

Fatherlessness: The Implications for God’s Word, Church, and World

Gregory E. Lamb¹

Continuously sing to God! Sing praises to his name. Prepare a road while singing for him who is riding in the deserts! His name consists in YAH, and continuously exult before him! Father to the fatherless and a judge for the widows, (is) God in his holy habitation.

—Psalm 68:5–6¹

[F]or those born in 1980, 70 percent of white children and 94 percent of black children are projected to have lived with only one parent before they reach age eighteen.

—David Popenoe, *Families without Fathers*²

Fatherlessness is an “elephant” in the room, a topic that few church leaders seem to be addressing or at least addressing in a proactive manner to facilitate change. For the few that are actually discussing this issue, it is mostly discussed in reactionary terms in transitioning children to a single-mother household. Yet, what does the Bible say regarding the most pressing societal ill in America according to many sociologists—fatherlessness?³

Scripture abounds with numerous references to the adverse effects of fatherlessness and the proactive, offensive stance YHWH adopts as a Father to the fatherless.⁴ James explains the proactive, offensive posture Christians are to take regarding fatherlessness in describing the essence of true religion, “Pure and undefiled religion from the God and Father is this: look after (and care for) the orphans and widows in their difficult circumstances/distress, to keep oneself spotless from the world.”⁵ James states that the fatherless (and widows) are in

Mr. Gregory E. Lamb is a Ph.D. candidate of Biblical Studies with a New Testament emphasis at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina. He has served fatherless youth in local churches for the past ten years and is also the co-founder (along with his wife, Tamara) of Treasure Chest Ministries—an evangelistic 501 (c) 3 non-profit organization that serves homeless and at-risk families throughout central North Carolina.

¹Author’s translation from the Leningrad Hebrew (WTT) text.

²David Popenoe, *Families without Fathers: Fathers, Marriage, and Children in American Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2009), 22.

³David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), 1.

⁴See passages such as Deut. 10:18; Exod. 22:24; Job 6:27; Ps. 68:4–5; Prov. 23:10–11; Isa. 1:17; Jer. 5:28; Lam. 5:1–5; Ezek. 22:6–7; Zech. 7:10; John 14:16–21; Gal. 4:1–7; Eph. 1:5; James 1:26–27.

⁵Author’s translation of James 1:27 from the UBS 4th ed. Greek text.

need of care and are not in an ideal circumstance. Christians are to play a proactive role in caring for them. Davids concurs, “True piety helps the helpless, for God is the God who secures the rights of those who have no hope (Dt. 10:16–19; 16:3; 26:7 . . .).”⁶ Dibelius adds, “The command to support widows and orphans was so universally in force that already it could give rise to unfair claims (see 1 Tim. 5:8 . . .).”⁷ Yet, some see nothing wrong with fatherlessness; in fact, they celebrate it. Sarkisian and Gerstel remark, “[F]ew Americans define family values in terms of the traditional nuclear family . . . the majority of Americans now say that gays and lesbians . . . count as family. . . . Neither young women or young men want traditional families . . . they want egalitarian relationships.”⁸ Popenoe disagrees: “[A]s marriage declines, fatherhood will inevitably weaken and children will be hurt—and this is exactly what is happening today. The great majority of young people still say that they want to marry (someday) . . .”⁹

Hence the problem question: What are the implications of fatherless families, be they single-mother households, same-sex marriages, or matriarchal cultures? While some see the role of “male” fatherhood as superfluous, this essay will argue that fatherlessness is a pervasive problem, an epidemic—chiefly arising from two root causes: divorce-on-demand and unwed pregnancies—that has severe implications regarding God’s word, church, and world.

I. Is Fatherlessness Problematic? A Sociological Perspective

Is fatherlessness a problem? Not according to Sarkisian and Gerstel who see traditional nuclear families not as the bedrock foundation of society, but as pernicious. In their view, father-led, nuclear families destroy the critical ties of the extended family and “fictive kin,” which is what really matters.¹⁰

President Barack Obama—himself raised in a single-mother household—refutes such logic in his 2008 Father’s Day speech:

Of all the rocks upon which we build our lives, we are reminded today that family is most important. And we are called to recognize and honor how critical every father is to that foundation. They are teachers and coaches. They are mentors and role models. They are examples of success and the men who constantly push us toward it. But if we are honest with ourselves, we’ll admit that what too many fathers also are is missing—missing from too many lives and too many homes. They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it.¹¹

⁶Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 103.

⁷Martin Dibelius, *James*, Hermeneia, rev. H. Greeven (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 121, n. 68.

⁸Natalia Sarkisian and Naomi Gerstel, *Nuclear Family Values, Extended Family Lives: The Power of Race, Class, and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2–3, 11.

⁹Popenoe, *Families without Fathers*, viii.

¹⁰Sarkisian and Gerstel, *Nuclear Family Values*, i, 3–4.

¹¹Barack H. Obama, “Father’s Day Speech,” The Huffington Post, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/06/15/obamas-fathers-day-speech_n_107220.html (accessed October, 25, 2014).

Jonetta Rose Barras, echoes Obama's sentiments when she writes:

By the time I was eight years old, I had already lost three fathers. . . . Each one had abandoned me. Each one wounded me—emotionally and psychologically. At an age when I was supposed to be carefree, brimming with happiness and laughter, I frequently felt a deep sadness, an abiding loneliness. Nothing seemed powerful enough to permanently soothe the agony I felt. . . . A girl abandoned by the first man in her life [her father] entertains powerful feelings of being unworthy or incapable of receiving any man's love. Even when she receives love from another, she is constantly and intensely fearful of losing it.¹²

As a co-founder of a 501 (c) 3 Christian, non-profit organization that ministers to and serves homeless and at-risk families within central North Carolina, this author can empathize with both Obama's and Barras's remarks as the cycle of fatherlessness perpetuates itself from one generation to the next—67.8% of all African-American children born in 2011 in the U.S. were born to single-mother households.¹³ In North Carolina, this statistic was even higher—reaching 69% in 2011.¹⁴ The problem of fatherlessness is an epidemic that has far reaching implications. Popenoe remarks:

Fathers are one of the two most important role models in children's lives. . . . The decline of fatherhood and marriage cuts at the heart of the kind of environment considered ideal for childrearing. . . . What the decline of fatherhood and marriage in America really means, then, is that slowly, insidiously, and relentlessly our society has been moving in an ominous direction—toward the devaluation of children.¹⁵

Popenoe's research reveals that in just three decades—between 1960 and 1990—the percentage of children living apart from their biological fathers increased dramatically from seventeen to thirty-six percent.¹⁶ Along with this statistic, came a sharp increase in poverty, crime, abortion, teen pregnancy, high school dropouts, teenage suicide, child abuse, and child molestation.

Also evident, is a marked increase in cohabitation and overall devaluation of marriage and traditional views on family. Blankenhorn opines:

Before they reach the age of eighteen, more than half of our nation's children are likely to spend a significant portion of their childhoods living apart from their fathers. Never before in this country have so many children been voluntarily abandoned by their fathers. Never

¹²Jonetta Rose Barras, *Whatever Happened to Daddy's Little Girl? The Impact of Fatherlessness on Black Women* (New York: Ballantine, 2000), 1.

¹³Rachel M. Shattuck and Rose M. Kreider, "Social and Economic Characteristics of Currently Unmarried Women with a Recent Birth: 2011," <http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/acs-21.pdf> (accessed October 25, 2014).

¹⁴The Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Children in Single-Parent Families by Race," <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/107-children-in-single-parent-families-by#detailed/2/35/false/868,867,133,38,35/10,168,9,12,1,13,185/432,431> (accessed October 25, 2014).

¹⁵Popenoe, *Families without Fathers*, 13–14.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 2.

before have so many children grown up without knowing what it means to have a father. Fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation.¹⁷

What has happened in American culture to bring about this recent rise in fatherless families? Two factors have contributed more than any other—the sharp increase of divorce-on-demand and unwed births. Both of these thorny issues have a common root—the decline of the institution of marriage.¹⁸ Popenoe sheds further insight:

[A]t mid-century, the United States was probably the most marrying society in the world . . . Marriage has been losing its social purpose. In place of commitment and obligation to others, especially children, marriage has become mainly a vehicle for the emotional fulfillment of the adult partners. . . . Fewer than 50 percent of Americans today . . . cite “being married” as part of their definition of “family values.” . . . This loss of social purpose is part of the broader cultural shift toward a radical form of individualism that accelerated rapidly in the 1960s.¹⁹

What of fatherlessness outside of America? Carr and Capitari write:

Imagine children lined up shoulder to shoulder all the way around the earth’s equator. Now consider that all of the orphaned kids in the world would not fit in that line. There are too many of them. According to UNICEF, 153 million kids worldwide have lost one or both parents due to all causes. That’s twice the total number of children in the U.S.²⁰

While divorce and unwed pregnancies are still the leading causes of fatherlessness in America, poverty, violence, and disease are the root causes globally. Additionally, radical feminism has done much to render fathers superfluous in developed countries, as well as challenge traditional interpretations of God’s Word.

II. What are the Implications of Fatherlessness on God’s Word?

Fatherlessness has helped usher in the pervasive popularity of a feminist hermeneutic in reading God’s Word. Those precious children who have been on the receiving end of the pain of fatherlessness, like Barras above, often have a negative outlook toward the God who calls himself, “Father”²¹—thus the feminization of God who now becomes “Mother.”

In addition, another trend in feminist hermeneutics is to view one’s biological family as “plastic” and disposable. What really matters in such a feminist reading of the NT is the

¹⁷Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America*, 1.

¹⁸Popenoe, *Families without Fathers*, 23.

¹⁹Ibid., 24.

²⁰Johnny Carr and Laura Capitari, *Orphan Justice: How to Care for Orphans beyond Adopting* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013), 1.

²¹Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

spiritual, fictive family. Some suggest that Jesus “redefined”²² family in spiritual terms, thus rendering one’s biological family obsolete. Good writes, “Since God is the only Father Jesus recognizes, an absolute and uncompromising rejection of the role or authority of the human, biological father distinguishes the composition of this [redefined] family.”²³ Good’s statement neglects the fact that Joseph was referred to as δίκαιος (“just” or “righteous”)²⁴ in Matthew 1:19. Moreover, it can be inferred that Joseph taught Jesus the Scriptures²⁵—implying that Joseph cared for Jesus. Jesus honored his earthly father and grew in knowledge and stature as a result (Exod. 20:12; Matt. 5:17; Luke 2:40–52). Joseph was sorrowful in having lost Jesus and searched for him relentlessly until Jesus was found (Luke 2:48). Jesus is referred to by the people as “Joseph’s son” and Joseph is referred to as Jesus’s πατήρ (“father”)²⁶ (Luke 2:48; John 6:42). Joseph seemingly taught Jesus his trade as Jesus is referred to as ὁ τέκτων (“the builder”)²⁷ in Mark 6:3—again implying Joseph’s concern for Jesus’s welfare and ability to provide for himself and to take the place of his earthly father as head of the household.²⁸ That Jesus is considered the head of his household is evinced by the fact that Jesus entrusted the care of his mother—despite Mary’s questioning of Jesus’s sanity during his earthly ministry (Mark 3:20–21, 30–32)—to the beloved disciple (John 19:26–27).

The Bible teaches that husbands/fathers are to be the spiritual leaders in the home (Deut. 6; Ps. 78:1–8; Eph. 5:21–33; 6:4), yet husbands/fathers are becoming increasingly rare in the twenty-first-century culture of divorce-on-demand and unwed births. The modern concept of volitional fatherless families is absent from the NT. This fact is evident in the term γονεύς (“parents”). This term is never singular in the Greek NT—as in a singular “parent.” It is always, without exception, rendered in the plural—“parents.”²⁹ Today, children are being raised by secular daycares, after school programs, and often by grandparents, rather than by fathers and mothers teaching them the fear of the LORD (Deut. 6:2; Ps. 34:11; Prov. 1:7). How do these disturbing trends affect God’s church?³⁰

²²Deirdre Good, *Jesus’ Family Values* (New York: Church, 2006), 66–72.

²³Good, *Jesus’ Family Values*, 67.

²⁴Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, “δίκαιος,” in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 246–47.

²⁵Philo stated that the task of educating children fell to the father (*On the Special Laws* 2.29, 236) as well Jewish children would have been taught the Scriptures from “their earliest years” (*On the Embassy to Gaius* 115).

²⁶BDAG, πατήρ, 786–88.

²⁷BDAG, τέκτων, 995; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A Nida, eds., “τέκτων,” in *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1: *Introduction and Domains* (New York: UBS, 1988), 45.9, 520.

²⁸Before Jesus began his earthly ministry, Joseph had apparently died; see R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 242–43.

²⁹BDAG, γονεύς, 205.

³⁰The study of Bradley R. E. Wright and Christina Zozula, “Bad News about the Good News: The Construction of the Christian-Failure Narrative,” *JRS* 14 (2012): 9 shows “Evangelicals” having a 46% divorce rate, “Mainline Protestants” having a 41% divorce rate, and “Black Protestants” having a 54% divorce rate.

III. How does Fatherlessness Impact God's Church?

Typically, fatherlessness has been handled in a defensive, transitional manner through ministries such as divorce care after the damage has been done and the family fractured. Divorce care ministries may offer help for divorced adults, but what of proactive measures to keep families together before separation occurs?³¹ What of the hurt and abandonment felt by children caught in the middle of divorce? Buchanan and Chamberlain note eight common reactions of children to divorce: 1) being physically ill; 2) feeling guilty; 3) not caring; 4) pretending all is well; 5) hoping for a rematch; 6) being confused; 7) hating the parent who has custody; and finally, 8) hating the departing parent.³²

Some may argue that fatherless families are no less effective in loving, serving, and worshiping God than any other family. It is true that God loves all equally (John 3:16–17) and fatherless families can and do love, serve, and worship God in very meaningful ways. However, is this ideal? Given the statistics, it is more likely that fatherless children will repeat the same mistakes of their parents and the fatherless trend will continue. Girard terms this behavior as “mimetic desire” in that children will mimic those whom they are closest to and love—thus repeating the same patterns of these role models for better or worse.³³ How much more could these fatherless families serve God with an intact family unit, increased income, sense of security, and higher education? Ultimately, is fatherlessness the best case scenario or are there clear benefits of having the family intact in serving God? The statistics indicate the benefits of intact families not only sociologically, but spiritually, and missionally as well.

Fatherlessness impacts the communities in which the local church is to serve. Popenoe's research reveals the damage of fatherlessness to communities—Popenoe states that since 1960 the crime rate in the U.S. has increased by 550 percent, with fatherless youth making the greatest statistical contribution to this troubling trend. In America, “60 percent of all rapists, 72 percent of adolescent murders, and 70 percent of long-term prison inmates come from fatherless homes.”³⁴

IV. What are the Implications of Fatherlessness on God's Mission to the World?

From the beginning, God intended the family to be a vital aspect of bringing glory to himself and a vehicle of his love toward all humanity.³⁵ God created humanity in his image and

³¹While there is no monolithic approach to “divorce care,” one popular example is the DivorceCare® program. DivorceCare® exists as a reactionary program to ease the transition to singleness and single parenthood. See Church Initiative, “You don't have to go through it alone,” DivorceCare®, <http://www.divorcecare.org/about> (accessed October, 27, 2014).

³²Neal C. Buchanan and Eugene Chamberlain, *Helping Children of Divorce* (Nashville: Broadman, 1981), 20–26.

³³René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 8–11.

³⁴David Popenoe, *Life without Father* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 62–63.

³⁵Joseph H. Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 221–25;

likeness (Gen. 1:26–27) and instituted the covenant of marriage and family (Gen. 2:24). The purpose of marriage and family is to rule over creation and to be fruitful and to multiply, thus filling the earth with YHWH worshipers (Gen. 1:28; 9:1, 7). So the purpose of family is to bring YHWH worship to the ends of the earth by and through the rearing of godly generations of children who will fear the LORD (Deut. ch. 6; Ps. 78:1–8). This concept is elucidated in Genesis 12:1–3, as in Abram, all the families of the earth will be blessed. Walter Kaiser notes, “Genesis 12:1–3 is foundational to the missionary vision of the whole Bible and for all the people of God through all the ages.”³⁶ Thus God’s purpose for family is missional in nature with the command to fill the earth with YHWH worship in and through Christ and to display God’s love/wisdom to the cosmos (Eph. 3:10).

The purpose of the missional family has three dimensions: 1) to exude the glory of God within the covenantal bond of marriage; 2) to promulgate God’s glory through the rearing and teaching of godly, missions-minded children; 3) who propagate the gospel—by and through the multiplication of their seed—to future generations.” This pattern is reflected theologically throughout Scripture and lived out historically—albeit in imperfect fashion—in both Old and New Testaments. The role of fathers is critical as they are to be leading these missional families by example.

Conclusion: What is the Christian Response to Fatherlessness?

The question must be asked: What can congregations do to *proactively* make a difference within the lives of these fatherless children and broken homes? First and foremost, congregations need to love fatherless children and single mothers—thanking God that they choose to attend church. There are other sundry places they could be each Sunday. Yet, they choose to worship and serve God in a local church. These broken families are not burdens, but blessings. Let Christians show these hurting children/families the infinite love and grace of Christ with no strings attached.

Second, the faithful church needs to intentionally mentor fatherless families as the community of Christ. Youth programs should seek to mentor fatherless children in the spirit of 2 Timothy 2:1–2—becoming “big brothers”/“big sisters” to hurting children and giving these fatherless children godly role models, accountability partners, and shoulders to lean upon. Throwing money at this issue is not the answer. Enabling the impoverished to remain in the welfare state is no solution. What matters is living the gospel in community with these hurting families in meaningful relationships. All born-again believers are adopted sons and daughters into a new, spiritual family (Rom. 8:15, 23; Gal. 4:1–7; Eph. 1:5). No doubt, the quintessential characteristic of this spiritual family, according to Jesus, is to love one another (John 13:34–35).

Third, congregations could offer free, biblically-based counseling to families including fatherless children. Such a ministry would go far in fostering the well-being of fatherless

Cormac Burke, *Covenanted Happiness: Love and Commitment in Marriage* (Princeton: Scepter, 1990), 99, 220.

³⁶Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Mission In the Old Testament: Israel As a Light to the Nations*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 37.

children and could be coordinated through existing divorce care ministries or in conjunction with various existing children's/youth ministries.

Fourth, intentionally adopt fatherless children. Numerous families cannot conceive naturally and adopting children locally and globally is a viable alternative to costly and controversial medical procedures. What if congregations proactively adopted every orphaned child in their city, or even their state? Missiologically, what message would that send to the unchurched in their community, the nation, and the world? Perhaps, Christians might once again be "continuously having favor with the entire populace"³⁷ by living out the faith they claim to profess.

Fifth, intentionally support orphanages both locally and globally by making them a part of the congregation's budget. Many congregants will not take an initiative seriously until it is a line item within the budget. These funds can make a difference in helping to alleviate horrible crimes against helpless children who are often kidnapped and sold as sex slaves in child prostitution rings. Merida and Norton note, "Human trafficking generates more than \$12 billion a year for those who sell human lives into slavery and sexual bondage."³⁸

Sixth and last, orphan hosting (both locally and globally) can be a viable alternative for those who cannot afford to adopt or cannot meet the necessary qualifications. Merida and Norton explain, "Taking kids out of the familiar context of their orphanages and giving them an experience like international travel can be an element of fostering hope."³⁹

In summary, Christianity is predicated upon right treatment of the fatherless (James 1:27) and this is to be accomplished through the conduit of the local church in which the variegated wisdom of YHWH is displayed to the cosmos in adopting sons and daughters—indeed the fatherless—into his eternal family. Pastors must proactively engage fatherlessness to prevent future generations from making the same mistakes of the past. Fatherhood must be taught and vividly modeled for fatherless children. Furthermore, mentoring and sharing life together with fatherless families must be a priority—ignoring the "elephant" in the room only perpetuates the problem.

³⁷ Author's translation of Acts 2:47 from the UBS 4th ed. Greek text.

³⁸ Tony Merida and Rick Morton, *Orphanology: Awakening to Gospel-Centered Adoption and Orphan Care* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope, 2011), 87.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.