent "rice" Christians usually turn out not to be the strongest disciples.

A *seventh* objection is, "Only individuals can have a relationship with Christ, not so for the diverse family." This is true for "personal" salvation generally, but here we are talking about the best strategy for producing long-term stability against often-fierce opposition, particularly among resistant peoples. The family comprised of a majority of new believers becomes its own nurturing force, closing ranks on the outside powers of opposition. Families throughout Scripture have been kept by the grace covering of God.

Eighth, "Group and family movements are shallow, weak and unstable." This can be true if post-decision nurture and teaching are absent. Family movements require suitable post-conversion evaluation with sustained teaching, training, discipleship and consolidation. But in the end the strength and solidarity of the Christian family stands tall. The strong Christian family can be a powerful model and tool for extending the gospel throughout the extended family and local community. History proves this.

Ninth, is a sad commentary, "Winning one by one individually is always the way we did it back home in our churches, so let's do it in missions too." The thinking advocate of indigenous methods will question this as a theologically good mission strategy. It has the seeds of proud ethnocentrism and ignorance of social and family structure across cultures.

Tenth, "Massive numbers of families coming into the church dilute it and produce nominalism." Not necessarily so, depending on the prompt nurture and training given. Individual converts can be weak, nominal and just as easily dilute the church. Often they may not have the strength to stand alone against the opposition of the family or village.

An *eleventh* view suggests that "Doing God's work with a few individuals is better than distributing our ener-

gies among the multitudes or multiple families." This mentality can produce the small insular ghetto church and favors a fortress mentality, instead of the vision for reaching out to the whole community or people group in self-sacrificing service.

Twelfth, some feel "If we do not accept the individual when opportunity to believe arises, they usually miss the salvation boat." While not advocating the rejecting of individuals, the group approach is one of faith in God and hope for the family by exercising love to the whole interrelated group. Often the "one by one against the tide approach" only shuts the family off from the gospel.

Lastly, "Individual salvation through "one on one" is the proven, successful method of some major evangelistic agencies. This form of evangelism is taught in churches, seminaries and Bible colleges." Unfortunately, it is also passed on to new and old native converts of foreign missions as "the best or only way to do real evangelism." Maybe changing this approach to "one on a whole family" might be an even better method with stronger and more extensive effect. It would be more culturally appropriate too.

Concluding Practical Applications and Suggestions

Modern societies face growing dilemmas of enormous moral declension and ethical challenges. These complexities demand that the church return to stress the family in its involvement with local communities, rather than remaining apart in insular isolation. The more the church is involved locally with the families of its surrounding society, the more effective and valued it will become. This conclusion primarily offers advice to Christians; it suggests some vital principles to apply to reaching families; and finally it recommends a key simple model to win families.

First of all, the church must accept responsibility in regards to family groups. Christians might well repent for failures to serve families in their immediate communities. Often the church's ambassadors have unwittingly contributed to family breakdowns and domestic divisiveness, not only through neglect, but also by their policies and practices in service and evangelism. Their tactics have frequently isolated individual converts from their families, instead of integrating loving ministry to their whole families through the church.

Church workers and missionaries should study and understand the sociological and cultural dynamics of families, the familial structures and their decision-making patterns. Making decisions in Asian families is often not an individual thing, but a family affair. So the church needs to take the whole family into account when anticipating increased and lasting conversion.

Notice that Christ's Great Commission commands us "to make disciples" (plural) not disciple (singular). Neither did Jesus instruct us to do that individually, "one by one." The emphasis is more likely "ethne by ethne," or family group by family group, tribe by tribe and people by people (Matt. 28:18-20). The Apostles obviously understood Jesus' command as from the beginning they won and incorporated whole families into the church. Few isolated individual converts are highlighted in the New Testament. The Apostles then extended the family movements out to reach Romans, Greeks, Gentiles, Goths and so forth. "Family by family" was the primary approach and mostly the usual mode of response for more than a millennium and a half.

Second, here are some vital principles and practical tactics for reaching whole families:

- Change the way we pray, from patterns of just individuals to lifting up whole families, their extended families and their family webs and networks before God.

- Focus outreach ministry and service objectives on specific families as the clear goal or reason for evangelism. This intentional strategy may produce quite surprising results.

- Experiment with creative ways to reach whole families. Test models, methods and strategies to do this. Research the effects of the process and its results. Recycle the best lessons learned.

- Foster building friendly relationships with whole families over time. Effort taken to invest in gaining connections with families does take energy, but is well spent.

- Develop family friendly tools and approaches to families rather than just to individuals. Mass media has tended to major on resources focused on individuals, little on families.

- Teach and encourage new interested seekers to begin sharing the good news with their families and their relatives, even before they themselves become committed believers.

- Allow time for the dissemination of the good news to penetrate and permeate whole family networks, before calling families to commit prematurely. Diffusion helps here.

- Practice patience, persistence, and perseverance in order to see whole families reached, penetrated, won and discipled. Pushing for speedy decisions, pressure to show results back home, and commando approaches are to be resisted rigorously. As Rome was not built in a day, nor are genuine converts or family conversions produced instantly.

- Immediately incorporate family accessions into house churches from the start. Most of the cutting edge extension of the church and its multiplication in Asia are found in tiny fellowships—usually less than fifteen or twenty members, sometimes only five to eight.

- Evaluate results in terms of families won, not just individual converts. Statistics should reflect both categories. The most vital one is the number of new families brought into the Kingdom.

Not only can heads of households start family movements, but sometimes they are started just from one relative's Christian witness to the family also. From there the movement is purposely spread throughout the extended family networks, across natural bridges of relatives and friends. It takes discipline to keep the group in mind.

Normally, time for diffusion of the gospel and its permeation to all members of the family network is required. Clear understanding and acceptance of the gospel may take even up to two and sometime more years. By not withdrawing from normal relationships, interaction and customary events of the family and the local community, Christians' witness can portray genuine faith and commendable ethical living to the society at large.

As family movements occur, it is essential to nurture the movements so that each member of the family affirms personal faith and relationship with Christ. Nurture adds spiritual depth to the members of believing families. Usually family house church fellowships are easily initiated. Unpaid local family leaders can be trained to function in them and to mobilize relatives for more extension into other family networks.

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