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Q&A#127 The Idolatry of the Family?

April 27, 2019



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Today's question: "Recently on the mere fidelity podcast, you made a passing remark regarding the use of "idolatry" language and categories for the nuclear family. Could you talk about why you find this kind of language unhelpful?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, Recently on the Mere Fidelity podcast, you made a passing remark regarding the use of idolatry language and categories for the nuclear family. Could you talk about why you find this kind of language unhelpful? To clarify, I don't have a problem in principle with the use of idolatry language and categories for the nuclear family.

What I do have an issue with, and what I took issue with, is the expression, the idolatry of the family, which has been so overused and misused as to be fairly useless at this point. And so I avoid that language while also thinking that there are situations where the language of the idolatry of the family might be appropriate. But we need to consider

those situations carefully first.

Idolatry language is sledgehammer language. It's the sort of language that we can use to smash some other position. And often we've thrown, flailed around wildly with that sledgehammer without actually aiming carefully at a proper target.

And in the process what we've done is smashed through a lot of things without clearly separating the good from the bad or understanding what it is that we're demolishing. Often it's also a means of dismissing another party or pathologizing them. Many people use the language of the idolatry of the family to refer to a certain type of evangelicalism that is very much foregrounding the family within the life of the church.

And while there are certainly problems in the way that that occurs in some instances, I see more carelessness in the use of that language in those instances than actual clarity. Hyperbolic language also needs to be questioned in these sorts of instances. If we're using hyperbolic language like idolatry or the big I word or the big H word, heresy, in every instance where we see error or mistaken values or priorities, we're going to devalue those terms.

Those terms are not going to be useful anymore. And so I prefer to go in with a scalpel first and then once we've isolated the healthy tissue, maybe we can take a sledgehammer to the rest. Well, maybe you don't take sledgehammers to patients at all.

But when we're thinking about these sorts of situations, let's try and understand. Let's get under the skin first. Understand the dynamics of these problems.

Unpick the issue. And once we've unpicked the issue, then we can deal with the error directly and forcefully and seek to maintain and develop that which is healthy. If we're, however, always going for the big terms, the big sledgehammer terms, valuing rhetorical punch or precision, there may be a problem with us.

Are we actually concerned in lovingly understanding this other group, this group of people and seeking to speak carefully and precisely to their issue? Or are we just wanting to appear prophetic? That desire to be the people who speak forcefully and with vision and power to every error that is in our neighbor. There is a real tendency for that in certainly young people, but it's something we need to be aware of. Beyond that, there's also the way in which this expression is used.

Can we think of synonyms for what we're trying to say that carry less freight? What is the term idolatry doing that the term overvaluing or overprioritizing or overemphasizing or over-centering would not do? Also, we need to recognize that as evangelicals, we tend to focus upon ideas and values. Everything flows from ideas and values. But often what we have is a more complicated situation that's bound up with the material conditions in which we live.

The weight that many people put upon the family is a weight put upon the family precisely because it is increasingly the only outlet for serving our need for companionship, belonging, meaningful activity, and self-investment in community. There are ways in which churches may try and provide that, but often they fail. And so people put a lot of weight in their families.

And as they put a lot of weight in their families, we can easily see the overvaluing or the over-centering that has occurred, the way in which their spouse becomes the person that has to bear all the weight of their need for companionship and belonging and meaningful connection. And that puts far too much weight upon any single person. No single person can bear that.

Is that the same thing as idolatry? Well, in many cases, it has similar flavor and character to it. But it has complicated sources, and idolatry doesn't necessarily shed light upon those. Idolatry doesn't really explain that we have natural human desires here.

And these natural human desires need outlets. And when they don't receive outlets, we'll be tempted and we will tend to put all of that weight upon something that's not sufficient to bear all of that weight. And that's the need for natural human connection is not, I mean, it's a search for a penultimate good.

But our search for that penultimate good should not be pathologized in itself. There are ways in which clearly it can become distorted and dysfunctional under certain social conditions and other things like that. But we need to understand what's happening here first.

When people are starved of connection, we should not be surprised that they overburden certain things with their need for that. And we should recognize that the problem may not primarily be idolatry as the fact that they don't find sources elsewhere. If people are eating from dirty pizza boxes from bins, then maybe we need to question not whether they're idolizing pizzas from bins, but whether they're getting food elsewhere.

Is there need for sustenance being met or are they becoming ravenous and so ravenously hungry that they'll eat anything? And that danger of failing to analyze the situation carefully enough and just rushing in in a Lee Roy Jenkins style with the hammer is one of the problems that is characteristic of evangelicalism in many instances. We like the big weighty rhetorical terms. We like the direct full frontal attack.

We don't actually like staking out the situation, understanding it first and then going in carefully. And so let's not be like Lee Roy Jenkins in this situation. Let's step back and let's understand what's going on first.

Let's confer and then let's approach things in a more clinical fashion. There are times

when we can break out those big terms. But let's think about it first.

Why exactly are people putting so much weight upon the family? And is it pathological that people have this desire that they need, that they're seeking to have fulfilled? When we're putting that much weight upon the family, what are some better ways that we can address that? Now, if you're thinking purely in terms of idolatry and value systems and these sorts of things, you'll just tackle the ideas in people's heads. You won't actually think about how can we form a healthier form of society where we don't have to put so much weight upon just one institution, upon one particular set of relationships. Now, often I see single people talking about the idolatry of the family in a way that is driven by a sense of frustration and exclusion in the church's centering of families.

That families are very much central to the life of the church and they feel left out, they feel marginalised, they feel excluded. And again, the source of that is often the fact that the fabric of our society is so weakened and people are looking for the church to fill the gap. The church is not intended to fill that gap.

The church has never been people's primary community. When you actually look at the church, the church tends to function best when it is a wider ecosystem to which a broad network of different familial and other networks open out. And if you're expecting the church to, instead of developing from those grassroots, to astroturf a community of its own as an institution, you're putting all sorts of weight upon the church that just does not belong to it.

It's going to disappoint you. And that again is an overvaluing of an institution and putting weight upon an institution that's not sufficient to bear. The church was never intended to be an institution that centred everyone in the same way, that validated every form of life equally, that gave everyone a sense of having an equally important vocation.

There are ways in which singleness can open you up to a celibate vocation and to serving people in a fuller and more devoted way than you could do in a family. That's certainly the case. But most people who are single are not actually devoted to that sort of vocation.

And the form of life that they have is not as worthy of honour and worthy of centring as the lives of married people. The lives of married people need to be centred in many ways because they establish a common good to a degree that unmarried and single people typically do not. That doesn't mean there's anything wrong with being single or unmarried, but it does mean that if you want to pursue the good of a community, there are ways in which you value certain forms of life over others, and those will be centred.

When you think about the life of a church, if you're going to develop the life of a church, you will find that the pillars of the community will generally be found in families. Now, there will be many people who are your most active workers who are single, but the

actual communal pillars will tend to be families. And if you want a strong community, you need to build those up, not least because they are the means by which the faith tends to be passed on from generation to generation.

And if you're not serving families and that family structure, you're not really building up a community. Often I fear that the way that single people have spoken to the issue of the idolatry of the family is also shaped to some measure by a degree of envy, that here you have a group of people that have centred, their form of life is more centred within the life of the church, and they seem to have a lot more companionship and belonging and all these other things that we feel that we lack. And as a result, we project upon them idolatry without recognising that maybe the problem is nearer to hand.

Maybe the problem is that the forms of life that would formally have sustained unmarried people and given them, even despite their unmarried state, a state of belonging and purpose and identity within a community, that those have been lost. And they've been lost in many ways for reasons attached to many ways that we pursue our singleness, the degree to which we are uprooted and move around, choose our communities, the degree to which we see ourselves as consumers of communities rather than those who are committed to forging a common good. Now, if you want a healthy community, you need to forge a common good.

And a family is the most, is a very natural and basic form of that. And if you want a healthy church, you will generally have to be feeding those institutions and those vocations and drawing people into such vocations that serve and foster a common good, a common belonging, a common purpose, a common identity. And the family is one means by which you do that.

However, the more that people have lost the structures of relationship that we'd have in a past society where people were a lot more settled, where the family was the primary organ of production and belonging, and we had extended families, all these sorts of things. In that situation, people are often expecting the church to fill the gap. And so a lot of the language about the church as the true family is pitting the church as the true family over against the natural family.

And that's not something we see in the New Testament. Indeed, Christ challenges the scribes and the Pharisees for their undermining the commandment of God to honour father and mother by saying that the service that would have been devoted to father and mother is devoted to the temple, to God. And although Christ does bring a sword into the family, Christ is also someone who's supposed to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the father, and the children to their fathers, to bring a new form of peace and life to the family.

Indeed, when you look at Jesus' disciples in the early church, what you see is a familial network at the very heart of the church, that Jesus' brother is the leader of the Jerusalem

church. Another one of Jesus' brothers writes one of the epistles. You have the fact that two of Jesus' cousins are among the inner three, the inner core group, James and John.

And there's another cousin of Jesus among the 12, James, the son of Alpius. You have his aunt and you have his mother as part of that inner circle as well. And as a result, you see a picture of the body of Christ and the body of his people as not being that detached from the familial network at all.

Rather, it's a purging of that or an elevation of that and the turning of it outwards into the service of some greater good. It's like an extended family network where a number of different families are intertwined together. And it's not surprising that we see a lot of emphasis upon families and households within the New Testament.

The other thing that we need to be aware of as we feel detached from family networks is when we set up the church as this alternative, the true family, and detach it from the natural family rather than seeing that it is the way in which the natural family is opened out into something more, we can easily open ourselves up to cult-like dynamics. The church or the family is not the ultimate good. The ultimate good is found in God, is found in his service.

That doesn't mean the penultimate goods can just be dismissed. Food is not an ultimate good. But it's not surprising that we are driven by hunger and that we need food and that it is important that we find food and that we provide for people's need for food.

When we're talking about the family, I think we need to recognise that the family is a penultimate good. That doesn't mean that it's not a good that we should be pursuing with a lot of energy and devoting ourselves to. Indeed, it's entwined with our commitment to God.

We must honour our father and mother and our loyalty to God is seen in that, in part. At the very heart of the Ten Commandments are two positive injunctions. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy and the idea of rest for a whole body of people and the whole household resting.

And then the second central command is honour your father and your mother. Man and woman brought together in an honoured relationship, an honour between the generations. This is the very heart of a healthy society as defined by the law of God.

And all the negative commands are framing those core injunctions, the sort of society in which people rest for one day a week and find communion and an ordering of their life towards something greater, the service of God and honouring father and mother, the ties of marriage and the bonds between the generations. And when you have that at the heart, what you will see is very often churches that foreground families, that have one day a week where we gather together and families are opened out to remembering God

and ordering towards him, but in a way that strengthens those familial bonds as well and opens them out to serving a broader community. Beyond this, we need to recognise that the church as the local community is also a penultimate good.

And if we treat it as an ultimate good or as more of a good than it actually is, we welcome cult-like dynamics. Someone who prioritise certain family activities over church activities is not necessarily engaging in idolatry or having idolatrous values about the family. What they might be doing is just prudently valuing certain family penultimate goods over certain church penultimate goods.

Your commitment to the family of God, your belonging to the family of God is not coterminous with your identification with your local church. It's deeply entwined but it is not the same thing. Just as your commitment to your family as something that is deeply entwined with your commitment to God is not the same thing as that commitment.

In both of those realms of life, your commitment to God can call you beyond and calls you to a deeper belonging and identification and purpose and service than those realms do. So in these respects, I think the language of idolatry of the family is vague, poorly defined. I think it's hyperbolic, it's used in a way that is careless and wrong and it creates a great deal more heat than light.

I believe that we need to recognise the structures of modern life and how these have often squeezed out healthy forms of belonging and as a result people have that need for belonging placed too much upon the family. And for other people, they feel that lack of belonging, particularly as single and unmarried people and they expect the church to fill that gap. Or they blame families for their enjoyment of some degree of communion and companionship and belonging and the fact that they're not sharing it with others.

Now there may be real problems there but there may also just be a dysfunction within society more generally that needs to be addressed more to grassroots level than at some sort of ideological level. It's not so much ideas in our mind but as material practices and other things like that that shape us in unhealthy ways. Thank you very much for listening.

Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow. If you have any questions please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you'd like to support this and other videos like it please do so using my Patreon or PayPal accounts.

God bless and thank you for listening.