

FAITH AND THE FAMILY: THE CORE STRENGTHS OF AMERICAN SOCIETY

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OVER THE LAST FEW GENERATIONS, the spirit embodied in the American family has been severely tested and, frankly, it is faltering. As record numbers of families fall apart or fail to form in the first place—a trend that has continued at an alarming rate since the 1960s—we have witnessed an epidemic of broken homes and broken families, greater sexual promiscuity among younger teenagers, a high number of out-of-wedlock births, a failure to reduce abortions, and more single and divorced mothers falling into poverty. Throughout the social science literature, we find an ever-present correlation between a breakdown in the family and increases in child poverty, juvenile delinquency, child abuse, poor academic performance, addictions, and health problems.

Not all Americans suffer from what I call the “Culture of Rejection and Alienation.” In fact, the data shows that, overall, the always-married intact family always provides children with more wealth, greater happiness, better health and educational opportunities, and more stability than any other arrangement. And the spiritual benefits loom large as well: Families that worship together tend to stay together and pass on to future generations more benefits and the bedrock moral principles upon which America’s democratic experiences are founded.

The great experiment in freedom that is America rests on a vibrant culture grounded in the family, where children have been accepted, loved, and cherished by both biological parents. But the culture of rejection and alienation undermines this foundation. Though there are some encouraging signs that a reversal may have begun, the damage—as you will see in the following discussion of the social science data—has been vast, especially among the poor.

Turning around this culture of rejection will require more than the heavy hand of government, for too often it has been government’s hand that contributed most to the crisis. The instruments and agents of the state have no capacity to evoke between parents the love, loyalty, and commitment needed for a strong marriage. Government actions can, however, encourage or discount, support or block, the other important social institutions that cooperate with the family—most notably churches and faith-based schools, institutions well equipped to offer direct and indirect help to parents and families. Leaders at all levels of government and within every community need to give these institutions greater support and encouragement to do the job. Too often, they bar them at the door.

The Tragedy Reflected in The “Ratio of Rejection”

The natural family, in which a mother and father raise the children they have conceived, is best embodied in the intact married family, or the traditional family. This family is founded on love, loyalty, and commitment. All other family structures, except the widowed-parent family, are households that are based on some form of personal rejection or ambivalence toward commitment. For instance, in the always single-parent family, one parent rejects marrying the other and rejects giving the child a married family in which to grow. The divorced single-parent family occurs after a profound rejection by the parents of each other. The rejection of a prior spouse is the usual condition upon which most step-families today are built. Finally, in cohabiting single-parent households, the parent has rejected a child’s other natural parent, and both cohabiting adults are ambivalent about a long-term relationship.

The deliberate acts of rejection or ambivalence at the root of these family structures have deep consequences for everyone involved. Most adults can recall the intense pain they felt as a teenager when their first romance broke up. That type of severed relationship is rarely debilitating over the long term. Rejection of the type that fractures families is much more damaging when one is married or a single parent, because the person who did the rejecting was a partner who had already altered one’s life most deeply, forever. Such damage is deep and lasting on the rejected adult and the child. Though not all forms of family rejection are deliberately brutal, they nonetheless are serious. Even if divorcing parents work to minimize the pain, an open wound from the absence of a spouse or parent remains. And in the best of cases, the breakup between parents rarely can be neutral.

To understand why I call this the culture of rejection and alienation in America, let’s look at the stunning increase in the numbers of children entering broken families after 1950. Children enter a broken home in two ways—by out-of-wedlock births or by their parents’ divorce. To understand the extent of this increasing ratio of rejection, consider: in 1950, for every 100 children born, twelve entered a broken family—four born out of wedlock and eight from their parents’ divorce. By the mid-1990s, fifty-eight out of every 100 children born in the United States entered a broken home.

This drastic change gives us a clear picture of the turmoil America’s children are experiencing. However, it also tells a startling story about what has been going on between men

and women in American society. The vast majority—60 percent—of men and women who brought children into the world could not stay together long enough to raise their children to adulthood. Such a massive rate of alienation and rejection between fathers and mothers has certain and far reaching consequences for children and society.

My deepest concern is that a stable and peaceful nation cannot last on this diet of alienation and rejection; and, like a cancer, this culture of rejection will at some time undo the glue that binds America together.

The Impact of Abortion

This cancer looks even worse when we add the very high numbers of children who are aborted each year by their mothers. This number has begun to decline recently, but the statistics are still shocking: one-third out of every 100 children conceived each year will be killed in their mother's womb, one-third will be born out of wedlock, and of those born to married parents, half will see their parents divorce before they reach the age of eighteen. The culture of rejection dominates American family life. America is increasingly a scary place to be born.

Abortion is one of the most contentious issues in the United States today, but what is constantly avoided in the debate is the relationship between abortion and sexual intercourse outside of marriage. The overwhelming number of abortions—82 percent—occur to women who are not married. Only 18 percent of abortions are attributed to women who are married. Since abortion became a protected “right,” this proportion has generally not changed, according to national sample data collected by the Alan Guttmacher Institute. The inescapable conclusion is that abortion acts as the ultimate protector of sexual relations outside of marriage.

To reduce abortions, something even President Bill Clinton has called for, the importance of teaching abstinence before marriage becomes clear. The data on teenage abortion rates bears this out: teenage abortions are dropping, abstinence is being taught in more and more schools and teenage chastity is rising, all of which are reflected in recent federal surveys.

Out-of-Wedlock Birth

There is bad news and good news. The bad news: out-of-wedlock births have risen over this half century from 4 percent to 33 percent. The good news: this proportion has remained steady at 33 percent for the last few years.

The effects of out-of-wedlock birth include¹ increased welfare dependency—some 92 percent of children on welfare today are from broken families;² lowered health expectations for newborns and risk of early infant death;³ retarded cognitive, especially verbal, development; lowered educational achievement; lowered job attainment; increased behavior problems; lowered impulse control, especially of sexual

desire and anger; warped social development; increased crime in the local community; and increased risk of being physically or sexually abused.

Divorce

In the late 1970s, almost 1.2 million children each year suffered the trauma of seeing their parents divorce. Since then, the number has dropped to just over one million children affected each year. This drop may at first appear somewhat encouraging, but it is also somewhat misleading because of the increase in the numbers of parents cohabiting. Cohabitation has increased since the mid-1970s, and a certain proportion of children of cohabiting adults have seen their biological parents split. (Splitting up, in fact, is more frequent among cohabiting couples than divorce is among married couples). At present, there are more than 1.1 million children who suffer their parents breaking up forever, leaving them suspended as a link in a difficult relationship of rejection between their parents. The combination of high rates of divorce and cohabiting parents has serious consequences for children and society.

The effects of divorce on children are pervasive.⁴ In the areas of government and citizenship, divorce is followed by increases in the rates of juvenile crime, abuse and neglect, and addiction. In education, divorce is followed by diminished learning capacities and lower high school and college degree attainment. Children from divorced homes, for example, perform more poorly in reading, spelling, and math, and repeat a grade more frequently than do children from two-parent intact families. In the marketplace, divorce precedes reductions in household income and the lifetime accumulation of wealth by family members. For families that were not poor before a divorce, income can drop by as much as 40 percent. Children raised in intact families have higher earnings as adults than do children from other family structures. In the realm of spiritual development, divorce is followed by a drop in both worship and recourse to prayer. Divorce weakens the health of children and shortens their life spans. It increases the rates of behavioral, emotional, and psychiatric problems, including suicide. Divorce can permanently weaken the child's relationship with his or her parents and peers. It often leads to destructive ways of handling conflict, a diminished competency in relationships, the early loss of virginity, and a diminished sense of masculinity or femininity. It leads to more acceptance of and frequency of cohabitation, higher expectations of divorce and rates of divorce as an adult, and less desire to have children.

These effects on the future family life of the children are disturbing because they compound the downward spiral of social decay in many communities and cities. Though any one particular child may overcome these weaknesses—because of the great love and dedication of one parent or stepparent, or thanks to the special help of a teacher or the

friendship of someone in the community—as a group the children of divorce bear the burden of these weakening effects. The layering of one generation of broken family life on top of another is compounding these weaknesses and eating away at the “social capital” of the United States.

Cohabitation

Cohabitation rates have been growing steadily for the last twenty years. Adults who cohabit and then marry are twice as likely to divorce as those who marry without cohabiting first. And those who cohabit with one person but marry someone else divorce at double that rate—that is, they have four times the risk of divorce as those who do not cohabit before marriage.

Though the likelihood of cohabitation after the divorce of one’s parents is understandable, because of the distrust of the strength of the marriage vows (daughters of divorced parents almost always cohabit before marriage), cohabitation is still a bad bet. “Trial marriages” do not strengthen a later marriage; statistically speaking, they weaken it.

What Home is Like for American Children

In light of all of this fracturing of families, what type of family structure do most American children have? The family structure of all American children, from newborns to eighteen-year-olds, shows: 47 percent live with parents in their first marriage—the intact family; 19 percent live in step-families (the vast majority of these the result of a divorce); 6 percent live with adults who cohabit; 6 percent live with always-single parents (who bore the child out of wedlock and did not marry later); 16 percent live with divorced or separated parents; and 6 percent live with widowed parents.

The picture changes when we look at our major ethnic groups: 75 percent of Asian American children, 50 percent of white and Hispanic children, and 27 percent of African American children live with their married natural parents.

Looking at what happens to American children by the time they reach the end of childhood, we find that among those aged fourteen to eighteen, only 42 percent of children live with their mother and father in an intact married family. Based on this figure, we can say that only about four in ten children born in the United States will be living in the natural intact family of mother, father, and siblings by the time they reach age eighteen.

Family Structure and Income

There are significant differences in average annual incomes for different family structures: the intact married family has the highest average yearly income of \$48,000; the average step-family makes an average yearly income of \$45,900; the cohabiting family, \$25,000; the separated or divorced single-parent family, \$18,500; and the family of an always-single parent, \$15,000.⁵ The average intact family is

3.2 times more successful in the marketplace than the always-single parent family.

Parents in different family structures work different numbers of hours on average per year, which of course explains part of the difference in the amounts they earn. Clearly, two parents in a family can work more hours than can a single parent, but even in the two-parent family, a difference in income is found based on family structure; this income does not include income transfers, which changes the picture of the total income for the poor significantly). The intact married family works an average of 3,336 hours per year; the step-family works an average of 3,223 hours per year; and the cohabiting family works an average of 2,966 hours per year.

Among single-parent family structures, the hours are even lower: The divorced/separated single-parent family works an average of 1,528 hours per year; families with single parents or never-married parents work an average of 1,056 hours per year; and the widowed-parent family works an average of 750 hours per year.

Divorce and Poverty

Divorce is the primary reason women and children move below the poverty line. Information from one study looked at the average drop in household income in 1993 after the divorce of parents with children—from \$43,000 before the divorce to \$25,300 after. That drop is larger than what the national economy experienced during the Great Depression (a 30.5 percent drop).

Divorced mothers do not tend to stay in poverty as long as always-single mothers do. The average stay of divorced mothers on welfare is three to four years, during which time they are able to work their way out of poverty. The always-single mother is less likely to do so and takes longer to escape the trap.

Family Structure and Wealth

One study from 1994 demonstrates the differences in the median wealth of families—based on home ownership, stocks, and savings—by family structure.⁶ This wealth was measured when adults were in their fifties, after they had put in most of their time in the workforce, but before they retired and began dipping into their savings. For most families, their wealth is primarily tied up in their houses. On this factor, the median wealth of married couples is almost four times greater than that of single divorced parents. The median wealth of married couples is \$132,000; of widowed parents, \$42,275; of single, never-married parents, \$35,000; and of single divorced parents, \$33,670.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that the earnings of the vast majority of single-parent families fall on the lower end of the income spectrum: 75 percent of children in the bottom quintile of income live in single-parent families, and an overwhelming number of children in poverty live in single-

parent homes. The overwhelming majority of children in the upper quintiles of income have two-parent families.

How Family Breakdown Affects Children

The next information shows the serious effects associated with the breakdown of the family and enables us to see where the problems are the greatest. Poverty occurs the least often in intact and stepparent families (10 percent).⁷ Importantly, although the poverty rate for African-American families is 30 percent, among African-American married families with children, it is only 3 percent.

Crime is somewhat more difficult to assess, since the federal government does not track information on family structure in its statistics. We do have data from Wisconsin, the only state that studied juvenile incarceration rates by family background. Using this data, analysts at the Heritage Foundation found that juvenile delinquency is lowest in two-parent families (both intact and step-families), but it is five times more prevalent among children with married but separated parents. Among children with divorced parents, juvenile delinquency is twelve times higher, and among children of always single parents, it is twenty-two times higher.

There are clear indications from a review of academic studies that crime rates for African-Americans and white Americans are not very different if we control for the presence of marriage. Among blacks and whites who come from broken families, the rate is similar and very high; for blacks and whites from intact married families, the rate is similar but very low.

Clearly, family structure has a huge impact on juvenile crime, and it is the single biggest determining factor of whether a child slips into delinquent behavior.⁸

Child Abuse

The federal government also does not track family structure in considering the incidences of serious child abuse. However, data from the United Kingdom—which on many social issues compares closely with the United States—shows that serious child abuse is lowest in the always-married (intact) family, that it is six times higher in the stepfamily than in the intact family; it is fourteen times higher in families with single mothers (divorced and always-single mothers combined); it is twenty times higher in families with single fathers (predominantly divorced fathers); it is twenty times higher in families with cohabiting biological parents; the most dangerous environment for a child is the home where the mother cohabits with a boyfriend, and serious child abuse is thirty-three times higher in these homes.⁹

The same holds true for fatal child abuse rates, but the differences in rates are more pronounced. Most fatalities occur in homes where the mother cohabits with a boyfriend—the rate is seventy-three times higher than in intact families. This cohabiting boyfriend configuration is found in most of

the gruesome cases of child abuse that make the headlines today. The intact marriage of a natural mother and natural father is the greatest safeguard against child abuse.

Serious child abuse has increased steadily over the last few decades in the United States. Regrettably, the seriously abused or neglected child is most likely to become the psychopath who commits the most heinous crimes or the dangerous thug preying on residents of particular neighborhoods at night. As the rates of abuse go up, the numbers of violent criminals do as well.

Education and School Performance

Analysts at the Heritage Foundation looked at data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, the federal government's largest research project looking into how teenagers fare on a host of issues. The findings on the average overall grade point average (GPA) of American teenagers in math, English, social studies, and science in 1995, out of a maximum possible score of 4.0, are examined by family structure. These GPAs are 2.98 for teenagers who have intact married parents; for those who live with cohabiting adults, 2.79; with stepparents, 2.71; with always-single parents, 2.68; and with divorced single parents, 2.64.

A slightly different picture of how teenagers from different family structures behave in school emerges when we look at children who are expelled from school. Teenagers with different family backgrounds are expelled at different rates.

Of teenagers who live with their still-married mothers and fathers, 2 percent are expelled; of those living with parents who cohabit, 7 percent; of those living with stepparents, 7 percent; of those living with divorced single parents, 7 percent; and of those living with an always-single parent, 9 percent. These differences in school performance and behaviors carry over into adulthood, in how these children handle positions of responsibility in the marketplace and in how much they earn.

How Faith and Family Affect Sexual Activity

There is a fundamental relationship between faith, family, and the sexual act. It took me a long time to see it. The whole purpose of creation and of the raising up of the people of Israel from Abraham down through Moses and the prophets—for Christians, of the incarnation, Calvary, the resurrection, and the founding of the Church, and for Muslims, the following of the way of the prophet Mohammed—is to reach the ultimate goal: God wants a very large family to live with Him in heaven forever. And the way He brings every member of this huge family into existence is through the sexual act. It is central to His whole order. And its centrality is recognized and cultivated in the good society. No other act in the natural order has the power to do anything like it: to bring a new being into existence forever. The wealth of the richest person, the insights of the most brilliant individual ever, the works of the greatest artist measures less than does just one

member of that family. The sexual act is more powerful than atomic energy for good or ill. Until recently, Western civilization has sanctioned the sexual act only within the institution of marriage, and the norms, rewards, sanctions, and taboos of society had the sole purpose of shepherding young adults toward marriage. The sexual revolution, which started a century or more ago, overturned these norms, sanctions, and taboos. Even federal government policies have become part of the new wave of revolutionary activity denying and undermining those cultural patterns that shepherd sexual intercourse towards marriage.

It is worthwhile to consider how the relationship between family and religious worship affects the sexual activity of teenagers and young adults. This relationship can be found in nationally representative data compiled in federally sponsored surveys and international studies.

Declining Rates of Fertility

One of the consequences of the sexual revolution has been a massive decline in the fertility rate of all developed countries. It is continually dropping, always declining wherever population control policies have taken hold. To put it bluntly, developed nations are not replacing themselves. Europe's low fertility rate means that for all intents and purposes it is dying out; its peoples are gradually disappearing. Spain and Italy—with fertility rates that are close to half the replacement rate (one child families)—will soon be nations comprised of children who have no brothers or sisters, aunts or uncles, or cousins. Families will be vertical between generations, with no horizontal dimension, no extended family members in each generation.

Europe's growing demographic vacuum is pulling in a vast migration of people from Africa and Asia, reminiscent of the movements of Vandals, Huns, Goths, and Visigoths in the third through sixth centuries. Yet, as the latest UN reports indicate, even this migration is not sufficient to sustain Europe's future economic needs.¹⁰ The situation illustrates on a grand scale Sigmund Freud's insights, in the latter half of his professional life, on the effects of sex gone awry: *thanatos*, the death wish.

In the United States, the declining fertility rate of the non-immigrant population (much the same as France and Germany) is masked by the high fertility rate of immigrants, which keeps our population at replacement levels. But it is well worth noting that a part of the declining birth rate is the success of abstinence education among teenagers. For the past five years, teens in the fifteen to seventeen and eighteen to nineteen age groups have experienced a continual decline in the number out-of-wedlock births. Among all teenagers, there has been an increase in the rates of virginity, a decrease in out-of-wedlock births, and a decrease in abortion. Even so, the rate of out-of-wedlock births is still highest among women in their twenties.

Virginity and Sexual Activity

Age of First Intercourse

The earlier a girl has her first sexual encounter, the more sexual partners she is likely to have, the more susceptible she is to contract a sexually transmitted disease, and the more likely she is to become a single mother. The numbers of American girls having intercourse for the first time by age fifteen rose sharply between 1975 and 1988; the rate, which began to drop in 1995, is still startlingly high at over 20 percent.

In 1970, 4.6 percent of American girls had lost their virginity by age 15; by 1975, the number had increased to 9.8 percent; by 1980, 16.7 percent of girls had their first intercourse by age 15; by 1988, the number peaked at just over 25 percent; and by 1995, the number had dropped slightly to just over 22 percent.¹¹

Influence of Peers and Worship

Peers have quite an impact on teenage virginity, as shown by data on this subject compiled by a team of Midwestern researchers, who studied sixteen-year-old individuals in their region. I think this is one of the most dramatic studies available in the social sciences today. On one end of the spectrum are teenagers who do not worship at all and whose friends are sexually active: 96 percent of such teenagers are likely to be sexually active. On the other end of the spectrum are teenagers who worship weekly and whose friends are not sexually active: 97 percent of these teenagers are likely to be virgins. Clearly, friends and worship are powerful influences on sexual experiences.

Relationship with the Father

The effect of peer influences can be altered quite a bit by how close a teenager feels to her parents, especially her father. A girl who has a close relationship with her father is more likely to maintain her virginity for a longer period of time. If she believes he cares about her, she is likely to remain a virgin far longer than one who believes her father does not care about her. With the absence of fathers in the home so prevalent today, the implications of this fact for society are enormous.

Parents Who Worship

Whether a teenager's parents worship matters. When neither parent worships, the rate of virginity of children is small. When a mother worships but the father does not, the rate is higher. When fathers worship but the mother does not, the rate of virginity is somewhat higher still. When both mother and father worship, children show the greatest capacity to maintain their virginity.

Effects of Worship on Young Adult Men

Findings from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, a federal national long-term study, indicate that religious

worship by men in their twenties has quite an impact on their capacity to sustain their own virginity.

The Most Sexually Content Adults

These findings fit very well with the findings of the most comprehensive survey on sexuality in America presented in *The Social Organization of Sexuality*.¹² Those who have the most enjoyable sexual relations as adults are married adults who worship God every week and have had only one sexual partner—their spouse. This is a very different profile from the one put forth by the purveyors of the sexual revolution over the past three decades.

Worship and Income

Data from the same National Longitudinal Survey of Youth demonstrates the relationship between church attendance and family structure in young adult men and the level of income in their early to mid-thirties. Young adult men in the lowest income group came from broken families that never worshiped. The highest income group consisted of young men who were raised in intact families that worshiped weekly.

This finding fits with research conducted in the 1980s by Harvard University labor economist Richard Freeman. He found that children who make it out of inner-city poverty as adults (the vast majority from single-parent families) overwhelmingly grew up in a family that worshiped weekly. Of all the background factors that helped individuals to escape poverty—and there are other influences—Freeman found that the most powerful was weekly religious worship. Yet America's largest church denominations fail to advocate social policies based on this finding. It would be valuable if church leaders spoke of this fact, especially when they are trying to help the poor.

The Case for Strengthening Marriage and Worship

The data clearly show that growing up in a traditional married family most often results in better health, longevity, happiness, higher levels of educational attainment, stronger work ethics, and more income and lifetime wealth, and also in much lower levels of crime, drug addiction, out-of-wedlock births, abortion, divorce, school dropouts, joblessness, poverty, illness, suicide, and depression.

The same effects can be found when we look at the frequency with which families worship God for building a person's strengths and weaknesses, improving health, attaining higher incomes, escaping poverty, being happier in marriage, having fewer out-of-wedlock births, lessening the number of divorces, and lowering rates of drug and alcohol addiction. Worship also increases the likelihood of a faster recovery from separations, addictions, and crime.

Sociologically, it is interesting to note that fostering a relationship with God will translate into an increased inner strength that is evident in external behaviors. In the jargon of

social scientists, the data support the view that the worship of God, in general, is a source of personal strength and interpersonal capacity and a facilitator of social cohesion, or, as economists like to call it, *social capital*. When intact marriage and regular religious worship are combined, social capital is increased and benefits for children, adults, and the nation are multiplied.

Given this association, we can logically and sociologically assert that intact marriage and regular religious worship are two of the most powerful and fundamental sources of social capital, and when they are combined they help children have fulfilling relationships in adulthood and achieve a higher standard of living and greater health and happiness. Though these factors are free, they are the most valuable to American society.

Conclusion

The challenge for America, and for the world, in this new century is not to improve the economy, but to strengthen the family and faith in God. One simple way to summarize the insights gleaned from the social science research of the last century is to say that children thrive within a family, that family life thrives when it is built on intact marriages, and that intact marriages thrive when there is regular worship of God. Despite the ever-growing body of evidence supporting this assertion, the rejection of fathers and mothers of each other and their children continues at unacceptable levels. By age eighteen, only four out of every ten children remain in an intact family—that is, live in a family where their mother and father remain committed to each other and to their children. One-third of children are rejected before birth and one-third are born to an unmarried mother without a father who is committed to taking care of them. One-half of those who are born to married parents will see their parents reject each other before they reach age eighteen.

Nothing in American history rivals this assault on children and families. Despite the nation's strengths, America is becoming one of the weakest of nations socially, when it comes to considerations of the family. Somehow, Americans expect their children to thrive in the culture of rejection which imbues its social, political, and legal institutions. In the family, law, education, the media, the marketplace, and even the church and synagogue—where marriages most often start and have always been most treasured—the vows a man and woman make to each other, to God, and to their community mean less and less.

If the state turns against the married family as its most basic institution, it is also rejecting the self-evident truths on which our nation was built. We have come perilously close to a crisis. A powerful section of our political and social elite no longer see a great place for marriage and worship in our society. Our government wants to step in and act as parent, despite having no institutional capacity to evoke love and loyalty and commitment from children and adults. Such is

the competence of the family, the church, and the school. It is with these three institutions that rebuilding a strong society must begin.

Thankfully, more teenagers now seem to have heard the message. They are beginning to lead the way in reversing the social unraveling that has occurred over the past three decades. Are we adults ready to follow our children? There has been talk of a fourth Awakening in America, a possible continuation of Protestant America's history of major religious revivals. If it, or a variant, does not come soon, the strong peaceful America we have known may soon exist only in our memories and the stories we pass down.

NOTES

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