

Growing Biblical Families on the Mission Field

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Christian workers in a cross-cultural setting² must try to raise healthy, biblical families while dealing with challenges faced by the general Christian population and more. Missionaries are often isolated from other believers and are not privileged to have strong local church programs to help meet the spiritual needs of their families. They must learn to grow in their relationship with God and others. At the same time, they want to teach their children to grow in their own faith without the support system of their home culture. Often, the host culture opposes Christian biblical values, making the challenge even greater.

A survey of fifty-five Christian educators from seventeen denominations and several independent churches identified eight categories of the greatest needs of today's families:

1. The need for families "to be led into a personal relationship with God . . . [and to have] foundational training in the Bible that will shape their values, perspectives, commitments, and actions."
2. The need for encouraging support from other families as well as from church staff.
3. The need for training in practical "how-to" skills.
4. The need for accountability groups.
5. The need for intergenerational mentoring and modeling by "functional families."
6. The need for a "positive, fun, and safe place . . . [to have] family-oriented activities unpolluted by a self-oriented society."
7. The need for "preventive, biblical counseling in addition to the more common therapeutic counseling."
8. The need for "easy access to books, videos, tapes, and other resources that can provide practical training in their own time frame."³

Most missionary families face the challenge of addressing these needs without the assistance of a strong local church. The challenge is compounded as many new applicants do not have backgrounds that include a Christian family, regular Sunday School attendance, early conversion, or missions education. Instead, a typical profile of missionary candidates appointed by the International Mission Board (IMB) describes an individual who became a Christian as an adult. Some grew up in a dysfunctional or divorced family, and carry the baggage of abuse, neglect, or immorality.⁴ If there is no strong positive model from their family background, missionaries must rely on their understanding of biblical foundations and practical application of biblical principles to grow biblically healthy families.

After twenty-five years of research, surveying and interviewing over 14,000 families in all fifty states and twenty-four countries around the world, Nick Stinnett identified six basic qualities in strong families. As he prepared to publish his findings, Stinnett invited Joe Beam to add insights into what the Scripture says about the principles the researchers were discovering. Scripture provides a foundation for building biblical families that exhibit these strengths:

1. *Commitment.* Members of strong families are dedicated to promoting each other's welfare and happiness. They value the unity of the family. [Mal. 2:13-16; Matt. 19:8; Eph. 5:25-28; Col. 3:19; 1 Tim. 5:16-18; Tit. 2:4]
2. *Appreciation and Affection.* Members of strong families often show appreciation for each other. [Lev. 19:18; Matt. 19:19, 22:37-39; Lk. 10:27; Rom. 13:9; 1 Cor. 7:3-5; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8]
3. *Positive Communication.* Members of good families have good communication skills and spend significant time talking with each other. [Eph. 4:15-29; 1 Th. 5:11]
4. *Time Together.* Strong families spend quality time in generous quantities with each other. [Eccl. 3:1-8, 4:9-12; Eph. 5:15-16]
5. *Spiritual Well-being.* Strong Christian families recognize God's involvement in their lives and praise Him for it. [Josh. 1:8; Ps. 32:6, 46:1-11, 150:1-6; Matt. 6:14, 7:12, 24-25; 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Phil. 4:6-7; Jas. 1:22; 1 Pet. 5:1-11]
6. *The Ability to Cope with Stress and Crises.* Members of strong families are able to view stress or crises as opportunities to grow. [Gen. 2:2-3; Ex. 31:15; Ps. 46:1-11; Prov. 15:13, 17:22; Is. 41:10; Mt. 6:34; Rom. 14:7-8; Phil. 4:4-9]⁵

Stinnett's research was based on three assumptions about strong families: "(1) members would have a high degree of marital happiness; (2) they would have satisfying parent-child relationships; and (3) they would do a good job of meeting each other's needs."⁶

The Challenge of Maintaining Spiritual Health in a Foreign Land

The Stewardship Factor

Growing a spiritually healthy family is a matter of stewardship. God has entrusted parents with the responsibility of raising their children. As the Israelites prepared to occupy Canaan, Moses emphasized that their highest priority was to love the one true God above all else and that they were to teach their children to love him with the same exclusivity. This practice would be their defense against the tempting guiles of the pagan practices of the peoples occupying the land.⁷

Jesus reaffirmed this priority as the “great and first commandment.”⁸ He also emphasized how seriously God takes the responsibility given to adults to raise children in the fear of the Lord: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”⁹ Missionary families living in a foreign culture that is hostile to Christian beliefs have an even greater stewardship responsibility to teach their children to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and might.

Challenges from the Host Culture

For many people, culture defines what is important, what is valuable and what is believed to be true. Each family develops its own distinct culture within the context of the influences of location, family origin, status, ethnicity, religious practices, and shared convictions. The culture of a missionary family naturally takes on some of the characteristics of the host culture as the family adopts some of the practices of the people among whom they live and work. For example, most missionaries living in Asia adopt the customary practice of removing their shoes as they enter any house. Even after returning from their host culture, they continue the practice because keeping clean floors in the home has become a cultural value.

At the same time, they will hold onto many of the common practices from their home culture. For example, most American missionaries continue to celebrate Christmas on the morning of December 25 with a large meal, although local believers in the host culture might celebrate on the evening of the 24th with a large meal about midnight when Baby Jesus comes instead of Santa Claus. Other nationals may not celebrate Christmas at all.

Missionary families often adapt to their host culture without compromising their biblical beliefs and values. Biblical culture, however, often clashes with some of the beliefs and practices of the host culture in which the missionary lives and works. Missionaries can be lulled into accepting some of the host culture’s practices that violate biblical principles, as illustrated by Abraham’s family as they moved to the land of Canaan.

Abraham was called by God to leave his pagan culture and take his family to a place God would show him.¹⁰ As they made the transition, his family's values were challenged by the host cultures they encountered. Abraham's nephew, Lot, settled in Sodom, a city known for its debauchery and sexual depravity. When two messengers from God visited him and were threatened by a rape-lustful mob, Lot was willing to offer his own daughters to protect the two visitors. Both daughters were betrothed to be married to young men from Sodom.

When Lot and his daughters fled the city before God destroyed it for its wickedness, both daughters seduced their father and bore children from the incestuous relationship in their desperate attempt to preserve their father's family line.¹¹ Although no biblical evidence indicates whether Lot had led his family to obey the commandment of the Word of God, Lot obviously allowed the beliefs and practices of his host culture to have influence over his family. They lost their focus on the greatest commandment.

On the other hand, Abraham maintained his commitment to God and his faith culture when he insisted on finding a wife for his son, Isaac, from his own people rather than from the pagan culture where he lived.¹² Unlike his nephew, Abraham passed on to the next generation the faith values he had learned.

From Abraham's example, modern missionary families can learn the importance of respecting the host culture without allowing it to compromise the family's biblical beliefs. This can only be accomplished by godly parents living out their faith with integrity on a consistent basis, regardless of their place of residence.

The Importance of Spiritual Disciplines

Growing a strong, biblical family requires parents who maintain their own spiritual health. The time and energy expended in adjusting to living and ministering in a cross-cultural setting can infringe on the missionary's personal time for rest and growth in the spiritual disciplines. Failure to maintain the basics of personal spiritual health results in a rapid depletion of spiritual and emotional energy.

When I mention this challenge to stateside church groups, the reaction is often one of surprise, as if missionaries are supposed to be super-spiritual and immune to spiritual lethargy. In stateside conferences, however, many missionaries admit to being spiritually, emotionally and physically drained after they have overspent their energy ministering to the needs of people in their environment. Often the decline begins with the stress of responding to a special event or crisis that demands extra effort.

This effect could be in response to a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, war, or terrorist attack. It also could be a very positive event such as a break-through opportunity to launch a new ministry. The spiritual, emotional, and physical energy necessary to meet such challenges requires making the practice of spiritual

disciplines a lifestyle conviction for each family member. All family members must learn to grow in their relationship with Christ, learning to abide in him daily.¹³

The Challenge of Maintaining Healthy Relationships

In exit interviews, missionaries retiring from service with the IMB shared their answers to two questions: 1) How did you manage to stay on the field so long? and 2) If you had it all to do over again, what would you do exactly the same? A common thread in every retiring missionary's answer to these two questions is the importance of commitments and relationships.¹⁴

Commitment

In response to the first question, the missionaries interviewed mentioned having responded to a keen sense of calling to career missions. They shared how they felt they were only acting in obedience to God's call. Their commitment was based on a close personal relationship to God and an intense desire to serve Him. Several persons mentioned times of discouragement when they were strongly tempted to give up and return to their homeland. When asked what kept them from leaving, they referred to the commitment they had made. Since they never sensed that God had changed their calling, they did not feel released from the commitment made many years before.

Relationships

In response to the second question (If you had it all to do over again, what would you do exactly the same?), several retiring missionaries mentioned specific accomplishments that had given them a profound sense of fulfillment. Almost all, however, said the one thing they would do exactly the same would be to build relationships with nationals, co-workers, and family. Many workers went on to share stories of the first converts they had seen among their assigned people group and the close relationship they had maintained over the years. Several mentioned young people they had discipled. Often they had regarded these youths as surrogate children. Some missionaries would become teary-eyed as they talked about friendships they had developed that were closer than any others they had ever experienced.

In similar discussions with adult children of missionaries, most indicate how privileged they felt to have lived overseas as third culture kids (TCKs) in a cross-cultural missionary family.¹⁵ Their shared experience with other missionary families built strong relationships with missionary "aunts," "uncles," and "cousins." Missionary kids (MKs) also develop close relationships with children in the host culture. When MKs are asked to identify their closest peers, they usually indicate other MKs or friends from their host culture.¹⁶ These relationships are extremely important to MKs.

As missionary parents help their children develop healthy relationships with nationals and other MKs, they need to instill biblical values. As they play and befriend other children in the community where they live, missionary children often help open doors for their parents to share the gospel. Families that remain on the field for longer and more productive terms find ways to involve their children in the ministry. Conversely, when MKs develop unhealthy relationships, the ministry of the entire family can be endangered.

Challenges for Couples Maintaining a Healthy Marriage

The same sense of strong commitment to a calling can be seen in the marriage relationships of long-term missionaries. Commitment to the marriage partnership is important to building a strong biblical family. Malachi revealed God's intent to establish the marriage relationship as the foundation for building strong, godly families: "Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth."¹⁷

When questioned about the issue of divorce, Jesus emphatically stated that from the beginning God intended the marriage relationship to be a lifelong commitment between one man and one woman: "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so."¹⁸ Nothing is as sad as seeing a couple who followed God's will and left their home country to preach the gospel to the nations, but who return defeated and seeking divorce.

Nick Stinnett identified commitment as the core basic principle on which all the other characteristics of a strong family are built. "Kids who see their parents loving each other feel secure in the longevity of the family. There is a sense in which their parents' commitment to each other also shows the parents' commitment to the children and to the family as a whole. God sees the commitment of husband and wife to each other as so crucial to families that He robustly condemned any violation of that marital commitment."¹⁹ The marital relationship must be a priority for both husband and wife. If the marriage relationship is not strong, other relationships will also begin to deteriorate, including their relationships with their children.

Commitment also extends to the relationship with each member of the family. All too often missionaries allow the demands of their work to absorb so much time, attention, and energy that the family is left with only the leftovers. "When a person is more committed to work than to family, it's almost as if that person is having an affair against the whole family."²⁰

As a young journeyman missionary, I learned from my pastor, Enrique Damaso, how important it is to establish a "pyramid of priority relationships." He explained that his first priority was to be obedient to God, maintaining a strong personal relationship with him. Next came his wife, followed by his children and

family, and then work and other relationships. Pastor Damaso explained that if his relationship with God was not healthy, then all other relationships would suffer. Similarly, if the marriage relationship with his wife was not healthy, then the children would also suffer and the negative results would spill over into the work. If, however, his wife and children were secure in the knowledge of how important they were in his priorities, then he felt certain his work would be more fruitful and productive. Pastor Damaso had applied these principles in his own life as one of Venezuela's first missionaries and later as an effective church-planting pastor and president of the Venezuelan Baptist Convention. In carrying out all his many responsibilities and ministry activities, his family always knew that they were his first priority after his relationship to God.

Although the amount of time spent in each level of relationships ascending the pyramid might be proportionately less, the order of the priorities is essential to healthy relationships and ministry. This order of priorities also follows the order in which the different relationships were first established by God. Missionaries are in the relationship business, reconciling others to God. If any of the priority relationships suffer, this problem will affect their effectiveness in all other relationships.

Challenges for First-Term Missionaries

First-term missionaries are challenged by the stress of constant change and adjustment as they learn to survive in their new culture. Maintaining spiritual health in the missionary family can be challenging under the best of circumstances.

During our first term on the field, we were undeniably under a great deal of stress. We saw many exciting responses to our ministry as we also experienced several major life changes while learning to live and work in our new culture. As positive as some of these events were, they added to our stress level, almost as much as the negative ones. During some periods of time, I felt spiritually depleted and experienced an utter lack of spiritual discipline. By the time we began our first stateside assignment, after four and a half years on the field, we were nearly exhausted.

The stress we experienced in our work and ministry did not just stay in the office. It spilled over into our family life. We discovered the importance of maintaining a healthy marriage relationship so we could enjoy a healthy family. Sadly, it took some hard lessons for me to come to this realization.

One thing that helped us was being part of a close community of believers who ministered to us as we also ministered to them. Close friendships with fellow missionaries, national coworkers, and new believers were sources of encouragement when we felt discouraged. Leading a group through the MasterLife²¹ discipleship plan helped us to maintain our disciplines of scripture memory, and regularly observing a day of silence and solitude. The responsibility of mentoring others and modeling

the disciplines for the group challenged me to be more diligent in maintaining my spiritual health.

As missionaries arrive on a new field, they must concentrate much time, effort, and energy on learning to survive and thrive in their cross-cultural setting, establishing new relationships with the people to whom they are sent. At the same time, they need to be reminded to continue to nurture their personal relationship with God, with their spouse, and with their children. The effectiveness of their work depends on it.

Challenges for Singles as a Family Unit of One

A substantial number of people serving on the mission field are single, representing a family unit of one. Single missionaries have special needs and challenges related to growing as part of a biblical family. They sometimes experience a sense of isolation and loneliness. They may feel unsupported by other married coworkers or families. It is important for a single worker to establish a sense of family.

Most single missionaries will become attached to a surrogate family, whether it is another missionary family or a national family. Often, however, the single missionary might be reluctant to express the need for this relationship, fearing it will be intrusive to the family. In the same way, some families might fear they will be seen as over-protective or placing undue pressure if they are too insistent on inviting singles to join in their family activities.

In many cultures, it is unusual for a single woman to live alone. She may be seen as sexually available because she is unprotected by a family. If no one brings her under their protection, she may be vulnerable to unwanted attention and even assault. A single male will often be the target of advances by young women whose parents see him as a prized potential son-in-law. The desire for inclusion might make him vulnerable to such advances. Adopting singles into the family while balancing the needs for independence and inclusion can be one of the most graphic illustrations of putting the needs of others first.²²

The Challenge of Pornography and its Effects on the Family

Building strong biblical families overseas requires being constantly on guard against internet pornography, one of Satan's most insidious weapons against the family. Children living overseas often spend significant time online. The internet has become the primary source for research, making it almost impossible for children to complete their school assignments without access to online resources. Many students attend online schools or correspond with a supervising teacher by e-mail. Even younger children often have their own e-mail addresses and are connected to their friends by social media.

As children spend more time online, their vulnerability to pornography increases. This problem was confirmed by a 2003 Symantec survey of 1,000 youths

between the ages of seven and eighteen. Over 80 percent of children who used e-mail reported receiving inappropriate spam daily and 47 percent of school-aged children received porn spam daily. This study also found that as many as one in five children open the spam they receive,²³ increasing the probability that the child will be exposed to pornography and become vulnerable to its addictive attractions.

Maintaining a healthy, biblical family requires more than just setting up external safeguards such as software to monitor or control computer usage. Parents must also instill the internal safeguards that include learning to apply the spiritual disciplines of Bible study, prayer, meditation, personal and corporate worship, and time in solitude with God. Rob Jackson, of Focus on the Family, offers this advice: “Frankly, there is no guarantee that even the best parent can prevent his child’s exposure to pornography. As with parents of any age or culture, we seek to do the best we can with the resources we have... If we really believe that sin is a powerful barrier between our child and God, we will move past a mere ‘sin management’ approach to mentor them into a loving relationship with us and, more importantly, with Him.”²⁴

The regular practice of the disciplines also helps to develop the ability to “take every thought captive,”²⁵ not only being aware of one’s thoughts and feelings, but also understanding why they are occurring and deciding how to respond appropriately when they occur.

The ability to overcome errant thoughts and feelings is indispensable to growing strong biblical families in a foreign culture. “The stress of daily life and ministry can cause our emotions and thoughts to be more intense, lowering our resistance to the temptations of Satan to accept falsehoods related to our identity. Our identity must be rooted in Christ and our response must be based on God’s true character.”²⁶ Teaching family members to practice the spiritual disciplines can help them develop the fortitude necessary for a life of holiness in close relationship with the Father, Who gives victory over temptation.

Conclusion

The challenges of everyday life and ministry are magnified by the stress of living in a cross-cultural setting. To face these amplified challenges, the missionary family must focus on practicing and exemplifying the spiritual disciplines and building healthy, loving relationships. The result will be biblically strong families enjoying healthier, longer, and more productive ministries that will bring more fruit to the Father and glorify Him.

NOTES

1. Larry Gay spent 35 years working cross-culturally and ministering to cross-cultural workers as he served in various leadership roles with the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (IMB) in Latin America and Asia.

2. The term *missionary* will be used as a synonym for expatriate Christian workers or cross-cultural Christian workers. The same principles for growing biblical families apply to all Christian workers living and working in a cross-cultural setting, including humanitarian aid workers, non-governmental organization (NGO) workers and other expatriate Christians.

3. Jeffery Gangel, "Survey of Effective Family Life Education Programs," *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Family Life Education: A Complete Resource on Family Life Issues in the Local Church*, Kenneth O. Gangel and James C. Wilhoit, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 67-68.

4. The author has observed this growing trend in over 40 years of association with the IMB, including five years with the selection consulting team, processing new missionary applicants of all categories.

5. Nick and Nancy Stinnett and Joe and Alice Beam, *Fantastic Families: 6 Proven Steps to Building a Strong Family*, (West Monroe: Howard Publishing, 1999), 10, 133.

6. Stinnett, et al, 219-20.

7. Deut. 6:4-15

8. Mt. 22:37; Mk. 12:29-30; Lk. 10:27

9. Mt. 18:6; Mk. 9:42; Lk. 17:2

10. Gen. 12:1-5

11. Gen. 19.1-38

12. Gen. 24:1-67

13. Jn. 15:1-11

14. As a field leader from 1990 to 2008, the author conducted formal and informal exit interviews with retiring IMB missionaries. Although this survey was not a scientific research project, the author would have noted any variations in the responses. Most of the formal interviews were with personnel retiring from Latin America and Asia, although the author also informally interviewed retirees from other regions at multiple encounters.

15. Third Culture Kid (TCK) and Missionary Kid (MK) are used interchangeably here. MKs are more accurately defined as a subset of TCKs, although many mission organizations refer to them as simply TCKs. For more about TCKs, see Ruth Van Reken, "What is a Third Culture Kid?" <http://www.tckworld.com/>, (accessed June 19, 2017).

16. Michele Phoenix, an independent TCK Consultant, has an extensive survey of several hundred adult MKs touching on issues that include relationships, faith, worldview and others. For more information, see <http://michelephoenix.com/survey-for-adult-mks/> (accessed June 19, 2017).

17. Mal. 2:15

18. Matt. 19:8

19. Stinnett, 16, 19.

20. Stinnett, 31

21. Avery T. Willis, Jr. *MasterLife Book Set: A Biblical Process for Growing Disciples*. (Nashville: LifeWay Christian Resources, 1997).

22. Phil. 2:3-4

23. “Symantec survey reveals more than 80 percent of children using e-mail receive inappropriate spam daily,” *Business Wire*, June 9, 2003, https://www.symantec.com/about/newsroom/press-releases/2003/symantec_0609_03 (accessed May 9, 2017).

24. Rob Jackson, “When Children View Pornography,” 2004, <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/sexuality/when-children-use-pornography/when-children-view-pornography#fn3> (accessed June 19, 2017).

25. 2 Cor. 10:5

26. “Instructions for Writing a Sexual Purity Plan for Internet Pornography,” International Mission Board, unpublished document. In response to the growing problem of sexual addiction and the use of pornography, the Selection Team of the International Mission Board developed the Sexual Purity Module that guides new missionary applicants in the process of writing a personal plan for maintaining their sexual purity.