



Helping Families Thrive

FATHERHOOD *THE CORE OF THE UNIVERSE* Jim Daly, President and CEO

Far the most important thing we can know about George MacDonald is that...an almost perfect relationship with his father was the earthly root of all his wisdom. From his own father, he said, he first learned that Fatherhood must be the core of the universe. He was thus prepared in an unusual way to teach that religion in which the relation of Father and Son is of all relations the most central.

C.S. Lewis

George MacDonald: An Anthology

Fatherhood is central to our work here at Focus on the Family; one of Dr. Dobson's earliest passions in founding our ministry. It is also deeply fundamental to our Christian faith as I explain below. Fatherhood is very personal to me as well.

As most of you know, my parents divorced when I was young, effectively removing my biological father from the scene. And just in case I didn't feel the full pain of that, when I was in 4th grade, my step-father hit the road too—just as my siblings and I were attending our mother's funeral. When we got back home, he came out of the master bedroom all packed. He walked away and never looked back. We went to bed that night on the floor; we had literally lost everything. At least mom was taken from us by illness. The men in my life left of their own free will, or because of their vices. Although I wondered why these men did what they did, I never really took it too personally. However, my impression is that in most cases, children do take it very personally, as a statement about their own significance and value. Yes, my fathers didn't want me. I didn't matter to them. That can be a debilitating message for a 4th grader to internalize.

In every community, you'll find too many young men and women who are weighed down by the immense pain of father abandonment, whether in the form of an absent father or one that is present, but emotionally distant or harsh and conditional. This type of hurt goes to the depths of our souls and it can be crushing.

But why? Why does it hurt us so profoundly? I hope that this essay will provide some insights into that question by considering some critical sociological and theological truths.

The Social Cost

David Blankenhorn chose an ambitious subtitle for his movement-creating book *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*. Our most urgent social problem! He didn't overstate the case. In his important work, he makes a strong indictment that the failure of fathers to connect with their children and their children's mothers directly drives a host of serious social problems: low birth-weight babies, domestic violence and child sexual abuse, poor educational attainment and school drop-out, increased drug use, higher crime rates and incarceration, unemployment, poorer physical and mental health, street violence, sexual aggression and dramatically increased levels of poverty. The social

sciences consistently report that fatherlessness drives many of these societal cancers dramatically higher—by five, ten, and sometimes even twenty-fold.

These troubling statistics should stop us in our tracks as followers of Jesus. We can't fulfill the second of Christ's two great commandments ("Love your neighbor as yourself;" Matthew 22:39) and not be concerned about fatherhood today.

Our culture emerged from the sixties and seventies assuming fathers were an optional family accessory, like the towing package on a new SUV. Get it if you think you'll need it. Forget about it if you don't. Men and women both took this idea and ran with it over the course of the next two decades. Millions of children were raised without fathers, while men lived large parts of their adult lives with very little connection to their children. The experiment was not without consequence for child, father and mother, as noted in the preceding paragraph. It has impacted—for the worse—nearly every segment of our society.

President Barack Obama, as a stumping candidate, gave a very strong Father's Day sermon at the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago last year. He told the congregation, "Of all the rocks upon which we build our lives, we are reminded today that family is most important." Then he got more specific: "And we are called to recognize and honor how critical every father is to that foundation." Mr. Obama lamented that the foundations of our lives and families are weaker because too many fathers are missing from too many homes.

I strongly disagree with many of this President's policies. But I enthusiastically support him as an important role model on committed fathering, particularly for the African-American community which is so deeply plagued by fatherlessness. I can applaud his recognition and deep concern that "we need fathers to realize that responsibility does not end at conception." We agree that a man is not one who merely impregnates a woman, but who has the courage to stick with that woman and raise their child together, showing up on the job every day.

This idea is supported by decades of irrefutable and diverse research: *Human thriving declines in broad and unexpected ways when the time fathers spend loving and caring for their families' declines or disappears*. It is that simple and it is inescapable. Fatherhood is not a partisan or ideological issue. It is a *human* issue. Both the Clinton and Bush administrations took serious and well-informed strides to promote fatherhood, and I am encouraged that President Obama seems eager to continue that work. I hope he does.

Core of the Universe

But fatherlessness is more than just our most urgent social problem. It is also a very urgent *spiritual* problem, and we who are Christ's agents in this generation will do well to understand why.

This question speaks to the very nature and character of God, as well as to us, who are created to reflect and show forth that nature. As George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis explain in the quote that opens this essay, fatherhood is quite literally the core of the universe. Jesus tells us as much Himself. Let me explain.

Francis Schaeffer noted that even though Scripture starts with "In the beginning," we recognize that something was there *before* "the beginning."¹ What was it? The answer is found in an often-overlooked

¹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time*, (Downers Grove; InterVarsity Press, 1972), pp. 16-17.

verse of Scripture that is very unique. In John 17:24, we are given the opportunity to eavesdrop on an intimate conversation between God the Son and God the Father. Jesus makes this profound statement, “Father...you loved me before the creation of the world.” So, before “in the beginning,” there was a loving Father. And before “in the beginning,” there was a Son basking in the love and glory of His Father (see also John 17:5).

If we think of creation as a Big Bang—a concept that doesn’t contradict Scripture’s account—this very dense, powerful starting point is a Father and Son in relationship. Georges Lemaître, a faithful Belgian priest, ground-breaking physicist and peer of Einstein, proposed the Big Bang theory and called it his “hypothesis of the primeval atom.” Christians can understand this “atom” was not mere matter or energy, but a very personal, relational and fundamentally self-giving community; an eternally existing and loving Fatherhood and Sonship. Ponder that!

Jesus spoke of His Father over 170 times in the New Testament, and in nearly every case He used the word *abba*, an intimate and exclusive form of address that only a father’s own beloved child would use. This intimacy, love, acceptance and self-giving between the Father and the Son is what Christians understand the “core of the universe” to be. This is what lies at the center of all reality and our very lives, our deepest essence. No wonder fatherlessness hurts. It is contrary to the very nature of the universe. It is contrary to what each of us are made for!

I realize this all sounds very philosophical and mysterious but it is a fundamental Christian Truth. And it has important implications for each one of us. What does this mean practically for you, right now, where you sit? If you’re like me, it dramatically changes your understanding of the foundation of reality and of God Himself. It impacts the very nature of who you are, what you are made for, and therefore your deepest longings. Beyond that, nothing much!

How many of us had a dad like the Prodigal’s father? His heart is deeply compassionate and forgiving toward his son. He has no judgment for his child, but loves him freely, openly and boldly, without condition or expectation. Jesus tells us that this is what His Father—and ours—is like. This is God’s, and therefore, reality’s character. We yearn so passionately for true acceptance and are crushed by shame and judgment for deep reasons.

The Nature of Motherhood and Fatherhood

The pain of father abandonment is tied to both the spiritual and natural meanings of motherhood and fatherhood. We all understand, for example, the “natural” qualities of motherhood, because moms have a very unique and natural connection with their children. As Maggie Gallagher has said, “Whenever you find a new baby born into the world, you are likely to find a mother somewhere in close proximity.” Christ’s mother was right there not only at His birth, but at the beginning of His public ministry, and at His death and burial. Mary was the classic mom. It is simply more natural for mothers to be connected to their children. “Mother-abandonment” is not a phrase we use, because it rarely happens.

Fatherhood is a different matter. Sociologists tell us that every society must be wary of the unattached male. He is more unpredictable. Historically, marriage is the way cultures around the world and throughout time have attached the men who sire babies to their offspring and their baby’s mothers. No other institution is able to do this, and as marriage weakens, so does fatherhood. And human thriving declines. The rise and fall of marriage and father-engagement go hand-in-hand.

Some years ago, a prison worked with a major greeting card company to provide inmates with cards to send to their moms on Mother's Day. The campaign was a massive success. In fact, the prison had to order additional shipments of cards to meet the demand. The Mother's Day idea was so well received that the prison decided to do the same thing for Father's Day. Boxes of cards were ordered for the prisoners to send to their dads. But this time, no one came. Not one prisoner felt the need to send a card to his father, and many didn't know who their fathers even were. Sadly, none of these incarcerated men had a relationship with his dad that would warrant even the simple gesture of sending a card.

Human fatherhood has to be fought and worked for because it is under constant attack due to what it images: the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. That is why the Enemy *despises* it. The institution of fatherhood is under vicious attack for this profound reason. Let's consider how this reality played out in the earthly life and passion of the Son.

The Spiritual Power of Fatherhood

The offense that brought Jesus to the place of capital punishment by crucifixion was not primarily His miracles, or even His teachings, *per se*. His crime was that He claimed to be the very Son of God, and therefore God Himself.

Christ's first recorded words in Scripture come when He is twelve years old. His parents accidentally leave Him behind in Jerusalem, and after they discover He is missing, a frantic three-day search ensues. They find Him in the Temple and offer a stern rebuke. Jesus responds by asking, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49)

Years later, Jesus tells the chief priests at His trial that they would see Him, the Son, seated at the very favored place—the right hand of His Father (Matt. 26:64). In response, the high priest tears his clothes, not missing the full weight of Jesus' words and intention. And so Christ is condemned and sentenced on this "blasphemous" assertion.

Jesus was killed by the leaders of His day for saying he was the Son of the Father. And He died a "cursed" death because Satan was bent on attacking the eternal nature of God as a Father. How do you wound a father more than killing his only son? This single event, which is foundational to our faith, demonstrates that fatherhood is deeply consequential in both the spiritual and natural realms.

At the Cross

To explore the issue even further, Jesus' violent death on the cross tells us a great deal about both motherhood and fatherhood. Who was there at his death and burial? His mother. And Jesus shows His care for her by asking the Apostle John to take care of her when He is gone. Here, he *connects* with his mother in a final way.

But moments later, we learn that at noon on the day of crucifixion, the sky went dark and remained that way for three hours. God had turned away from the Son because of the sin that He bore on our behalf. For the first time—and the last—in all eternity, the intimacy between the Father and Son was severed. And Jesus died.

But let us notice something important from the evening before. Luke reports that when Jesus stole away from the disciples to spend time with His Father, drops of blood dripped from his skin to the ground as He prayed (Luke 22:44). This was indicative of a documented physiological reaction in which blood is excreted along with sweat under conditions of extreme anxiety.

What was our Savior's source of such deep anxiety that evening?

It was something much deeper than the physical pain He would endure at the cross. At its heart, Christ's anxiety was rooted in His impending separation from the Father. It had to be. Sin and Satan would temporarily interrupt their intimacy and relationship on the cross. Christ's anguish in Gethsemane was no small, fleeting discomfort. His death would shake the very essence and nature of God the Father and God the Son in separation. No human words can fully describe what this temporary separation really meant. It would be the centerpiece of God's incarnation in Christ and the capstone of His redemptive work in history. It would be demonstrated in the curtain in the Temple being torn in two, demonstrating that redemption had been accomplished.

With Christ's death and resurrection, Satan's egomaniacal campaign to destroy the relationship between Father and Son and establish himself in that place was permanently thwarted. We simply cannot overlook the fact that this cosmic struggle—and sacred victory—centered around the integrity of a relationship between a Father and a Son.

A Christian View of the Father Wound

Although Christ has won, we remain in a fallen world that is not yet fully restored and healed. And so, many of us continue to feel our profound father wound so deeply. Some people, like Walt Kowalski, the embittered, disconnected father played by Clint Eastwood in *Gran Torino*, would say this pain is simply the whining of an overly therapeutic, navel-gazing generation of pansies. But people like Walt Kowalski are wrong.



Small Crucifixion, Matthias Grunewald c. 1511
National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

Fatherhood is a deeply precious thing, which cannot be overstated. It is the very nature of God. And thus, father absence is intensely painful. It is literally what killed our Lord.

And this explains why David Blankenhorn was right to isolate fatherlessness as our most urgent *social* problem. It is also a profound *spiritual* problem. It is because fatherhood is the most universal good. We don't lose it without atomic effect.

That is what the work of Focus on the Family is about in this environment of widespread fatherlessness. We want to help our culture fully understand why these family relationships are so important in demonstrating God's very nature and humbly provide resources and assistance to help them thrive.

Jim Daly is the President and CEO of Focus on the Family and the author of *Finding Home* and the forthcoming book *Stronger*.