



Rising to the challenge of Biblical fatherhood: taking a standpoint in the Word of God against negative trends of fatherhood

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Abstract

Fatherhood has changed over time and, as a result, most families are struggling with serious problems and challenges in their respective communities. Fatherhood is the heart of masculinity of what it really means to be a man created by God. Notwithstanding, feminists stated that a father is just a luxury, and families and society do not need him. In addition, a report of the American Psychological Association (APA) postulated that traditional fathers comprise a grave danger to their boys and must be stopped. The LGBT¹ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) practice same-sex marriages and sexual experiences with both sexes. A serious problem in South Africa is the fatherhood issue, and it is a problem that needs to be addressed as it is emerging globally. Society needs Biblically oriented and committed fathers for their families. Colonization, apartheid and urbanization transformed family arrangements extensively in South Africa in the 20th century, not to mention the fundamental role of the father. A father is biblically the leader of his family and he occupies a powerful role in shaping the mood and quality of the interconnected, interactive, and vital social unit of the family. God has not given up on the importance of this role, therefore, fatherhood requires the proactive impartation of Biblical principles. Fathers have a God-given role to fulfil in the family and they are accountable to guide their families according to these principles.

Keywords: Biblical, fatherhood, Word of God, negative trends, rising challenges.

Rationale

In the context of this paper, practical theology is a significant notion of fatherhood. Theological inquiry is the *genus* of practical theology and some kind of action of the human spirit is the primary object of inquiry. Theological inquiry as practical theology is an aspect of the divine-human relationship. Practical theology occurs whenever and wherever there is a reflection on practice from the perspective of experiencing the *presence of God* (Müller, 2005). Cilliers (2009) builds further on this premise by including the social embodiment of faith, which is advocated in the practical theological approach (*fides quarens societatem*).

¹ LGBT is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and is called by the President of Poland, as an ideology that is more destructive than communism.



Introduction

The value and significance of fatherhood across South Africa is challenged and threatened daily by the new age movement who believes man as the new Being (Hunt, 2019), the neo liberalist thinking about heterosexual coupledness and post-feminist discourses accentuating choice, freedom and female empowerment (Gresaker, 2017). Feminists have indicated, since 2002 until the present, that a father is just but a luxury and families and society do not need him (Dominelli, 2002). A report by the American Psychological Association² argued that traditional fathers constitute grave danger to their boys and must be prohibited based on the feminist hatred of traditional men and concur with the LGBT agenda (Dobson, 2020). Maternal gatekeeping reduces father involvement and limits men's opportunities to participate in the home context (Thomas & Holmes, 2019; Allen & Hawkins, 1999).

Families are challenged by a father's absence, non-involvement of fathers, and fatherlessness. Although families comprise the world's oldest and most basic form of relationships, they are undergoing multiple crises, failures, and relationship break-ups in the 21st century. Numerous families experience no fatherly presence due to the lack of fatherhood issue and, globally, endless activities seem outlined to fill the void in the family left by the absent father. Where there is father engagement this however best facilitated in two-parent families, because most single-parent families are headed by mothers.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, South African society has neglected the importance of fatherhood (Ratele et al., 2012). South African fathers do not differ much from fathers elsewhere, however, South Africa has unique circumstances that impact on families. During the era of the migrant labor system, for example, families were disrupted because fathers had to leave their immediate families and work in mines and cities. Fathers only returned home over the Christmas period (Frazier, 2015). This contributed to the shocking situation reported in 2010 that South Africa had the highest rate of father absenteeism in Africa after Namibia (Richter et al., 2010). The unfortunate reality for most children at that time, was that 50% of all fathers in South Africa did not have daily contact with their children (Richter et al., 2010). In 2011, father absenteeism in South Africa escalated from 42% to 48% (Bartlett, 2013). In 2012, South Africa was rated as one of the countries in the world with the highest figures of father absenteeism (Freeks, 2016; Richter et al., 2012).

It is assumed that fatherhood is of paramount importance to all races in society. A comparison of the problem of the absent father among the different races in South Africa in 2013, emphasized the disconcerting situation of Black children. Approximately 33%-38% of Black children lived with their fathers, and 79% with their mothers, compared to the 87% of White children who lived with their fathers (Mkhize, 2013). Some statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau show that while 88% of American children in 1960 were living with both parents, only 69% were doing likewise in 2016. In the second most common living arrangement with children living with a single mother, the number of children who live with a single father increased during that time, from 1% to 4% (Vrouvas, 2017).

An unavoidable consequence of the absence of fathers is that numerous households are run by single mothers (Amoateng et al., 2004). The fatherhood problem is the leading cause of the single parenting challenge in South Africa. This situation is far-reaching and worrying. According to a report by Hawkins (2015) on *SA Breaking News*, statistics revealed that 31% of mothers were raising their babies without a father figure. The report also indicated that approximately 886,202 babies were born during this time and 50% of the women who gave

² In 2018, the American Psychological Association (APA) published an outrageous and widely spread report entitled 'APA guidelines for Psychological Practice with boys and men'. This report reverberated feminist hatred for traditional men and they identified themselves with the LGBT agenda.



birth were single mothers with no assistance from the biological fathers. Such a situation signified a deep concern and a desperate cry for help.

The dilemma of absent fathers is aggravated by the increasing number of divorces in South Africa. In 2010, the South Africa Institute of Race Relations revealed that 56% of divorces involved parents with children, where 48% of these children had no fathers. This resulted in 3.95 million fatherless children in 2010. Divorce is, therefore, another disconcerting phenomenon in South Africa, and it has added to the catastrophe of 9 million children growing up without fathers in 2015 (Frazier, 2015).

To compound matters, the number of absent fathers is still on the increase in South Africa. Father absenteeism has become a dilemma and has led to a serious debate in South Africa. This tendency generates problems such as broken families, aggressive behavior among children, financial and social ills, and poverty (Freeks, 2016). It is imprudent to weaken the salience of a father, and it is also unkind to South Africa's current and future children to diminish the role of the male parent that is critical to their future contentment.

The researcher believes that these trends are redefining the family and since as early as in 2008, the father has not even featured in this definition (Ford et al., 2008). A few years later, this phenomenon has been identified as one of the main causes placing family life in jeopardy (Bertelsmann, 2016). Research has indicated that if children grow up without fathers, factors such as poor educational outcomes and anti-social behavior may cause disrupted employment (Frazier, 2015). A disturbing factor is that a third of the country's prisoners are at the age of 18-25 years and they have children outside the prison walls. Another negative aspect is that 63% of reported youth suicides in South Africa originate in fatherless homes (Frazier, 2015). The American culture struggled to maintain a healthy marriage where 25% of children under 18 years live with their mothers, 50% live without their biological fathers and 30% of all American children are born in single-parent households (Williams, 2014). Today these statistics and figures are much more unfortunate.

In South African society, there is a distinct lack of positive father figures as role models. Perceptions of manhood gleaned from role models, and many young men do not have good masculine role models. Analysts refer to this problem of fatherlessness as a "earless monster" and "corrosion of fatherhood" that destroys families (John, 2012:24; Swartz et al., 2013). This corrosion is a major cause of the current societal ills in South Africa. South Africa is rapidly becoming a fatherless society with men behaving like "monsters" towards women and children (Feni, 2016). The influence of fathers in families and communities has declined significantly during the period of democracy since 2008 in South Africa (Feni, 2016:2).

From a biblical viewpoint, the problem of fatherlessness originated in the fall of the human into sin and resulted in a cycle of problems caused by fathers who are not fulfilling their role (Genesis 3:1-24). The absence of a father, unfortunately, goes hand in hand with the absence of enhancing situations brought about by the presence of a father. These include health, well-being, academic performance, self-confidence, and behavior control in boys and girls (Frazier, 2015). Human life was paramount in all biblical corpora and families were bound to be headed by the father as a patriarch and no supra-personal legalities could not be placated. Man had to try to remain in harmony with the natural law including the notion of a male-headed household (Nicolaidis & van der Bank, 2011).

Aims, objectives, and research method

The main aim of this research is to propose guidelines to restore fatherhood in South Africa. The supposition underlying this aim is that if fathers take responsibility for their dysfunctional families, disrupted communities, and general crises in the country, then true fatherhood could be restored. The research question is: What should be done in South Africa to convince fathers to accept their responsibilities and help families and communities to address the issues of



father absence, fatherlessness, and uninvolved fathers? The author wishes to achieve three objectives by putting forward four discussion points. The first discussion point deals with biblically based parenting in the South African context. The second underlines biblical principles of fatherhood. As the third point of discussion, several proposed guidelines will be suggested for restoring true fatherhood.

Methodically, the research was executed by means of a literature review. It also took into account the notion of practical theology, which is a diffusing and changing field that involves many diverse participants, methods, and also concerns. Practical theology deals with the theory and practice of pastoral care and counselling. In a Christian context, practical theology is concerned with practice and the Christian theological tradition. For practical theology, the Christian community, the church, and the work of the church are important foci (Pattison & Woodward, 2000). In addition, practical theology is an exciting, multidisciplinary way of engaging in theology (Browning, 2000).

Biblically-based parenting

The biblical message clearly depicts the family as God's structure in society; God wishes to restore broken families in a community. Communities are in great need of help especially in times of pandemic such as the world is currently facing (Deuteronomy 15:11; Ephesians 4:28; Galatians 6:2; Hebrews 6:10, 13:16; John 3:17), as detrimental factors such as the increasing absence of fathers in communities are having an increasingly negative impact on families. This is coupled with the most unexpected and extraordinary social trend in recent times, namely the decline of fatherhood (Popenoe, 1996). God commands parents, according to Deuteronomy 6:6-9, 20-25, 11:19, as well as Proverbs 22:6, to teach their children what He conveyed to them, for the children's own good.

Biblical parenting is essential since it will support children and give direction to them in their lives. A major principle regarding Biblical parenting would be re-introducing the Word of God and Christ into broken families. Biblical parenting can be viewed as a double-edged sword with which both relationships and activities of families can be built. Fathers receive the mandate to manage the system of the family effectively and develop a unit that makes a difference in society (Freeks, 2017). The following saying is relevant in the context of this paper: "It takes a village to raise a child." It is an old African saying, and the family should be considered "the first village" fostering the religious and spiritual development of children (Boyatzis et al., 2006).

God provides his Word, Jesus Christ the *Logos* incarnate to his people (Nicolaidis, 2010) to help families handle situations, challenges, and problems. The Bible is the *nidus* and foundation that offer guidelines for life issues such as father absence. The principle of *sola Scriptura* ('Scripture alone') and in *solo Christo* ('in Christ alone'), which together mean the Word alone reveals Christ is the human's only mediator, can be applied to the challenges and problems that face families and communities. According to 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Scripture is useful for "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work". In Ephesians 6:10, it is made clear that believers should clothe themselves with the full armor of God, which will enable them to stand up against the devil's evil plans, including the destruction of families because of father absence and uninvolved fathers.

Biblical principles of fatherhood

The references to the fatherhood of God in the Bible are explicit. The Old Testament testimony and narratives present God as a Father to Israel, especially through the Lord's fundamental roles as creator, protector, and savior (Nicolaidis, 2010; Dobbs, 2013). The first specific



reference to God as Father occurs in Deuteronomy 32:6, where Moses testifies that God is the Father who created all of humanity. God is the Father of all flesh, including humans (Jeremiah 32:27; Job 12:10). This indicates that God presents a type of father image to all people (Isaiah 64:8; Numbers 16:22; Micah 2:10). God is the ancient Father who honors his Fatherhood and expects that humans should honor and respect Him as their primeval Father (Micah 1:6, 2:10-11). Thus, the same honor and respect should be shown to earthly fathers (Freeks, 2016). Significantly, God is depicted as the Father of his creation and people. Hence, his Fatherhood should be displayed so that earthly fatherhood can flow from it (Deuteronomy 32:6, 15, 18). Earthly fatherhood and its origin thus derive from the Fatherhood of God (Steensma, 1995).

God proposes the image of earthly fatherhood at a very early stage of adulthood. In Genesis 2:24, it is said that man will leave his parents and be united to his wife to take up his role as head of his home and to fulfil his position in society. Moreover, humans – including the father – are created in the image of God. The Fatherhood of God can, therefore, be seen as the model indicating how Christian earthly fatherhood should be pursued (Freeks, 2016).

The Fatherhood of God is a central concept in the Bible and knowing God as Father lies at the heart of the Christian gospel (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:5-6). The concept can be understood better by focusing on Jesus Christ (Hoepfner, 2009). A relationship with Jesus Christ should point towards a suitable solution for broken families because of father absence and fatherlessness (Gerstenberger, 2009).

Moreover, the fatherhood image of God can be presented analogically, where the man is the head of the family as Jesus Christ is the head of the church, according to Ephesians 5:23. Elsewhere, the Fatherhood of God is proclaimed in Jesus Christ, seeing that Jesus called God his Father and the Father of all (John 5:18-47, 8:19, 25-30, 10:29-30). As God showed his love as a father through Jesus, the earthly father can place his life and trust in God to help secure a hopeful future for himself and his family (Hoepfner, 2009).

Restoring true fatherhood -proposed guidelines from a Biblical perspective

Father absenteeism and fatherlessness can be countered by restoring the fundamental role of fathers in the family and the community, and by re-addressing the true calling of fathers as men *coram Deo* ('in God's presence'). The author now suggests important guidelines to restore fatherhood from a Biblical perspective:

Biblical fatherhood principles and renewed values

God as Father through his Son, Jesus Christ, can reverse the negative statistics and the negative trends resulting from father absenteeism. God promises in Malachi 4.6: "He will bring fathers and children together again; otherwise I would have to come and destroy your country." Men should develop renewed values, however, change will not be possible if they do not experience a total change of heart. Men should first renew their minds through the Word of God, (Romans 12:2).

The most profound change in understanding fatherhood will come from knowing God as Father (Smail, 1980). Smail elucidates that ignorance in families about the biblical doctrine of God as Father impedes all the members' activities. To this effect, Smail makes this challenging statement:

The charismatic experience can most certainly rejuvenate people and families, but how much evidence is there that it can mature them, by delivering them from their insidious self-concern and making them profitable and outward-moving members of the body of Christ?



The answer to this question depends considerably on how people and families relate to God the Father (Smail, 1980).

Fathers should take responsibility for their dysfunctional families, the disrupted society, and general crises in the country. Adhering to Scripture, they should understand and follow God's directive in 2 Chronicles 7:14:

If my people, who are called by my Name, will humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.

The question is still, how can fathers break away from the sin of father absenteeism and fatherlessness? The author believes that the only way for fathers and families to break the vicious circle father absenteeism and its consequences is by knowing God the Father through Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit (Smail, 1980). This entails faith in the triune God. The Father sent his Son, and the Son sent the Spirit to restore the rule of the Father over creation (Chandler, 2015; Smail, 1980). The way towards restoration is clear. Fathers and their families should lead a new life through Jesus Christ, which will help to break the epidemic of fatherlessness (Freeks, 2013). Jesus Christ is the crucial answer to the problem of father absenteeism and fatherlessness because He brings about a relationship with God the Father in people. Fathers have the opportunity for God to use them to impact on their family. If a father is saved, he cannot act otherwise than intentionally seek to build Christ's love and presence into the life of his family. Therefore, fathers should know that fatherhood is a God-given calling. They need to be role-models embodying the purpose and qualities of Christ's new commandment (Waresak, 2016).

Becoming a father shaped by God the Father through his Word

Fathers are not only parents, but also leaders of their own families. They have a responsibility to shape the quality, mood, tone, and texture of the interactive, fundamental unit, the family (Brooks, 2008). When fathers manage their families, they must focus on building relationships (McGraw, 2004). It is important that the father must function as role model and follower of Jesus Christ and cultivate a love for God and his Word in his family by engaging in house altar or home fellowship and Bible studies (Freeks, 2004).

Testimony in Scripture is clear about the fact that God places a high value on family life. The Bible provides more information and commandments for the family than any other structure in society. God should be an essential presence in family life because the father and family are important in the eyes of God (Freeks, 2011). Christian families have a task to serve the Lord, as Joshua confirmed to the Israelites: "... but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

It is also vital to understand that parenting involves relations and activities. Before the father can answer God's calling and care for his family optimally, he must take care of himself. First, the father (and mother) stands in a relationship with God. The results of his faith cascade down to the children, who are nurtured by the in-working of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is crucial for a father to understand that his religious life influences his children to seek the presence of God (Freeks, 2011). To be an example to his children is a divine calling. The shaping of his children entails covenant education (Bergh, 2002; Morris, 2007; Steytler, 2007). Above all, it is important that every father and his believing family should understand their task and calling to participate in the Great Commission of God, namely winning over the world for Jesus Christ (Buys, 1983; Matthew 28:19-20).



The importance of the home altar or fellowship in the home

A home altar refers to family devotions, which entail daily sessions where family members hold fellowship in the home. They read and share Bible passages, discuss Christian doctrine, pray together, and sing Christian songs and hymns. This time together may include celebrating family members' days and commemorating special days, such as the anniversary of repentance and baptisms' as well as the Lord's Supper (Freeks, 2011; Goheen, 2011).

In this context, the father acts as the 'priest' in the family. His main task is the spiritual gathering of his family and instituting the home altar. It is crucial that the father take the lead at the home altar. He should teach his family that God has greater plans for them, not only as a unit but also as individuals, to prosper in various areas of their lives (Jeremiah 29:11). The home altar is not only important, but also an effective way for the family to read and study the Word of God together and forge a deeper spiritual bond with one another and God (Bergh, 2002).

The significance of prayer meetings

In prayer meetings, the father must lead his family and make the family's prayer requests known to God as their heavenly Father (Freeks, 2004). Such meetings are crucial building blocks for spiritual growth in the family as a unit. The father's task is to ensure his children apply this spiritual discipline of prayer, which will be a positive sign of their closeness to God as their heavenly Father. If children are unable to identify with God as their Father, it might imply an inadequate relationship due to the fact that children do not pray together with their earthly or physical father (Warren, 2005). The outstanding aspect of prayer life is that it connects a person to God and builds that individual's faith to enjoy God as their heavenly Father (Matthew 5:6, 26:41; Mark 11:24; Luke 11:1, 18:1).

The effectiveness of Bible studies

The father must emphasize that the Bible is the constitution in the home. The family should not only love the Word of God but also study it diligently (2 Timothy 2:15). Family members should follow biblical guidelines and cultivate a passion for God's love and his Word. Such an approach makes God the priority in their lives (Hart & Hart Frejd, 2010). Studying the Bible will allow the family to understand they are fragile, fallible, and liable to err. Hence, they need to place their lives and trust in God as their heavenly Father, who guides them and provides for them (Freeks, 2011; John 18:11).

The importance of faith in the lives of children

It is important that parents teach their next generation about faith because children are the future of society (Goheen, 2011). A father should nurture faith in his children. Their future will be bleak if they are not taught about the true faith and spirituality. As Goheen aptly states, "what will it profit families, if they gain the whole world, but lose their children?" (Goheen, 2011:223; cf. also Mark 8:36-37).

The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper (also called the 'Lord's Table') was instituted on the night when Jesus Christ and his disciples celebrated the Passover (Matthew 26:19; Mark 14:16; Luke 22:13). The Lord's Supper was instituted to commemorate the death of Christ and the expectation of His return to earth. In the family circle, it is crucial that children participate in the Lord's Supper,



since it is an important practice confirming the Christian faith. The father should perform the Lord's Supper regularly, as prescribed in the Bible (1 Corinthians 11:23; Luke 2:13-20). The significance of this sacrament is that it is a concrete celebration of the family's deliverance from sin through the death and resurrection of Christ. By taking the bread and wine, the family members identify themselves with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The importance of attending church

The father should make it clear from the outset that it is essential that his family attend church. Families have to attend church as a unit because these times of worship influence their life and worldview, including the family's view of God (De Beer, 2012; Jansen, 2015).

Next to the home, the church is the most appropriate spiritual institution for the family to learn about Christian values and the existence of God (Haydon, 1997). In this regard, the church is the main institution in society dealing with and providing service in specific religious aspects such as prayer, spiritual character, faith, and confidence (Lickona & Davidson, 2005).

If the church teaches children Christian values, the institution should be steadfast in its values, principles, and norms. Setting the spiritual 'benchmark' in society, the teaching and fellowship of the church should outweigh the detrimental 'themes and schemes' that children receive and adopt from the outside world. Often children are perceived in a distorted way and treated negatively as the 'lost generation' by the outside world. Children should not only be considered as the church of the future; they are the church of today because the influence of the church can still change their lives, enabling them to make a difference in the world (Frees, 2011).

Moreover, the church does not only focus on the existence of God; it entails devotion to spiritual life (Abdool, 2005). It is therefore crucial that the father should teach his children to view the church as the heart of the family's activities, such as praising, worshipping, praying, offering, tithing, testifying, and thanksgiving (Bergh, 2002). First and foremost, however is the idea that man is not simply a physical, emotional and intellectual being, but rather an immortal being, who is called to live with the Triune Godhead with his family if married. If the spiritual aspects in life are not taken care of, man will soon collapse and so will his family. A believer must be realistic and understand that his marriage will not work out well without God's Grace and without the guidance of the Holy Spirit received in the Mystery of Marriage (Nicolaidis, 2003).

The church should not be considered only as a place that families frequent to praise and worship God. Families should also view the church as an avenue where they can be educated and taught, and Christian values instilled into children. Furthermore, the church should be a dedicated sphere where information about fatherhood, families, marital problems, etc. are exchanged and shared. Families need to implement this lifestyle of exchanging and sharing information and should exercise the same religious activities at home (Pitout et al., 1990).

The church should not only be viewed as the gathering of believers to praise and worship the Lord; the church also has to be a space where children can have fun and enjoy themselves in their relationship with the Lord. It should also be a safe haven where children can be themselves as God intended them to be, without pretensions or fear.

Conclusion

A Biblical father has the duty to cultivate a love for God the Father and his Word, thereby encouraging his children to adopt the same lifestyle. He should take the time to teach his family from the Word of God, guiding his children to practice and lead their daily lives according to biblical guidelines. The author believes that fatherhood should have a strong Trinitarian vision, which should be emphasized in Christian families. The father's participation is vital in



the family system. His involvement with his children may require sacrificial time, but if he engages in family matters and commits himself to create a safe and secure home where God is honored and worshipped, it will result in meaningful connections, happiness and positive attitudes among the children. The father's personal involvement in his children's education will help them thrive in life due to improved cognitive development and achievement at school. Teaching them about the love of God for all people will help them contribute to community development and be a testimony to a home where they have grown up under the guidance of a God-fearing and loving father. This is the concept gained from revisiting fatherhood from a community perspective.

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