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# How Can the Church Prevent the Breakdown of the Fragmenting Cambodian Family? 

Glenn MILES

## What is a family?

The Cambodian view of the family differs from that of typical Western conservative Protestants. The latter have regarded the "nuclear" family-typically with three or four members-as the traditional model. But this view owes more to European culture than to the Bible, and is far from what is "normal" in most cultures, including Cambodia.

In Bible times Hebrew families were grouped together in houses. An interdependent Hebrew household was made up of between fifty and one hundred people. These were in turn united through marriage, kinship, and adoption to form clans. Several clans constituted a tribe, and the confederation of tribes made up Israel. According to this model, the family was not just a social unit but also an economic and political one. Marriages were arranged and a "bride price" paid to seal the covenant." Whole households, including children, worked together on the land. This pattern has much in common with the extended families found in rural Cambodia today.

[^0]In this context marriage is usually arranged, and a covenant is made not just between individuals, but also between families. Where parents are loving and concerned for their children's welfare, arranged marriages can result in a successful union of dynasties. They are also a strong reminder that two families are being brought together, not just two individuals. This can strengthen the bonds within the community, and economic ties further reinforce the relationship.

## What causes family breakdown in Cambodia?

Problems may arise within this model if parents of a bride and groom make decisions for their children without any regard for their opinions or needs, such as choosing a partner on purely financial grounds. Another unhealthy model in Cambodia is the dominant patriarchal marriage, in which men become abusive towards their wives and children, and rarely if ever consult them in decisions that affect them. Domestic violence is common in Cambodia.

Political ideologies, too, sometimes wage war against the family unit. For example, during the Pol Pot era the family rice pot was broken as a symbol that the new regime would do away with the need for the family. Everything was supposed to be provided by the Angkar (the new regime), which even arranged marriages. Children were expected to speak out against their parents if they were going "against the Angkar." Many children became the soldiers who enforced the rules; such a role reversal violated the traditions of respect for the elders.

Cambodian culture still contains many fatalistic attitudes. Men still blame their wives if the family is poor, and feel that this can justify their desertion.

In a society where people's belief structures-in Cambodia's case Buddhism, animism, and communism-have been challenged and left a vacuum, people may turn to materialism as the answer. Money becomes a god. "If only I had enough money everything would be OK," people think. So in some "middle-class" families both parents work long and late; and see very little of their families or each other. Relationships become frail and break down.

## What is God's concern for families in Cambodian society?

What would God have us promote or discourage, protect or challenge, in the area of family life? Scripture does not always present a rosy picture of the family. We read of fratricide, rape, incest, adultery, and murder-as well as love and loyalty-both within households and beyond them.

Nevertheless, the "family" can be a relationship and an institution in which God's grace is experienced and where people can find nurture and healing. It is a place where they can grow as persons in their individuality, in their social relations, and in their relationship with God. ${ }^{2}$ However, like any special relationship and institution, "the family" can become perverted by sin, with people being disloyal, competing for power, and neglecting responsibilities. Sadly, some churches have at times misinterpreted Scripture in an attempt to justify such wrong behavior.

As mentioned earlier, the Old Testament gives us the model of the extended family. This was not just a social but also an economic and political unit. In the New Testament we see marriage as a covenant relationship, characterized by mutual submission, respect, and service. Thomas Aquinas ${ }^{3}$ described how children are made in part in the image of their parents, and therefore naturally belong to and are valued by them. But they are also made in the image of God, and belong to and are valued by Him. He compares Christ's sacrificial love for his church in Ephesians 5 to a father's love, in order to reinforce the long-term commitment of fathers and husbands to their children and wives.

Yet the family in the New Testament is seen not just in terms of kinship and marriage, but also as the community of believers. Paul describes the church as a family. The New Testament church met in households, where fellow believers were to be welcomed like relatives. Those baptized, according to Paul,

[^1]have been adopted by God. ${ }^{4}$ Their siblings are other Christians. Their inheritance is the community of believers. ${ }^{5}$

In a culture where the family was more important than all other relationships, the New Testament church was to reach out to the Gentiles, to the unlovely, and even to enemies. Clapp suggests, "Paradoxically, a family is enriched when it is de-centred." ${ }^{\text {" }}$ The Christian family is therefore not a safe haven from the world, but rather a powerful witness to the world. Even vulnerable families need to learn the responsibility and joy of reaching out in hospitality, rather than fearfully withdrawing into a "bunker" type of self-preservation mentality, which has been so common in the Cambodian environment of thirty years of war.

Jesus himself reinforced the importance of the community of believers on various occasions. He emphasized his relationship with his heavenly Father over his parents, ${ }^{7}$ and he described the disciples as his "mother and brothers" over his own family. ${ }^{8}$ Later he says that those who love father or mother more than they love him are not worthy of him. ${ }^{9}$

This is not to denigrate the family. In a country where the father of many children is absent because of Pol Pot, civil war, abandonment, HIV/AIDS, or simply excessive work demands, we need to encourage men to take their responsibility for their wives and children seriously. God sent angels to ensure that Joseph took his responsibility in fathering Jesus seriously and did not abandon Mary as he might have done. God went to some trouble to make sure there was no risk of the breakdown of the marriage of Joseph and Mary, thus ensuring that there were two parents.

[^2]
## How can the church support the family?

Parenting in Scripture occurs in the context of marriage. This does not mean that in ministry we ignore those who are parenting outside a marriage, but it does mean that we value the relationship between parenting and marriage within the church. The church also needs to find ways to stop men from drifting away from families and parenthood. Cambodian men need to understand that if their families are poor it is not their wives' fault. There is no room for fatalism in the church, and the church needs to challenge such assumptions. Cambodian men also must understand the importance of faithfulness to their wives and families, and avoid promiscuity.

Supporting parents is vital. There needs to be encouragement of parental responsibilities towards children and the development of a caring community around them. "God himself trusted His own Son to humankind as a vulnerable child, requiring that Son to be nurtured by a frail but able family and community, symbolically provid[ing] a model of trust and responsibility. . . ." ${ }^{10}$

In the Old Testament, although children were entirely subject to the authority of the head of the household and counted legally as his property, "there was much greater concern with the responsibility of the father for his children than with his rights over them."11 The shema, the Hebrew confession of faith, was to be impressed on children "when you sit at home, when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." Parental responsibility to teach children the truth about God and godly living was vital. In Proverbs 6:20 children are encouraged to keep their father's commands and not to forsake their mother's teaching. Proverbs 22:6 talks about the responsibility of parents to create a

[^3]desire for spiritual things in children from a young age. ${ }^{12}$ Men in the church can and should provide role models for children.

In the early church children were encouraged to obey their parents. There is no surprise about this. It reflects one of the Ten Commandments Moses received. However, parents were then encouraged to "bring children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord," and fathers were encouraged not to "exasperate your children, lest they lose heart." ${ }^{13}$ Since Paul's letters were to be read aloud to the whole churches to which they were sent, the fact that he addressed parents and children in them is significant. First, he assumes that children belong to the community of the church and that they would be present when his letters were read. Second, he encourages mutual responsibilities on parents and children. This challenges the common assumption at that time that the parental role carried with it unlimited authority over the children of the family.

Although parenting does require sacrifice, "loving your neighbor as yourself" is key. ${ }^{14}$ "Love as equal regard" provides a balance between modern individualism and the more traditional ethics of extreme duty and self-sacrifice. This understanding of love is especially important for those Cambodian mothers and wives who have "disproportionately carried the burden of enacting self-sacrificial models of Christian love."

While children can most benefit from growing up in a twoparent family, this is not always possible. Both the Old and New Testaments mention responsibility to orphans and the fatherless. Being an orphan in ancient times meant being deprived of support, losing legal standing, and becoming vulnerable to those who would exploit the weak. God is seen as the defender of the fatherless, ${ }^{15}$ and the covenant community is encouraged to practice similar

[^4]compassion. ${ }^{16}$ The same was true of the early church, where a "pure and faultless" religion was exemplified by those who "look after orphans and widows." ${ }^{17}$

The difficulty for the Cambodian church today is that there are many children who do not fit neatly into the two-parent family structure. Children may have been separated from one or both parents through war, disaster, accident, or the ill health of a parent. In the past there have been culturally appropriate ways of absorbing orphans-into the extended family or into a monastery, for example. However some communities-for example those greatly affected by war or those with a high incidence of HIV/AIDS-may feel they cannot cope. In these situations the supportive environment of the church family can provide a model different from that of the surrounding community and explore how it can support orphans

The Cambodian church has many families headed by women. Pastors need to understand how each situation arose; because the issues such families face will vary according to the circumstances. One family may suffer a history of violence and abuse, whereas others may have to deal with widowhood, desertion, or promiscuity. There are no simplistic solutions. The church must first find out what the needs are by gently developing relationships, asking, and then being ready with appropriate support.

Grandparents, aunts, and uncles, where available, can play a supportive role. This should be encouraged. In some cases they are the main providers of care for the child. The influence of peers is also important for children's physical, emotional, and spiritual development.

Cambodian churches need to recognize that the number of orphans is likely to increase due to HIV/AIDS, and must take the issue of orphans seriously. One Takhmao church with a congregation of eighty has taken on the responsibility for seventeen orphans. Various members have opened their homes to children to sleep overnight, and then part of the collection money on Sunday

[^5]goes towards paying for their food. They are taking the Biblical mandate of caring for widows and orphans seriously.

As well as considering what to do with orphans in the community, the church needs to look at how they can prevent children from being orphaned in the first place. In Cambodia this may result from loss of parents by death or abandonment, but children can receive inadequate care for other reasons. Where a marriage is fragile, the church needs to support and strengthen the marriage. In this way it may enable relationships to be restored and prevent family breakdown, violence against women, desertion, and divorce. Similarly where parent-child relationships are strained, support of parents in a loving community may prevent child abuse and inter-generational violence. There may be other ways that the church can temporarily look after children until vulnerable parents can develop greater resilience.

The church in Cambodia can provide a model very different from that of the surrounding community. Ideally, Christian couples are committed to each other and to their children, and are secure enough in God's love that they are willing to reach out to the unlovely and include them as part of their extended family.

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[^0]:    ${ }^{1}$ Gen 34:1; 1 Sam 18:25; Lev 27.

[^1]:    ${ }^{2}$ Stephen C. Barton, "Towards a Theology of the Family," Crucible Board for Social Responsibility (Jan-Mar 1993): 4-12.
    ${ }^{3}$ S. Pope, The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 1994).

[^2]:    ${ }^{4}$ Rom 8:15-17, Gal 3:26-4:6.
    ${ }^{5}$ Mark 10:28-31.
    ${ }^{6}$ Ronald Clapp, Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional Roles and Modern Options (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1993).
    ${ }^{7}$ Luke 2:41-52.
    ${ }^{8}$ Mark 3:34-35.
    ${ }^{9}$ Matt 10:37.

[^3]:    ${ }^{10}$ Viva Network, "The Oxford Statement" (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, and Viva Network, Jan 6-10, 1997).
    "Chris J. W. Wright, God's People in God's Land (Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster, 1997), 239. See Deut 21:18-21; 21:16; 2 Ki 14:5-6.

[^4]:    ${ }^{12}$ Deut 6:4-9.
    ${ }^{13}$ Eph 6:1-4; Col 3:21.
    ${ }^{14}$ Don Browning, "Christian Ethics and the Family Debate: An Overview," virtual International Journal of Practical Theology: 1999 [www2.uchicago.edu/divinity/family/].
    ${ }^{15}$ Deut 10:18.

[^5]:    ${ }^{16}$ Ex 22:27.
    ${ }^{17}$ Jas 1:27.

[^6]:    A modified version of this article was presented to the United Pastors Fellowship Annual Retreat on 8 March 2001 at Kompong Som.

[^7]:     incitsier טn

[^8]:    (b) Stephen C. Barton, "Towards a Theology of the Family," Crucible Board for Social Responsibility (Jan-Mar 1993): 4-12.
    (m) S. Pope, The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 1994).

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[^10]:    (3) Ronald Clapp, Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional Roles and Modern Options (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1993).
    
    
    

[^11]:    ${ }^{(90)}$ Viva Network, "The Oxford Statement" (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, and Viva Network, Jan 6-10, 1997).
    ${ }^{(99)}$ Chris J. W. Wright, God's People in God's Land (Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster, 1997), 239. See Deut 21:18-21; 21:16; 2 Ki 14:5-6.

[^12]:    
    

[^13]:    (96) Don Browning, "Christian Ethics and the Family Debate: An Overview," virtual International Journal of Practical Theology: 1999 [www2.uchicago.edu/divinity/family/].
    

