

Challenging Issues

This is one of a series of booklets on challenging issues facing Christians today. It is written with the conviction that God's word the Bible is relevant and needs to be studied and applied sensitively.



the family



One of a series of study guides to help Christians think through difficult issues in a helpful and informative way



Challenging Issues

The Family

**A Bible Study produced by
The Social Issues and Resources Committee
of the
Presbyterian Church in Ireland**

Foreword

This is one of a series of studies on Challenging Issues facing Christians today. It is written with the conviction that God's Word, the Bible, is relevant and needs to be studied and applied sensitively.

Our hope is that this series will help Christians think through these difficult issues in a helpful and informative way.

Norman AL Cameron
Convener of the Social Issues and Resources Committee

Other studies in the Challenging Issues Series:

Disability

Homosexuality

Available from the Board of Social Witness, Church House, Belfast BT1 6DW.

Introduction

Doreen was devastated when she discovered that her husband was having an affair. Later that day he broke the news to their two children, aged twelve and ten, that he was leaving home. Their world seemed to fall apart as he told them that he was going because he loved someone else now. His son literally bent double as if hit in the stomach. He cried, "Don't go Daddy, we love you. Mummy loves you."

How many of us have experienced the above scenario, if not in our own home, then in our extended family or among our neighbours or friends? In July 1998 a report entitled "Family Matters" was made to the Home Secretary by the Lords and Commons Family and Child Protection Group. This report was the result of growing concern in the face of the increasing breakdown of the family in Britain. It points out that three thousand children every week experience the divorce of their parents and highlights the significant destabilising effect of family breakdown upon our whole social structure.

In a briefing paper published in 2001, the Christian charity Care for the Family points out that in just one generation in Britain the numbers marrying have halved, while the majority of those who do marry cohabit for a period before their marriage. The rate of divorce among those who cohabited prior to marriage is almost double that for those who did not cohabit. (Population Trends no 68. 1992)

In Northern Ireland the current rate of marriage breakdown is one in three. 28% of children have experienced the divorce or separation of their parents by the age of 16. (Relate, 2001) Divorce figures appear to have levelled off in recent years, but that is probably because fewer people are getting married in the first place as more and more choose to cohabit.

Social attitudes and behaviour have changed so that cohabiting relationships and homosexual relationships are increasingly accepted alongside the traditional family as the way to live. The Daily Telegraph of 8th April, 2002 reported that a lesbian couple in Edinburgh had been granted the same parental rights over each other's children as a heterosexual married couple. The couple said, "Family is about cohesion, about bringing people together in a secure, loving, stable environment. That is what we have. That is family."

If as Christians our final authority is God, not the prevailing culture, then it is important to know what He says in the Bible on these issues. Then the challenge is to apply these principles in the society in which we live.

It is our hope that this Bible Study will clarify some of these issues as we consider carefully the question - what is family?

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Discussion Starters

- 1 In June 1995 the Church of England's General Synod published a report entitled "Something to Celebrate" in which it claims that the diversity of family forms today ought to be seen as a positive development which is to be respected and welcomed. Do you agree?
- 2 "Long lasting stable marriage as the dominant family pattern is in the best interests of the nation and for the health and well being of its children." (Family Matters p35) Do you agree?

Exploring the Biblical Material

1

Please read Genesis 2:18-25, Mark 10:6-9

Why does marriage result in a more stable society? What principles and practical implications arise from these passages? Are Adam and Eve a universal picture of the essence of what it means to be a family?

2

Ephesians 5:31-33

What is the significance of marriage as a reflection of Christ's union with the church?

3

Please read 1 Cor 13:4-7, Philippians 2:3-7, Galatians 5:22-25

"Marriage is a publicly proclaimed union of one man with one woman, voluntarily entered into for life, to the exclusion of all others." This is the commonly accepted definition of marriage. What principles in the above passages would help us maintain the long-term commitment of marriage in an environment that increasingly encourages novelty and short-term commitment?

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4

Please read Malachi 2:13-16, Matthew 19:3-12

Does the promise to remain faithful “till death us do part” hold true under all circumstances? Is divorce ever permissible?

5

Please read Proverbs 22:6, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Psalm 78:1-7, Mark 10:13-16

What parenting principles emerge from these passages? In what practical ways can we pass on Biblical principles to our children?

6

Please read 1 Corinthians 6:15-20, Matthew 5:27-30, Galatians 5:19-21

What do these passages have to say about sex outside marriage? Is there teaching here that helps us to have a right approach to cohabitation or trial marriages? What is the significance of the promise, “for better, for worse”?



Please read Romans 1:21-32 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11

What do these passages teach about homosexual relationships? Can a homosexual relationship ever be an acceptable basis for a “family”?

Pastoral Issues



Please read Exodus 20:12, Mark 7: 8-13.

Jesus did not allow even sacred vows to interfere with the duty to honour our parents. How does this apply to those of us who have the responsibility of caring for elderly relatives?



Please read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, Matthew 16:26, Ephesians 5:25-30

How do we maintain a proper balance between the demands of work, family and church?

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10

What should be our attitude as Christians to those struggling with some aspect of their sexuality or those living in a relationship outside marriage, whether homosexual or heterosexual?

11

How do we address family life in our congregation? How could we help married couples strengthen their relationship? How could we help singles feel part of the church family?

12

How could we help parents dealing with specific situations - lone parenting, step parenting, bereaved parents, parents with disabled or ill children, parents with rebellious children?

Affirmations and Recommendations

- 1 We affirm that all that is true and real about the family is revealed in God's word to us. As Christians we are called to live in obedience to God's Word and not according to the prevailing attitude of our culture.
- 2 We affirm that there is a created order and structure in family life that is best for us as individuals and is beneficial to society as a whole.
- 3 We affirm that monogamous, heterosexual, lifelong marriage is God's ideal for family life.
- 4 We affirm that sexual intercourse should take place only within the context of marriage.
- 5 We affirm that we have the responsibility of passing on Biblical principles to our children within a loving, accepting home environment.
- 6 We urge Christians to offer support, patience and love to all who struggle with sexual morality and through it the promise of forgiveness and hope in the name of Jesus Christ to all who repent.
- 7 We encourage Christians to promote and strengthen family life in their congregation and in society.

Further Reading and Resources

Family Matters	Report to the Home Secretary (Centre for Contemporary Ministry)
Briefing paper on Marriage, Divorce and Cohabitation, published 2001, Care for the Family	
Sixty Minute Marriage	Rob Parsons (Hodder & Stoughton)
Sixty Minute Parent	Rob Parsons (Hodder & Stoughton)
Loving against the Odds	Rob Parsons (Hodder & Stoughton)
The Marriage Book	Nicky and Sila Lee (HTB)
Families at the Crossroads	Rodney Clapp (IVP)
Single Parents in Focus	Care for the Family
Homosexuality	Challenging Issues series (PCI)
For Better, For Worse	Philippa Taylor (CARE) (Marriage and Cohabitation compared)
The M Word	CARE (Marriage Education video and teachers guide for 14 and 15 year old students)
Exploring Marriage	CARE (CDRom and teachers guide for 16+ age range)

Relevant Christian Organisations:

Care for the Family, 3 Wallace Ave, Lisburn, BT27 4AA. Tel: (028) 9262 8050.

Care in Crisis, 39 Union St, Lurgan, BT66 8DY. Tel: (028) 3832 9900.

Love for Life, 35 Cottage Road, Dollingstown, BT67 9NB. Tel: (028) 3834 4166.

Divorce Care, 39 Union St, Lurgan, BT66 8DY. Tel: (028) 3834 5522.

Christian Guidelines, 7 Queen Street, Belfast. Tel: (028) 9023 0005.

CARE, 75 Hollywood Road, Belfast, BT4 3BA. Tel: (028) 9067 1200.

Marriage Resource, 24 West Street, Wimborne, Dorset BH21 1JS. Tel: (01202) 849000.

