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FAMILY LEADERSHIP: LEGACIES FROM THE ABRAHAMIC FAMILY

Abstract: The issue of leadership development remains a constant objective on the agenda of every organization aspiring toward maximum effectiveness. Timely research is frequently conducted and from the findings new strategic measures are extracted and implemented in an effort to move the organization to the next level of excellence. At times strategic measures lie in taking a new look at old methods of leadership development. This article looks at an antique method that has relevance for contemporary leadership development.

Keywords: Family leadership, authority, covenantal agreement, abundant blessing

The thought of family conjures various emotions. To have a family implies love; a sense of belonging and well-being, as mutual reciprocity nurtures the development of its members (Galvin et al., 2012; Newman, 1999). In the traditional sense, the family consists of husband, wife and child/children, but over time, the image of the family has changed (Balswick & Balswick, 2007). The emergence of various types of family is altering the structure of the family, but the needs of its members remain constant (Hicks, 2002; Newman, 1999; Prokos & Keene, 2010). The family is considered one of the strongest relational bonds shared among humans; it is hardly likely one can exist without some input or influence from a family of origin. Yet the family is more than a unit that interrelates and shares responsibility for the development of its individual members.

The family, classified as an institution, is the nucleus of civilization and to a great extent shapes society (Koenig & Bayer 1981; MacArthur, 2013; Martinson, 1970; Newman, 1999). Tracing its origin, we see stories or images of families throughout the pages of the Bible. We read about the patriarchal family lineage—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, David,

and Jesus and His family. Images of “God as parent to the children of Israel; Christ as groom in relation to the church as bride; and the Holy Spirit’s indwelling empowering brothers and sisters in the Lord” (Balswick & Balswick, 2007, p. 20) illustrate the importance of family in God’s eyes.

Family implies relationship and community (Gallagher, 2012). In the postmodern world, it is popular to stress community and relationships and talk about openness, acceptance, and equality. However, the reality is that there is a rapid increase in the quantity of broken relationships and failed marriages within American society. Family violence is increasing, as are the numbers of single parents and at-risk children.¹ According to reports from the Domestic Violence Resource Center (2013), over 600,000 women and 100,000 men are victims of domestic violence each year. The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2011) reported in 2011 that 69% of children 0-17 lived with parents (65% lived with both parents who are married), 27% lived with one parent, and 4% lived with no parent. McWhirter et al. (2007) concludes, “so many children are at risk for psychosocial difficulties that it is reasonable to say that the society itself is at risk” (p. 5).

The church, as God’s representative in society, is faced with the challenge of engendering intervention and restoration of some sort amongst families. To bring restoration is to empower families and enable them to grow in God’s ideal. This article posits that one of the failures in the family structure is that of neglect and displacement of leadership roles. This assumption is supported by briefly rehashing certain events of the Abrahamic family lineage and their implications for the current family structure. At the same time, it will propose that the key to triumphing over family brokenness is accepting and upholding three divinely appointed legacies: authority, covenantal agreement, and abundant blessing, all of which are rooted in the overarching legacy of grace. The story of Abraham and his family, distant in time, experienced these legacies that are relevant even today.

Lesson 1: Legacy of Authority and Faith

Leadership styles (autocratic/authoritarian, participative/democratic, laissez-faire/free rein, transformative) as well as family styles are often described in terms of authority and power (Kippenberger, 2002).

¹Extensive research on the issues that put I 10 99.2126 313.2718 Tm fficulties

Scholars also argue that leadership styles are formed and enhanced during childhood, thus closely connecting family and leadership (Bennis, 2004; Kelly et al., 2002; Koesten, 2004; Saphir & Chaffee, 2002; Zhang, 2007). It is imperative to study, understand, and improve families because children view their parents as role models. Inherited character traits and behaviors could influence children's leadership styles (Dong, 2005; Fitzpatrick et al., 1996; Prasitthipab, 2008). The family is a place where leaders originate. Therefore, the first legacy of leadership found in the story of Abraham and his family is connected to authority but, surprisingly, not so much to authority and power as to authority and faith.

The stories from Abraham's life show that he and his wife were confused about authority.² At the beginning, it seems as if they understood that the ultimate authority of the family leader (and any other leader) has its source in God (Nee, 1995). Abraham heard God's voice, took his whole family, and led them to a place unknown to him, following the leading of God (Gen. 12:1-9; Heb. 11:8).

Later, however, just as it often happens in life, Abraham took authority into his own hands. This self-appointed authority without any real power led Abraham to a desperate decision unworthy of a family leader.³ "Say you are my sister," Abraham pleaded with his wife (Gen. 12:13). When God interfered by sending a disease on Pharaoh, Abraham was given a direct "hands-on" lesson on leadership authority. He was reminded that the ultimate source of authority is God.

Abraham learned the lesson that, even though discomfiting at the time, an effective leader places integrity ahead of comfort. In the flow of time Abraham was again confronted with the issue of leading with integrity; again, instead of making the decision based on God's authority, he made it based on his wife Sarah. God gives all members of the family their own role(God) -22. rvwife own nwa&of of the

authority by taking on herself the role of God, just as Eve did in the Garden of Eden.⁵ The promised son could be born only through the will of God.⁶ It took almost a lifetime for Abraham and Sarah to understand

future. Abraham was in a similar situation for most of his life. The story of the covenant teaches us how to find stable ground and a clear vision for the future.

Abraham, uprooted from the land of his fathers, followed God's lead-

But in contrast, the altruistic Abraham, who extends his blessing, suddenly becomes a curse for Pharaoh and King Abimelech (Gen. 12, 20). Abraham's vision narrows down to his own life and well-being, rejecting not only his acquaintances and friends, but his own wife. He forgets about her well-being, closes his eyes to the dangers of a king's palace. Sarah was his wife, the future mother of the son of promise. By giving her up, Abraham shifts from blessing to cursing. Abraham has yet to learn that to be a God-appointed leader of the covenant family, the father of nations, means to extend God's blessing to others and put their well-being in front of his own at all times, even when it seems inconvenient to do so.¹⁶ To become a leader means to give up everything, more than one's own life, to give up the life of the promised son. God's way of leadership, which found its ultimate expression in Christ, is to become a servant.¹⁷ Servant leadership is not reserved for the large institutions "out there"; it starts in the family—biologically and spiritually.

The basic characteristic of servant leadership is that a leader is a ser-

postmodern culture. Applying lessons from the patriarchal legacies within the contemporary context is essential for benchmarking a sociological structure on which effective family leadership can be established. The family, a minuscule organization that feeds other microsystems and ultimately the macrosystems of the social structure, exerts its influence for good or bad in society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2007; Newman, 1999). Similarly, the influence of society shapes the contour of the family. McWhirter et al. (2007) use a tree metaphor to depict all the different entities in society (socioeconomic structure, culture, technology, school and peers) that impact the development of a child. Each entity is represented as part of the root that nurtures the outgrowth (p. 14).

Using Fisher's (1978) idea on systems perspective, one can assume that family existence is not merely the sum total of all the actions of all its individual members; rather, it is the interaction of all family members operating as a unit of interrelated parts, influenced by surrounding culture. An understanding of the interdependent nature of the different systems at the micro and macro level can serve to guide proactive leadership within contemporary families. To be proactive calls not only for self-reflection but also the ability to plan and implement with the end results in view (Covey, 1990).

Asserting Authority

The structure and role of individual members of the family have shifted significantly (from those of the patriarchs). Breakdown in relationships, which often results in divorce, is one of the key causes contributing to this shift in the family. Galvin et al. (2012) uses terminologies such as "co-breadwinner," "stay-at-home mom," "noncustodial father," and "birth mother" to portray particular labels that have evolved from this breakdown. Many families today are also influenced by pluralistic and relativistic ideologies of postmodernism. A plethora of different ideas and approaches to given circumstances pervades the environment; it is not uncommon for individuals (within a family unit) to make decisions based on personal preference and self-interest rather than common virtue or what is suitable for family well-being. In the same way, standards become less relevant and absolutes are shunned in favor of individuals' perceptions of what is right. In such cases the essence of authority tends to fade or takes on a negative connotation. Individual family members often reject the authority roles they were called by God to fulfill. A lot of struggle is often caused by greed for

power and negligence, which stem from the lust of selfish gratification.

In calling people's attention to their God-given leadership responsibilities, the faith community should emphasize the fact that leadership begins in the family. The church should let individuals know that leadership also begins with intention—that of communicating meaning and value in a way that leads members to understand their leadership roles in the family and society, and to seek to fulfill those roles with integrity. In view of the confusing “anything goes” approach of the world, the faith community is challenged to be the light shining on a hill that points people to God's model of family leadership.

The words of William R. Wallace (1819-1881), “The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world,” depict the significance of a mother's influence on a child's development and, ultimately, his or her place in society. This is a suitable application concerning the implications of the need for parents to exercise authority in guiding the development of their children in ways that will influence society positively. Over time, family roles are shared mutually and now it is incumbent on both father and mother to lead the world with intention as they lead their micro organization—their family.

Such leadership becomes evident when a father asserts his authority within his family in a manner that aligns with God's authority (Gen. 18:19; Deut. 6:4-9; Josh. 24:14, 15; Mic. 6:8). It becomes real when he chooses to love his wife (and children) even as Christ loved the church, giving His life for it (Eph. 5:25, 25). This sacrificial method of love is made manifest in various ways, including the time spent intentionally fostering healthy growth and development of family relationships. Leadership becomes evident in the wife who is cognizant of the need to see (and experience) submission not as a passive act but as a dynamic process that engages willingly, showing steadfast love and respect for the man she has committed to share her life with (Eph. 5:22). Her act of submission complements his divinely appointed authority implemented in favor of her well-being (Gen. 2:18; Ruth 3:1). Ultimately, effective leadership distinctly marks the role of both husband and wife as they submit to God, and to each other (Eph. 5:21). This synergy of mutually responsible roles of leadership between parents asserts the kind of authority that leads their posterity to contribute to the good of society. Children are more influenced by what they see than what they hear. Pollard (2012) stresses that parents need to be conscientious with their behavior, that they “practice” what they “tell” their children and that it is “important to give children the influence of godly example” (pp. 17, 18).

The practice of healthy authority within the family might not come easily and might take years to learn. However, acceptance and understanding of one's authority and the authority of God in the family will lead to deeper relationships between the individual family members as well as their relationships with God.

Covenantal Agreement

The relative nature of society today seems to obscure the concept of covenant. A covenant's original intent is often altered through imposition of arrangements that are contractual, ones that are more transitory than permanent. The concept of covenant is characterized primarily by God's binding relationship with humanity. It is used metaphorically to represent relationships among family members. Anderson and Guernsey (1985) describe the concept as "love that provides the basis for family" (p. 40), a place where individuals give and receive unconditional love. The unconditional nature of a covenant calls for a kind of commitment to leadership in the family, similar to that of God to humanity. Balswick and Balswick (2007) describe God's action toward humanity (based on His covenant with them) as compassionate, loving, disciplining, guiding, pursuing, giving, nurturing, respecting, knowing, and forgiving (p. 20). On the contrary, the contractual arrangements that pervade society are often based on selfish conditions that inhibit the development of leadership potentials of family members. In essence, it reduces the quality of effective leadership in society.

The concept of covenant within the family stresses not only self-sacrificial love, but also love with a goal, love that brings life, love that ties humans' present reality with God's infinity. Christian parents supported by the communities of faith can fulfill their roles of contributing to effective leadership in society through intentional interpersonal family circles that allows members to learn and share values and meanings through narratives. In the words of Langelier and Peterson (2006), "the communication practice of storytelling is one way of doing family" (p. 109). Through stories, metaphors, and rituals, individuals learn to create meaning and set goals for their lives. In postmodern society, the pervasive effects of media and technology manipulate the senses, alter the quality of interpersonal transaction within the contemporary family, and mark storytelling as an extinct phenomena. God's instruction to the patriarchs remains a guide for today: "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house,

and when you walk by the way" (Deut. 6:6-7, ESV). As beneficiaries of God's covenantal love, parents today are challenged to share their experiences of such love with their children. In a time when hope seems elusive, it is vital to teach children that hope remains in the story of the self-sacrificing, unconditional love of God.

Abundant Blessing

A concept embedded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model is a relevant instrument with which to measure the family's input in society. This model assumes that individuals and their environments (microsystems, mesosystems, macrosystems) "are continually interacting, and that the individual exerts influence (that results in change) on the environment" (McWhirter et al., 2007, p. 18). As the foundational structure of civilization, family development of leaders inevitably feeds the caliber of leadership within the society. This is evident in the increase or decrease in morality and virtue. Adhering to developing and improving leadership within the family unit ultimately becomes a blessing to society. The presence of values and a sense of responsibility within the unit produce morals and virtue, ultimately leading individual members to cultivate self-leadership. Blanchard (2010), in highlighting the importance of self-leadership, proposes that "before you can hope to lead anyone else, you have to know yourself," for "only when leaders have experience in leading themselves are they ready to lead others" (p. 89). When transferred into society, this kind of leadership has the potential not only to allay unscrupulous practices but also to have positive exponential effect. The family, supported by the church, becomes an environment where such individuals physically, intellectually, and spiritually develop in the image of God.

Conclusion

In looking at leadership in the patriarchal clan, the recurring message is that family leadership is authorized by God for individuals and societal well-being. When the authority of God is undermined, it causes a rift in family leadership, and breakdown in family leadership has its negative impact on posterity. The need to develop leaders at their core (within the family) is essential for effective leadership in society. This is so because the success and well-being of the society is inevitably tied to the quality of family existence.

As part of society, the community of faith shares in the responsibility of cultivating the posterity of leaders; however, it is imperative that this

start with the family. This is done by not only intervening in the brokenness of different family relationships but also by preventing the lapse in leaders' awareness of their roles. To understand one's role in life is to first make reasonable sense of life, to connect a creation to her

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