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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Family Life: a Primary Sphere of Christian Establishment and Expansion

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GOD has not only ordered human life according to the family pattern; he also commonly chooses to make families the sphere of his special activity and blessing.

Families Have a Place in God's Purposes

SO God's great purpose in Christ for the blessing of the world was under his providence anticipated and prepared for by God's choice of a family unit as the sphere in and through which he was pleased to work. Starting with Abraham and his family God defined his ultimate larger purpose by saying to him, 'In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'—a promise repeated in similar words to Jacob (Gen. 12:3; 28:14).

Later, at the time of the great Passover deliverance in and from Egypt, care was to be taken, by God's command, to provide a lamb for every family (Ex. 12:3, 21). Or again, through his prophet Jeremiah, God declared, 'I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people' (Jer. 31:1). This, then, is how God particularly thinks of his people and provides for them; as a company of family units rather than as a host of solitary individuals.

Similarly, when God has purposed to raise up a man to do some outstanding work for him, he has commonly begun by choosing the parents through whom he was to be born, and by whom he would be brought up. Their contribution was fundamental and indispensable to the full outworking of God's purpose. We have only to think of the parents of Moses and Samuel, of John the Baptist or Timothy, to realise how true this is.

Yet again, in New Testament times when the Gospel began to spread the chief sphere of its penetration and establishment was the same—the

family. In his book entitled *Pentecost and Missions*, in a chapter dealing with 'The Witnessing Church in Action', Harry R. Boer has made a discerning assessment of the importance of this feature. 'It is very evident,' he writes, 'that although faith is always an individual commitment the conversions which Acts records took place within large social contexts. . . . The Church was not built up of so many individual Christians but of *basic social units*, of *organic wholes*, and these units, these wholes, were the fundamental cells of society, namely *families*.'¹

You and your Household

SO, at Philippi, when 'the Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul', Lydia 'was baptised, with her household' (Acts 16:14, 15). When Paul and Silas answered the jailer's enquiry, 'Men, what must I do to be saved?' it is noteworthy that they said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household'. And the following record explicitly mentions the participation of all his family in hearing the word, in believing in God, in being baptised, and in rejoicing greatly. (See Acts 16:29-34). Later, we similarly read of Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue in Corinth, that he 'believed in the Lord, together with all his household' (Acts 18:8).

Response to Christ and the Gospel was in these cases a family affair. It was led by the head of the household; it was shared in by the whole family. This is a pattern it would be pleasing to see repeated here and now, in Britain today.

An Unchanging Universal Social Unit

'*THE family*,' comments Harry R. Boer, is, according to the record in Acts, 'the one social unit . . . that is repeatedly mentioned as being converted *as a whole*'.² This is how faith in Christ most significantly took root and became firmly established in new centres—by the conversion of whole families. In addition, Boer asserts, 'The New Testament clearly does not extend the believing social unit beyond the family. It is at that point that unit baptism stops.' This is the more significant, so Boer argues, because amid constant change and much variety of social structure the family is the one social unit that remains constant or intact. 'The family is a social structure that is met at all times and among all peoples. Clans, tribes, castes, and other forms of society may come and go, but the family abides. The reason for this is that the family is a divinely instituted social unit.' 'The family and the relationships which it necessarily calls into being are abiding and cannot be destroyed.'³

An Obvious Object for Evangelisation

HARRY R. BOER then invites his readers to make a practical deduction when he writes, 'The heavy emphasis that Acts places on the conversion of families as units requires the closest attention of the student of missionary principles and practice'. For 'it is clearly around this divinely given social unit that the churches founded by the apostolic witness were built.'⁴

The same theme is treated by D. A. McGavran in his book *The Bridges of God. A Study in the Strategy of Missions*. He contends that in missionary strategy the primary unit to be laboured with is the family. This principle, he asserts, operated in the early Church under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit. He pinpoints its practical importance when he writes, 'The most successful answer to ostracism is the conversion of chains of families. The lone convert is particularly susceptible to boycott.' 'Movements gather enormous power as relative after relative becomes Christian.'⁵

Is this not, therefore, the strategy to which there ought in our own land to be some deliberate return? There are large areas of our population in which Christianity makes little impact or progress because families are not won as families. The men are largely unreached. The home is not seriously invaded or properly possessed. Any hold on women and children tends in consequence to be incomplete and often without enduring fulfilment. We need, therefore, to learn from the Scriptures, both Old Testament and New Testament, and to be taught afresh by the Spirit, that God deals with people most deeply, and with the most enduring and widespread consequence, by dealing with them in families, and by securing his daily acknowledgment in the home.

Making Religion a Family Affair

TO further this end it is the men—particularly, of course, the married men, or those likely before long to be married—who must be reached and confronted with God's truth; and confronted not in a meeting for men only where their family connections (actual or potential) are deliberately forgotten, but confronted as those who have (or may soon have) by God's ordering the privilege and responsibility of leading their families in the way they should go.

The end, too, may obviously be furthered by securing the attendance at church of the family at a family service. But this, successful as it may seem at first, will be unproductive of deep permanent result unless the parents treat participation as a demanding adult responsibility, and not as something shared in simply at the children's level for the children's sake, to be dropped as soon as they grow older. Indeed, what will

ultimately reveal its full genuineness as a mature family participation will be if the family still delight, when possible, to go to worship together as a family, after the children have all grown up.

Reaching this desirable goal will of, course, be helped or hindered by the way in which such family services are conducted, and by the quality of the teaching that is given in the full programme. It can be fatal to imply that religion is only for children.

Also, it would appear to be particularly relevant to suggest that, if there are place for, and profit to be gained from, both instruction in preparation for marriage and occasional consultation after marriage to obtain guidance and advice, there are surely equal place and need for those who are (or are expecting soon to be) parents to be given appropriate Christian teaching on the discharge of parental responsibilities; and to be able to discuss practical questions and particular problems that arise, either in a group with other parents, or in private consultation with a minister or other experienced parent. This seems an area in which many would welcome help, and all too little is available.

A Local Centre of Vital Godliness

FINALLY, not only going to worship on the Lord's day with the Lord's people, but still more the daily recognition of God at home, need to be made a corporate family concern and commitment. Parents need to recognise that it is they who are in the first place responsible for the proper Christian teaching and training of their children; and that the home and the family are the place, and childhood and adolescence the time, where and when lives can be, by God's grace, most decisively established in enduring Christian faith and devotion.

Also, when families and homes are as social units corporately committed to such faith and devotion they can be used by God, in a way solitary individuals from outside cannot, to reach, influence and win other families alongside which they live, or with whom they are in constant contact.

There is great practical wisdom, and wisdom of continuing relevance to our day, in words Philip Henry wrote three hundred years ago: 'It is not so much what we are at church, as what we are in our families. Religion, in the power of it, will be family religion.' So what is greatly needed in our land to make our Christianity more deep-rooted, and to make our practice of it more enduring and all-embracing, is a genuine and widespread revival of family religion.

¹Harry R. Boer. *Pentecost and Missions* (1961), p. 165.

²Harry R. Boer. *Pentecost and Missions*, p. 168.

³Harry R. Boer. *Pentecost and Missions*, p. 176.

⁴Harry R. Boer. *Pentecost and Missions*, pp. 172, 176.

⁵D. A. McGavran. *The Bridges of God. A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (1955), pp. 18, 21, 22.