Family Structure

by Eugene S. Gibbs*

Many Evangelical Christians have become champions of what they call the "traditional," or "biblical," or even "natural" family. They take this to mean a husband, a wife, and 2.1 children: a nuclear family. James Davidson Hunter believes it has become for them "...a symbol of stability and traditional moral virtue"(quoted in Clapp 1993, 10). These virtues are especially found in the ideal of lifelong faithful monogamy, bread-winning fathers, stay-at-home-with-children mothers, no premarital sex, and heterosexuality. Tim LaHaye in *Battle for the Family*, James Dobson and Gary Bauer in *Children at Risk: The Battle for the Hearts and Minds of Our Kids*, and Pat Robertson in a chapter in *The New Millennium* entitled "The Assault on the Family" all project the nuclear family, along with U.S.–style capitalism, as the biblical model for Christian families and also as the foundation of historic America (cited in Clapp 1993, 10). Evangelist James Robison relates faith and nuclear family to the "American way of life" (quoted in Clapp 1993, 11).

While many Christians might support some of these ideals as virtues, in fact the nuclear family as we know it, in the main is a product of Germanic westward invasions between the 6th and 9th centuries that broke up the Roman household *(familia)* into more independent peasant agriculture as a basic unit of economic production (Brundage 1987).

During the period of feudalism the households of the nobility grew to great size, sometimes numbering in the hundreds. They included relatives, allies, and servants. Also a wife might have six to eight children (Bresc 1996). Even peasant marriages took place only after much deliberation by the feudal lords, as the household was the major unit of economic production. The heads of household of both the prospective husband and wife had to determine what the new alliance between the two kinship groups brought about by the marriage would bring for the advancement of both (Fosssier 1996).

By the twelfth century often only one son was allowed to marry and carry on a noble lineage (Quale 1988). Children were perceived to belong to that lineage rather than to the mother. The kinship group grew in importance and independently arranged marriages were discouraged (de La Ronciere 1988).

With the colonization of North America the extended or augmented household became the norm. This started with a nuclear family, but expanded to

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meet the needs of the community. What we might call "families" functioned as schools, vocational institutes, Christian formation centers, houses of correction, welfare institutions, poorhouses, orphanages, and hospitals (Demos 1970). Every household had to adjust to the needs of the larger community. Since this was so critical for the good of the community, it was deemed proper for the local government to intervene if a household failed in its duty. The household included everyone living under the same roof. After 1640 house size began to accommodate to these household expansions (Demos 1970).

While the first colonies were male dominated, women had a vital role. They could hold property and pass on an inheritance. They could make legal contracts, a right which had been denied them in England. Widows could insist on prenuptial contracts to protect themselves and their children. Wives had, by law, to be consulted in the sale of property. In these cases a wife was considered an equal partner in the marriage. Even liquor licenses were sometimes granted to single women, usually widows, almost never to single men (Demos 1970).

In the pre-Civil War decades families began adjusting to the industrial revolution. While the nuclear structure was beginning to be seen as basic, it was actually varied in several ways. Many families were aggregates of kinship groups. Some were childless couples, some surviving spouses with children (single-parent families), some combined grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews and nieces. The more affluent included domestic servants within the family unit. The less affluent could include paying boarders (Wallace 1978).

By 1855 a mill culture began to grow in the U.S., facilitating the change of families from being primarily a unit of production to being a unit of consumption based on wage earning. This continued for a hundred years, going from 46% of the labor force in agriculture in 1850 down to only 12% in 1950 (Kain 1900, 34. Quoted in Garland, 1999). Industrialization requires a mobile work force, one that can move to follow the jobs. The need for a work force increased and varied as the American west opened up to mining, meat packing, and manufacturing. Since mobile workers must travel light, too large a household is hard to move, and the available jobs might be open to only one member of the family, extended families became the exception in order to accommodate mobility. The model of preference became the limited nuclear family. Since it was no longer needed for economic production, became centered on sentiment, support, protection, and consumption (Goldscheiter and Waite 1991). These are the exact qualities exemplified in the English, Victorian middle class family. Father worked, preferably in a profession (remember all those 1950-60 sitcoms where Dad would come home from the office) and mother would manage the household and direct the domestic help. Upper class

Americans sought to emulate this pattern, followed in their desire by the growing middle class. Soon even lower class families saw this as the ideal, though perhaps hard to fulfill (Lasch 1980, Hall 1990). This Victorian family structure became identified as the ideal, and by mid-20th century its very recent origins had been forgotten.

Family structure has changed over the centuries in response to social and economic demands. None of its structures can be rightly called "natural" or "biblical" since the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments contain various structures. Most structures arose in response to social and economic, and sometimes religious, needs.

The main exception to this Victorian structure is found in the African-American tradition. Since slaves were forbidden to marry during much of the slave era in America, the broader African-American community took on a strong inclusiveness. In the 50 years ending in 1864 slightly less than 49% of slaves lived in families consisting of a married couple and their children (Malone 1992, 17). After the Civil War former slaves were not allowed the financial means to be able to move toward the Victorian model, and so very few could afford to do so. The community, and in many cases the church, were the institutions that provided support and guidance for former slave families. Often these households were deemed by the dominant culture as matriarchal. This comes from the tradition that a child born to a slave mother was a slave regardless of whether the father was a slave. Only in the last few decades has this community and church support begun to break down. Structures of many kinds met the needs of these families (Coontz 1988, Cody 1983). This is beginning to emerge again.

What some Evangelical writers insist is the biblical or natural or only structure for Christian families in reality is a response to a specific social need and changing economic conditions. This model has become envisioned as an ideal, though it was only begun by the English middle class and copied by affluent Americans. Insistence on this model has made some of those Christians who cannot pursue the limited nuclear structure feel that they cannot have a truly "Christian family". They believe that they are only second-class, or of less value in the eyes of the church. In reality what makes a family "Christian" cannot be defined by its structure alone.

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