

Family Life: In Britain Today

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Modern social developments, particularly increasing industrialisation and urbanisation, together with the greater mobility made possible by modern means of transport, have introduced very radical changes into the family life of the community. Writing on *The Family and Marriage in Britain*, Ronald Fletcher says, 'The "extended family"—the large interdependent network of extended kindred—is outmoded in a modern industrial society. The days of the clan and of the village network of aunts, uncles, and forty-second cousins, is over. The functional roots of the extended family have gone.'¹ Instead of the old pattern we find everywhere families now living singly, frequently in isolation from, and largely in independence of, their blood relatives. The single family has become a more self-contained unit.

Also the authoritarian family of the middle classes and the completely unplanned large family of the working class, alike typical of some earlier generations, have both largely given place to the small planned democratic family. The family itself has, too, become publicly recognised in new ways as a social institution. Its wellbeing is now cared for by the state and by local authorities. 'The quality of its internal life is also a matter of public concern. . . . The health and stability of the community is now seen to rest on the health and stability of its families; the social health of the individual personality is now judged to depend in great measure upon the quality of parent-child relationships. These are accepted generalities today: fifty years ago they were not.'²

Change and Improvement

Such changes have in many ways brought improvement into the conditions, character and conduct of family life. Their improvement has been the more marked because many changes have been accompanied and influenced by better social standards. The rise in status of the young wife and of children is, for instance, one of the great transformations of our time. There is, too, exercising obvious influence a better conception of marriage.

According to Peter Willmott, co-director of the Institute of Community Studies, 'The trend is from the consanguine family, one emphasising ties of kinship to the conjugal, emphasising the husband-wife bond.' 'The close-knit family, and particularly the husband and wife relationship, is becoming a more influential factor in social life.' 'What has been described as partnership marriage seems to be spreading throughout society. The partnership is both in power, with major decisions being discussed and made jointly, and in the division of labour, with the old directions between men's and women's jobs (though still made) becoming increasingly blurred.'³

Families are now generally smaller than they were. More families are separately housed. Improved standards of living and better provision for physical and material needs have introduced into family life a new degree of security. 'Husbands not only do more to aid their wives in emergencies; they also spend less on themselves and more on their families.'⁴ It is, too, the children who are now commonly put first. Encouraged by state provision parents generally are more actively concerned about the dress, the education and the future prospects

of their children. Also, 'for the first time in modern British history the working-class home, as well as the middle class home, has become a place that is warm, comfortable, and able to provide its own fireside entertainment—in fact, pleasant to live in'. And the modern husband 'spends his evenings and his weekends not with his workmates but at home with his family, enjoying common fireside relaxations with them, or else "pottering" round the house maintaining or improving its comfort and appearance'.⁵

All this means that married and family life are potentially much better. On the other hand, the intense and demanding character of the basic personal relationship between the husband and wife make the possibility of failure more obvious, and the consequences of failure more intolerable and disrupting. In new ways, therefore, particularly as far as the future of the new family is concerned, marriage today is 'for better or for worse'.

Causes of Instability

The family also finds itself still beset by serious dangers. 'The declining birth-rate, the decay of parental control, the increase of juvenile delinquency, and the growing prevalence of divorce are ominous indications of a widespread revolt against the restraints, sacrifices and duties of family life.'⁶

The new freedoms of a permissive society tend, with some, to stimulate and encourage a desire for sexual 'enjoyment' without involvement in family responsibilities. 'What so many of the modern world demand is romance without fidelity, so that when the fires of intense feeling die down, and people tire of one another, they can part without more ado. . . . Such sexuality is hostile to the continuance of the family.'⁷

The better standards of an affluent society encourage desire for material comforts and luxuries; desire, that is, for the possession of more things selfishly to enjoy rather than for the joys and sacrifices of parenthood or of other intimate human relationships. So with some married couples children are not wanted. Or, because of competition and jealousy over the acquisition of material status symbols there is lack of true friendliness towards neighbours. Such tendencies can only impair and prevent true family fulfilment.

Children, too, may not only rightly come first in their parents' attention. But also, by parents' inordinate and ill-governed love, they often tend to be spoiled, to be given too much, to be allowed without necessary discipline too much freedom or even encouragement to be self-willed. In consequence, 'we may', writes Ronald Fletcher, 'be bringing into being a generation of young people who are self-centred and uncooperative; who are intensely aware of their rights and what they can demand of society, but not so sensitively aware of their duties'.⁸ This danger is increased by the fact that, as teenagers immediately able to earn a good wage, these young people will probably have too much to spend on themselves and their possible self-indulgence.

It would, however, be wrong to allow ourselves to become too depressed by such regrettable tendencies. There is also cause, probably much greater cause, for encouragement. So, the vicar of a large town parish writes, 'We do have a number of divorces, of husbands or wives running away from home, of deserted children, alcoholism and so on. Yet the thing that impresses me is the increasing importance of the family unit, and the great sense of family spirit and family affection that we find everywhere. I wonder whether fathers and mothers have ever been keener on their families, or more self-sacrificing for them, than they are today.'

Christian Ideals

In conclusion, if we return, as we ought, to let Christian standards inform our attitude and our actions, what, in the face of these conditions, are some of the most obvious and urgent needs? We venture to suggest four.

1. We live in a world of changing values, with little or no respect for authority, with the claim increasingly implicit that every person should be free to do what is right or fancied most in his own eyes. For our guidance, judgment and correction, to unite parents and children who can otherwise so easily become divided, we need the common recognition of the supreme, permanent, unchanging authority of God-given revelation, as made available for our practical instruction in the divinely inspired written Word.

2. To counter the danger of children being spoilt and to gainsay the current educational theory and practice which encourage in children free, undisciplined self-expression, we need to be guided by the truth plainly recorded in Scripture and painfully confirmed by experience, that all who are born of women are by nature sinful and prone to sin. This means in practice that children need discipline and correction. They need to be helped to distinguish the bad from the good in the things they may do or want to do. The same truth also means that parents must not punish or correct or criticise their children as if they themselves were perfect. They must be prepared to make their children aware that they, too, sometimes do the wrong, and need God's forgiveness; and that we all alike need to learn—and to go on learning—to prefer God's will and way to our own personal and possibly selfish and sinful preference.

3. Our young people need to be helped to take entrance upon marriage and family responsibilities with adequate understanding and full seriousness. They ought to be helped fully to appreciate the practical values of the Creator's ordering of human living; that it is God's idea, not merely their youthful fancy, that male and female should become one flesh, and in their union enjoy the gift of children and the privileges and responsibilities of parenthood. What God has thus joined together men ought not to try to put asunder. Also, God's love for man shows that true love finds its full expression in the steadfast loyalty of covenant faithfulness. And so the marriage vow 'till death do us part' should be treated most of all as permanently binding by the two who are truly in love with one another; so that, when they do get married, they should with full awareness consciously and deliberately commit themselves to one another in this complete unqualified way. This should make them aware that henceforth if, before God, they are to be true to themselves they must be unceasingly faithful and devoted to one another.

4. Because single families of parents and their children are nowadays largely self-contained units with decreased dependence on, or involvement in, intimate connexion with other blood relatives, there is increasing need for them to find a new family connection with their otherwise unrelated neighbours by their common participation in that experience of God's saving grace which will consciously make them brothers and sisters in Christ, eager and able in active kindness to love one another. We need the gospel of redemption from sin for our social as well as our spiritual good. Only so will adjacent families, without unhealthy isolation or competition, fully cohere in the larger community and, above all, in the one family of God our Father.

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Endnotes:

- 1) Ronald Fletcher. *The Family and Marriage in Britain* (1966), p. 215.
- 2) Professor Titmuss. *The Family*, National Council of Social Service, p.8.
- 3) THE TIMES. 3 April 1968.
- 4) Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957), p. 145.
- 5) Mark Abrams. 'The Home-Centred Society', *The Listener*, 26 November 1969.
- 6) Rt. Rev. Dr. E. J. Hagan. *Rebuilding Family Life in the Post-War World*.
- 7) E. C. Urwin. *Can the Family Survive?* (1944), p. 21.
- 8) Ronald Fletcher. *The Family and Marriage in Britain*, p. 149.