

A Family of Families Part Two – Choosing a Spouse Genesis 24

1. Choosing a spouse is a _____.
2. A _____ should never be _____ to a _____.
3. Seek the _____ of _____.
4. Look for _____, not _____ alone.
5. If you aren't _____ to be _____, you aren't _____ to _____.
6. _____ who you _____, but more importantly, _____ who you _____.

God's Redemption of Family AND Singleness...

"This article by Tim Keller originally appeared on The Gospel Coalition at thegospelcoalition.org. under the title *Three Ways with Families*"

In Japan, in Western Europe, and in Russia, the birth-rate has fallen precipitously, to below replacement levels. Many have pointed out that interest in child-bearing is lowest in the most secular countries and sectors of society, while it is the highest in the most religious countries. Why is this? One explanation is that more educated people put off child-rearing until later in life and that means fewer children. However, educated religious people have more children than educated secular people, and therefore the socio-economic answer isn't the most basic answer. I don't think anyone can be completely sure that they have a handle on this complex phenomenon, but I think it creates an interesting backdrop for the consideration of the unique Christian view of the family.

My European friends have two theories for why their secular neighbors have lost interest in the family. First, there is the sacrifice factor. For the last 30 years, sociologists have documented that secularism fosters individualism. A 2003 Ben Gurion University study found religious communes in Israel did better across the board than secular communes. (Cited in "Darwin's God", *New York Times Magazine*, March 4, 2007.) The reason? The members of secular communes simply were more selfish, particularly the men. Men who went to synagogue regularly were much more willing to sacrifice for the family and the community than men who did not. As the studies since Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* have shown, secularism teaches that every individual determines his or her own purpose in life the autonomous self is sovereign. In this world-view, family life looks like the loss of personal meaning and happiness.

There is also the hope factor. My European friends tell me that their secular neighbors are much more pessimistic about the future. They are keenly aware of the ecological and technological disasters that are possible, perhaps inevitable. Why bring children into such a bleak world? Religious persons, however, have a profound assurance that in the future is final justice, or paradise, or union with God in some form. They have an over-arching hope that makes them more optimistic about bearing and raising children.

At this point you might think I would simply say "Yay for religion, it is the friend of the family!" It is not that simple. While secularism in the West tends to make an idol out of the individual and his or her needs, traditional religion has often made an idol out of the family. According to theologian Stanley Hauerwas of Duke University, Christianity was the very first religion or world-view that held up single adulthood as a viable way of life. Jesus himself and St. Paul were single. "One clear difference between Christianity and Judaism [and all other traditional religions] is the former's entertainment of the idea of singleness as the paradigm way of life for its followers." (Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p.174.) Nearly all religions and cultures made an absolute value of the family and of the bearing of children. By contrast, the early church not only did not pressure women to marry but it institutionally supported poor widows so they were not forced to remarry as they were out in the culture at large.

Why? The Christian gospel and hope of the kingdom-future de-idolized marriage. "Singleness was legitimated, not because sex was questionable, but because the mission of the church is 'between the times' [the overlap of the ages]. We must remember that the 'sacrifice' made by singles was not [just in] 'giving up sex' but in giving up heirs. This was a clear expression that one's future is not guaranteed by the family but by the [kingdom of God and the] church" (Hauerwas, p.190). "[Now, in the overlap of the ages], **both** singleness and marriage are necessary symbolic institutions for the constitution of the church's life . . . that witnesses to God's kingdom.

The gospel-based community practices a view of family that is contrary both to the cultural idols of secular and traditional societies. The gospel frees singles from the shame of being unmarried they find in conservative cultures. Their truest identity is in Christ and their assured future hope is the kingdom of God. Even bearing children, in the Christian view, is merely nurturing more lives for the family of God. That can be done in other ways than the biological. On the other hand, the gospel gives us the hope and strength for the sacrifices of marriage and parenthood that is lacking in liberal cultures. We know that children are only brought to life and self-sufficiency if their parents sacrifice much of their independence and power. In light of the cross, it is the least we can do.

The gospel is neither religion nor irreligion, it is something else altogether. Vital gospel Christianity's influence on a society will produce neither a liberal and secular nor a traditional and conservative culture, but something we have seldom seen before.