The Role of Family in the Faith and Value Formation of Children

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Every action taken, every response made, every dynamic of relationship, every thought held, every emotion allowed; these are the minuscule arenas where, bit by bit...we are shaped into some kind of being....Life is, is by its very nature, spiritual formation.

—M. Robert Mulholland, Jr.¹

The most persuasive moral teaching we adults do is by example: the witness of our lives, our ways of being with others and speaking to them and getting on with them—all of that is taken in slowly, cumulatively, by our sons and daughters, our students.

—Robert Coles²

It is clear that in the world of Biblical faith, the family is the primary unit of meaning which shapes and defines reality.

—Walter Brueggemann³


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Despite all the changes in family life and structure, families remain crucibles that shape faith and values. Churches can inspire new visions of this noble calling, working with parents to make disciples of the next generation.
I. INTRODUCTION

WHAT MANY PARENTS AND TEACHERS KNOW FROM EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE, scholars are verifying scientifically: “children learn what they live.” Because most children are born or “adopted” into families, these basic units of life become the primary context of young people’s most formative relationships and much of their daily lives.

These families of origin, no matter what their form or state of health, are intergenerational systems that create an ethos (a way of life) as well as a mythos (a life perspective). Whatever else families are doing, whether intentionally or not, whether constructively or not, families are passing on values and faith of one kind or another to their children.

If families are the basic units of life that shape faith and values, then the primary question becomes: What faith are they passing on? What values are they inculcating? A secondary question emerges as well: Can families become more rather than less intentional and constructive in this moral and spiritual work? For leaders in faith communities, yet another question follows: How can the church best support and enrich these formative family dynamics so as better to nurture Christian faith, shape good values, and prepare disciples of Jesus Christ?

II. BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

Many of the Old and New Testament writers understood the capacity of families to pass on the traditions and the practice of faith. While their times and contexts were dramatically different from ours, their views are worth our consideration.

The writer of Deuteronomy reflects this understanding of the teaching role of families in his presentation of the shema, the central theological tenet of Judaism: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” This radical monotheistic understanding of God is accompanied by the great commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.” Then follow instructions for maintaining this theological and ethical core at the center of Israel’s life:

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6: 7-9)

These are the kinds of activities to which Walter Brueggemann refers when he writes of families in the Old Testament:

Although the Bible has other agenda that are more central than that of the family, it does drop hints along the way about family that are worth considering. It is clear that in the world of Biblical faith, the family is the primary unit of meaning which shapes and defines reality. The individual person belongs to and lives out of the family. It is the family that provides deep secure roots into the past, bold
Eventually, the major ritual and tradition through which Old Testament families celebrated God’s “story” and Israel’s identity (as well as the family’s) was the Seder meal held every Friday evening at table. At this meal, held in the home, faith and life as well as past, present, and future converged in the space and conversation of everyday life.

While the traditions and rituals of the larger family contributed to these spiritual and moral responsibilities, these tasks were the primary work of the “elders” of the family. The older ones of the grandparent generation were to tell the stories of God’s mighty acts in calling and rescuing Israel. As the elders told stories of God’s presence and activity in Israel they cited illustrations from the tradition and from their own “days” with God as they spoke in the hearing of “your son’s son.”

Edward Hays speaks of these traditions when he writes of the history and development of worship:

The first altar around which primitive people worshiped was the hearth, whose open fire burned in the center of the home. The next altar-shrine was the family table where meals were celebrated and great events in the personal history of the family were remembered. The priests and the priestesses of these first rituals were the fathers and mothers of families.⁶

This “table spirituality” celebrated in the Jewish household, the primal place of worship, was not only an Old Testament practice. The Lord’s supper, which Jesus initiated with his disciples whom he included among the “chosen family” of his followers, was, according to many scholars, a Seder or Passover meal, celebrated in Jewish families since the exodus. The early Christian communities continued to celebrate the Lord’s supper in their homes, which were primary loci of the New Testament church. Even as the bonds of marriage and birth were relativized, family households remained primary settings in which the oral tradition, psalms, and profession of Jesus as the Messiah were spoken, sung, and shared. House churches, which included children, servants, and guests as well as men and women, were the primary loci not only of worship but of mission, catechization, and caregiving as well.

⁴Ibid.
⁵Ibid., 19.
III. The Reformation

Both John Calvin and Martin Luther held families in high esteem, considering them to be “classrooms” where faith and values were taught and “laboratories” where faith and values were practiced.

Luther in his usual intuitive and bold manner was particularly outspoken concerning the role of families in nurturing faith. In his treatise The Estate of Marriage, he writes:

Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel. In short there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal. Whoever teaches the gospel to another is truly his apostle and bishop.  

Luther acted upon these convictions in the late summer of 1526. Traveling through Saxony in the early spring, he had observed first-hand the lack of knowledge of the Bible, the creeds, and the Lord’s Prayer among young and old alike in the congregations of the reformation. When Melanchthon did not follow through on Luther’s request to develop a resource to assist Lutheran Christians in learning these basics of the faith, Luther wrote the Small Catechism for parents and children to “work together” at table.

For Calvin, families were places of both private and public ministry. As in the Old Testament, families in Geneva were to be places of hospitality to strangers as well as protection and support for members. As in both Old and New Testament times, families were to be places of instruction in faith and values. Fathers were specifically singled out to “bring up their children in the fear and admonition of the Lord.”

IV. Colonial America

The Puritans brought to America their Calvinistic understandings of the roles of families in spiritual and moral formation. The Puritans were especially clear about a father’s responsibilities in these matters.

Almost all the literature written on child-rearing in colonial America was written to fathers. Fathers were to be leaders in the socialization of their children. Society touted the importance of a father’s wisdom in nurturing the life of the young.

In their highly valued role in families, especially in preparing children for adult maturity and independent living, fathers had a multitude of roles. They were to be instructors in literacy, philosophy, ethics, and faith. According to the literature of this period a father carried out these educational tasks at many levels as his children’s benefactor, supervisor, guide, and companion. As his children’s spiritual guide, a father was not only to gather his children for scripture reading and

prayer, he was also to model the precepts of faith in his life with them, their mother, and his neighbors.

These Old and New Testament, reformation, and Puritan images of families’ roles in faith and values formation make a significant theological statement. God is present and active in primary life relationships, not only to order sexual expression, create new human beings, and protect the most vulnerable, but also to evangelize, catechize, and make disciples. Christian men and women as parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents—as members of families—are called to bear witness in these vocations of powerful influence on children and each other. Moreover, the home, the household, the setting where these relationships are exercised is one of the central places of Christian worship. Edward Hays argues:

The communal church...was intended to be a gathering point...not a substitute for the domestic church, the home. Families came to the village church bringing the gifts of their...family prayers, and these were joined to prayers of other families to form the rich and inspiring prayer-mosaic of the Christian community.⁸

Based on their readings of early Christian history, Hays and other theologians, including Marjorie Thompson, speak of congregations as communal church and Christian families as domestic church, thus affirming the enduring value of families as one of the most basic units of the church universal’s mission in the world.

V. FAMILIES IN MODERN AND POST-MODERN SOCIETIES

Should families in contemporary technological societies exercise these spiritual and moral functions once carried out by families in hunting and gathering or agrarian cultures? Can they? In less structured societies, families were often the primary centers of production, instruction, and social services. In urban and highly technological societies, with their complexity and mobility, most of these functions have been taken over by other professional and public structures.

Indeed, formal, intentional instruction in faith and values has also been taken over by professionals in late twentieth-century western culture. Very few families read the Bible, pray, or sing hymns together. Most parents transport their children to a church or synagogue where professionals or trained volunteers educate and lead them in worship.

Marjorie Thompson writes:

In our day, the church is usually viewed as the primary teacher of faith and the mediator of spiritual values. Theologically speaking, this is a proper perspective. The problem arises when the church is identified primarily with its structure, or with its professional leadership rather than with its full membership. Specialized training is so esteemed in our culture that we have come to trust only “professionals” to teach, heal or advise us. It is small wonder that parents often feel inadequately equipped for the demanding task of teaching their children, whether about faith, sexuality, or even basic human values.⁹

⁸Hays, Prayers, 17.
Many parents, scholars, Christian educators, and clergy not only recognize this shift in the roles of families within society, but see many families as incapable of carrying on these activities. Some of these leaders are convinced that families are not the setting where faith and values can best be taught.

A deeper look at the dynamics of families in late twentieth-century technological societies presents quite another point of view. Systems theorists understand families—no matter what their form or level of functioning, no matter what their cultural context—to be intergenerational units of primary life that generate their own ethos and mythos. In this view, there is no family that does not shape a child’s or adult’s values and faith in some way or another. Because children work out their earliest years of greatest dependency in these formative relationships, their family’s ethos (way of life) and their family’s mythos (perspective on life) will profoundly mold the values and faith of the child.

VI. LEARNING FROM FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

An anonymous popular poem, regularly hanging on the walls in children’s rooms, states:

CHILDREN LEARN WHAT THEY LIVE

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn
If they live with hostility, they learn to fight
If they live with ridicule, they learn to be shy
If they live with shame, they learn to feel guilty
If they live with tolerance, they learn to be patient
If they live with encouragement, they learn to be confident
If they live with praise, they learn to appreciate
If they live with fairness, they learn a sense of justice
If they live with security, they learn to have faith
If they live with approval, they learn to like themselves
If they live with acceptance and friendship, they learn to find love in the world.

While there is a certain naiveté in the simple causal connections of these assertions, they express the capacity of everyday life to shape human existence. It is this power, found in life’s most formative relationships, which family systems theory has identified and described.

A wide variety of family systems thinkers argue that through basic bonding with their earliest caregivers, and through immersion in the atmosphere, roles, rules, decision-making, communication, and rituals of their families children experience psychological, sociological, moral, and spiritual beginnings that are constitutive of the child’s present and future life.10

Research from family studies in addiction and abuse provide a clear illustration. It is now well documented that family patterns of behavior, communication, and decision-making, generated in response to the addiction or abuse of one member in the family, create a climate, an atmosphere, an emotional tone best

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10See Stephen J. Schultz, Family Systems Thinking (Norvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1984), for an overview of the various schools of family systems theorists and their essential agreement in this regard.
described as shame. This resulting shame is so pervasive and powerful that it becomes the experience out of which a child establishes self-identity and the basic attitudes of mistrust, denial, and deceit.

Leo Tolstoy’s story, “The Old Grandfather and the Grandson,” provides another illustration of what family systems thinkers have discovered:

The grandfather had become very old. His legs wouldn’t go, his eyes didn’t see, his ears didn’t hear, he had no teeth. And when he ate, the food dripped from his mouth.
The son and daughter-in-law stopped setting a place for him at the table and gave him supper in back of the stove. Once they brought dinner down to him in a cup. The old man wanted to move the cup and dropped and broke it. The daughter-in-law began to grumble at the old man for spoiling everything in the house and breaking the cups and said that she would now give him dinner in a dishpan. The old man only sighed and said nothing.
Once the husband and wife were staying at home and watching their small son playing on the floor with some wooden planks; he was building something. The father asked: “What are you doing, Misha?” And Misha said: “Dear Father, I am making a dishpan. So that when you and dear Mother are old, you may be fed from this dishpan.”
The husband and wife looked at one another and began to weep. They became ashamed of so offending the old man, and from then on seated him at the table and waited on him.\textsuperscript{11} Ross Bender reflects this systemic understanding of the family as he speaks of its role in shaping faith and life:

All of the uniquely personal powers of deciding, exploring, solving problems, persuading, competing, and the like are first learned in their most elemental, therefore profoundest, form in the family. Behind each word (and these represent only a small beginning) lies the drama of our being and becoming. Written into the script of that drama is the view of life which is actually lived in the family; this is what provides the child with the lived experiences out of which grow the thought structures and the vocabulary by means of which all subsequent experiences are organized... It will only be possible for a child to grasp the meaning of “Jesus loves you” and “God forgives you” where love and forgiveness are part of the daily round of life.\textsuperscript{12}

If basic family interactive patterns and states of being become the pre-verbal, enflashed “body-language” of faith and values, both the quality and content of ongoing family life become significant factors in Christian education.

VII. EFFECTIVE CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

In the mid-1980s Search Institute conducted a study of the effectiveness of Christian education among six mainline denominations. Among 28 significant religious influences reported by children, youth, and adults, the most significant were mother and father. Both of these ranked higher than pastor or church school teacher and the Bible. The seven dynamics most directly related to mature faith in children and youth were:

\textsuperscript{11}Cited in Robert Coles, \textit{Moral Intelligence}, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{12}Ross Bender, \textit{Christians in Families} (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1982) 97-98.
1. A mother who models the faith
2. A father who models the faith
3. A regular dialog with mother on faith/life issues
4. A regular dialog with father on faith/life issues
5. A regular dialog with an adult other than parent on faith/life issues
6. Experience regular reading of the Bible and devotions in the home
7. Experience a servanthood event with a parent as an action of faith

The study indicated that interactive family life and intentional faith instruction in
the home combined with excellence in congregational Christian education were of
significantly greater impact on the faith maturity of a child, youth, or adult than
only participation in church school or congregational worship.

Families generate faith and values not only in theory, they have been major
contributors to the mature faith of children, youth, and adults of six mainline de-

VIII. THE CRITICAL PARTNERSHIP: HOUSEHOLD AND CONGREGATION

Recognizing the power of quality family interaction and intentional faith
practice in the home combined with faithful and effective congregational ministry,
many leaders in Christian ministry have called for strengthening the ancient part-
nership of household and congregation.

Marjorie Thompson puts the challenge in a series of questions:

How can the church become the community of families and individuals that
helps its member families recognize and claim God’s grace in the very midst of
their failure and incompleteness? How can the church help families erase the ass-
sumptions and fears that inhibit them from fulfilling their primary role, instead
of trying to replace the family in that role? How can the church let families know
that they are loved and accepted, imperfect as they are, and that they are called to
be blessed instruments of God’s most critical labor: forming each person in the
mind and spirit of Christ? What if family were not merely an object of the church’s
teaching mission, but one of the most basic units of the church’s mission to the
world?

What I am suggesting is that both the “communal church” and the “domestic
church” need to recapture a vision of the Christian family as a sacred commu-
nity. This will require an awareness of the “sacred” in the “secular” of God in the
flesh of human life.14

The Augsburg Youth and Family Institute, working with a team of educators
and practitioners from across the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, has
developed this vision of a “communal” and “domestic” church partnership into
strategies for ministry called The Child in Our Hands.

In their vision, a female/male home visitation team meets with children and
their families on the occasion of nine “rites of passage” or “milestones” during a
child’s journey from birth to graduation from high school. During the visit the
team prepares the family and child for the coming milestone by presenting infor-

13Peter Benson and Carolyn H. Eklin, Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant
Congregations (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1990).
14Thompson, Family, 26.
formation on baptismal grace, child-development, and faith-informed child-rearing as well as ideas and resources for maintaining the life of faith in the household. During this visit a “FaithChest” and a “FaithLife in the Family” resource catalogue are provided.

The “FaithChest” and the “FaithLife in the Family” resources are musical tapes, Bible and faith-in-daily-life story books, puppets, videos, and games that can be used at bedtime, cartime, laptime, sicktime, mealtime, and other significant family “touchpoints” to communicate faith across the life cycle.

Each of the nine passages or milestones are celebrated in a congregational festival worship service followed by a reception for the child and family members. These worship celebrations and all other worship services are intentionally “child-friendly” as well as intriguing to youth and adults.

Following each of the home visits and congregational festival worship celebrations the child and family are invited to an intergenerational enrichment event, designed to motivate, instruct, and equip family members to envision family as “sacred space,” and a laboratory in which to nurture faith and values in the child.

During these contacts parents are informed of avenues of support for “positive parenting” and resources available in a variety of forms through the congregation. This support and these resources vary from parents’ days out to parent support groups to videos to classic parenting books to family counseling, parenting mentors, and networks.

Regular worship and participation in adult Christian education is encouraged throughout the contacts with the family. Quality day care or pre-school and after-school ministries and resources are brokered to the family either through the congregation or other providers in the community.

Families, no matter their form and quality, are crucibles shaping faith and values. Parents can rise to the awareness of the noble role they exercise in the lives of their children. Churches can inspire new visions of this noble calling and enrich the quality of the ethos and mythos that nurture faith, shape values, and make disciples of the next generation.