

# **In the World But Not of the World**

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## **PART I**

### **Introduction**

At one of the first PACANet meetings in 2002, Troy Lewis<sup>1</sup> led a session on “Unreached people groups” with reference to HIV and AIDS. I think most of us expected unreached people groups to be truck drivers or commercial sex workers or something like that. Instead, Troy spoke of the Church as the biggest unreached people group. About 65% of people in sub Saharan Africa call themselves Christians. The Church is big but at that time, there was a strong us/them mentality. Churchgoers were not aware of how much HIV was already in the Church. Individual Christians might have been at the forefront of the struggle with HIV, but the Church as a body was not very much involved. It was an unreached target group.

A lot has changed since then. In 2005, Dr. Peter Okaalet<sup>2</sup> spoke of more than 4,000 Christians dying daily of AIDS related illnesses in Africa or 1.5 million annually. In 2006, Tearfund produced a report titled “Faith Untapped” that spoke of a hidden army of millions of Church volunteers tackling Africa’s AIDS crisis head on. The report estimated the value of the churches’ care for orphans, the sick and the elderly at over £2.5 billion annually. It said, “The churches’ long reach, deep into people’s psyche and far down potholed tracks into even the most remote villages, means they are uniquely placed to respond to people’s needs. Their reach often extends far beyond that of governments and NGOs.”

A UNICEF report published at about the same time says, “Religious leaders are in a unique position of being able to alter the course of the epidemic.”

### **The Supernatural Strength of God’s Church**

What all the above-mentioned reports have in common is their recognition of the strength of God’s Church, numerically, socially, and personally. I believe the Lord also sees the potential for spiritual change in society through his people, the Church. I am thinking of the strength of God’s Church because that is what we are – God’s Church. What an awesome privilege it is that we are more than a human institution or organization. We are the Church of the living God.

Let us turn to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. It starts with Jesus going with his disciples away from the crowds. Jesus is not preaching to the world but specifically speaking to his disciples; to those who have heard the good news of the kingdom, have repented and have believed. Today he is speaking to us. He starts with the Beatitudes which describe Christian character and then says, “You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.” I have 4 points:

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<sup>1</sup> Troy Lewis is an Afro-American missionary to Zambia who was on the first PACANet Board and did a lot in those early years.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Peter Okaalet is Senior Africa Director of Medical Assistance Programs (MAP) International, with oversight of its Africa-wide operations.

### **1. *The Church is Different from the World***

Salt is different from sand. Light is different from darkness. Christians are different from non-Christians. Jesus sees two different communities – the salt and light community of his followers and the earth and world community which does not follow him as Lord. Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones puts it this way, “The glory of the gospel is that when the church is different from the world, she invariably attracts it. It is then that the world is made to listen to her message, though it may hate it at first.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes, “Flight into the unknown is a denial of the call. A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow him.” And John Stott sums it up by saying, “It is important to assert this difference clearly in our day in which it is fashionable to blur the distinction between the church and the world.’ Therefore, Jesus is calling us to radical discipleship which involves such things as turning the other cheek and doing to others what we would have them do to us. And in the context of MCP, not looking at a woman in order to lust after her and, I suggest, for women, not to behave or to dress with the aim of getting men to lust after them.

### **2. *The Church is What the World Needs***

Jesus is saying that his followers are what the world needs. The world has a tendency to deteriorate and go rotten. It cannot stop itself from going bad. Only salt from the outside can stop the decay. The world is a dark place; it needs an external source of light to illumine it. The Church is set in the world with a double role – to be salt to arrest the process of social decay and to be light to dispel the darkness. Now, what the world needs and what the world wants are often different. I haven’t met anyone who wanted to undergo a medical operation, but some of us have needed one. If you have had the experience of a doctor saying to you that you need a major operation, you will know the difference between what we want and what we need.

Martin Luther emphasised that we may not always be welcomed even though we may be what the world needs. He said, “Salting has to bite. If you want to help people, you must be sharp and rub salt into their wounds. Although they criticise us as biters, we know that is how it has to be. Christ has commanded the salt to be sharp and continually caustic.” A more recent German scholar, Helmut Thielicke, makes a similar point saying, “To look at some Christians one would think their ambition was to be the honey pot of the world. They sweeten and sugar the bitterness of life with an all too easy conception of a loving God.’

### **3. *The Church IS Salt and Light***

The word ‘you’ is emphatic and we could translate it to mean “you and only you.” In the same way, the word ‘are’ is emphatic. It is not something we have to struggle for. The struggle is for salt to stop being salty or for light to stop shining. Our Lord stresses the danger of the salt losing its saltiness and the light hiding its radiance. Let us hear and take to heart his warnings:

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16)

Jesus is telling us, “You and only you ARE the salt of the earth, so be salty. You and only you ARE the light of the world, so shine.” If we Christians are indistinguishable from non-Christians, we are useless. The world is supposed to see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven. The implication is that we will not only do good, but we will explain why we are doing it.

Being the salt of the EARTH and the light of the WORLD must have felt highly unrealistic as our Lord Jesus spoke to a very ordinary group of people - a bunch of Palestinian peasants - on a hillside in an obscure corner of the known world. They seemed insignificant but they turned the world upside down according to Acts 17:6. I believe God’s take on it was that they had turned the world the right way up! It often feels unrealistic today in spite of the size and influence of the Church. But it is our Lord’s assessment and we must take it seriously. We can say humbly and with awe, “We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.”

#### **4. *The Church is one Church.***

The call is to the whole of God’s Church. The *you* word is plural. It includes all of the disciples of Jesus. Jesus is not calling for individual action or for one denomination to act as salt and light. He is looking for a combined response of the whole Church. It is a call to God’s Church to be united, prophetic and influential. When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he wrote, “To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours.” He wrote to one Church – it was not the Anglican or the Presbyterian or the Charismatic or the Catholic or even the Pentecostal church, because those labels did not exist. They had no meaning. Loughborough is a town in England and several years ago now, I met some Christians from there who talked about the ‘Church of Loughborough – Anglican division’ or the ‘Church of Loughborough – Pentecostal division’. I don’t know if it has continued, but at that time, all the churches had got together to present a united front.

In John 17, our Lord also prayed then on the night of his betrayal for our oneness. I fear that we are paining his heart by some of our divisions and squabbles when there is a world out there that needs to be reached. Jesus prayed:

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one. May they be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one.” (Vs 11 & 21-22)

That they may be one as we are one – wow! That is a mind boggling closeness of oneness, but it is the unity Jesus prayed for. We can be sure that if Jesus is praying for his followers to be united, our enemy, the devil, is working to divide us. Our disunity plays into his hands. At times in history, Christians have fought each other and destroyed each other. I have rewritten 2 Chronicles 20:23, from the story of God’s victory when Jehoshaphat was king, to highlight the tragedy of fighting ourselves:

The men of the Evangelicals and the Catholics rose up against the men from the Organization of African Independent Churches (OAIC) to destroy and annihilate them. After they finished slaughtering the men from OAIC, they helped to destroy one another. (Original: the men of Ammon and Moab and the men from Mount Seir.)

I remember visiting a mission secondary school in eastern Zimbabwe 40 years ago. It was a time of expanding education and the mission had made plans to add a primary school to the secondary school. However, the Ministry of Education had made a ruling that no rural primary school could be closer than 5 miles from the next one. The headmaster told me that the Catholics in the area had deliberately built a school 5 miles and 100 yards from their existing one in a totally unsuitable place where very few people lived. They had done it because it was 4 miles from the secondary school and it meant that his mission could not have their new primary school. In that case, the Catholics got in first but the headmaster was so bitter that he was busy looking at maps to see if he could retaliate. Let us beware of fighting one another and destroying the army of God.

Probably more often today, we do not actively fight each other. We are more like the divided kingdom in the Old Testament history of God's people. Their best time was when they were united under King David. When the kingdom divided after the death of Solomon, it never regained its stature and influence. Today, God's Church is divided. Each denomination or church battalion carries on as if it were the whole army and the only church. We ignore one another; we fail to communicate and to share; we duplicate what each is doing. We fear competition for funds if we tell another group what we are doing. We do our own thing.

God is calling us to repent of our past disunity. He is challenging us to take serious action in order to stand united. As I say this, I acknowledge that it is difficult and we can all too easily make excuses. As Christian leaders in Africa, we do have influence in our churches. We are sometimes overwhelmed by our weaknesses and our differences and cannot see that there is far more that unites us than divides us. We forget that God sees us as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Every big thing started small and we can be the start to something big in God's kingdom. MCP is a challenge to the Church because it is already inside our churches. But it is also a moment of opportunity given to us. I say a moment because this is urgent. The new fashion of seeing MCP as the key driver of HIV infection will change. Next year, the AIDS community might sing a different song even though I believe they have got it right this time. God has set before us an open door. We must seize the opportunity in his name and go through together, as one body in Christ.

PACANet exists to coordinate a Christian response to HIV and AIDS in Africa. Maybe we will look back and say that this was the reason God called PACANet into existence. It is a tough calling and an uphill struggle because the Church as a whole somehow does not see how much stronger it would be if it stood united as one body, the one Church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## **PART II**

### **The Spiritual Significance of Marriage**

Jesus prayed for his disciples because they were in the world but not of the world. He prayed for their protection because he knew the world would hate them even as it hated him. He said, "I have told you these things, so that in me you will have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

We will concentrate on the passage on marriage in Ephesians chapter 5. It is a well known passage that is also a minefield of difficulty and contrary opinions. I learned that when my late

wife Janet and I had the privilege of facilitating a marriage seminar for the bishops and their wives from the Church of Uganda. Most of our presentations went well but Ephesians 5 felt like a disaster. Every good bishop seemed to have a different understanding of what was meant by words like ‘head’ and ‘submit’ and wanted to be sure his opinion was heard. It became a heated argument about Greek words. To avoid heated arguments, we will look at the big picture of this marriage passage in its context in the letter to Ephesians.

### ***Spiritual Bookends for Marriage***

The marriage passage is part of a larger section that Martin Luther in his Catechism calls *Haustafeln* or household duties. In the New International Version (NIV) bible, the paragraphs are titled Wives and Husbands (5:22-33), Children and Parents (6:1-4) and Slaves and Masters (6:5-9). When you read these scriptures, it becomes clear that the household duties are introduced and followed by teachings on God’s Spirit and spiritual warfare.

Just before the section on marriage, we are told to “be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). Right after the teaching on marriage, there is the famous passage on spiritual battle in Ephesians 6:10-18. That is not a coincidence. The Spirit passages that come on either side of the marriage teaching are like bookends which will support the marriage and make it strong and secure. Just like a row of books on a table will not stand upright on their own and need to be supported by bricks or bookends, a marriage needs the same kind of support. Imagine that the section in Ephesians on relationships in marriage, home and work was printed in a booklet. It could not stand upright without support. The bookends that God has provided to make a marriage secure are: *The filling of the Spirit* and *standing strong in the Lord in spiritual battle*.

These spiritual bookends give strength and stability to a marriage and family life. In marriage, as in all of life, human effort is not enough. The demands are too much for us on our own. If we try in our own strength we will fail. Praise God that he stands with us in mercy when we fall. Wives and husbands will not be able to live as God requires in the demands of daily life unless they are constantly being filled with God’s Spirit. The good news is that God is with us by his Spirit, and it is his delight to help us.

### **Bookend 1: Being Filled With the Spirit**

The directive to be filled with the Spirit comes before the section on marriage. This whole section on relationships in marriage, home and work grows out of the instruction in Ephesians 5:18 to be filled with the Spirit. Paul compares the filling of the Spirit with drunkenness or being filled with alcoholic spirits. Being filled with the Spirit is a bit like drinking – we get thirsty and have to go back for more. The effects of alcohol wear off so that a person has to keep on drinking alcohol to remain drunk. Similarly, we are to keep drinking in the Spirit through prayer and absorbing God’s word.

The results of being filled with the Spirit come in 4 phrases found in verses 19 to 21. People filled with the Spirit will be marked by:-

1. *Fellowship*: “*Speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.*” If you love someone you want to talk about her or him all the time. Spirit filled people in love with Jesus will have the Lord at the center of every conversation and encounter – at home, in the street and in church.

2. *Worship: "Singing and making music in your heart to the Lord."* Worship bubbles up from inside us when we are filled with the Spirit. Spirit filled believers will sing in their hearts and with their mouths whether they are with other Christians or not.
3. *Thankfulness: "Always giving thanks to God the Father."* A Spirit filled person is marked by gratitude not grumbling. God is God no matter what happens in our lives. As we thank him for the blessings we receive everyday, we will be better prepared to face the problems of life. We will always thank God for his faithfulness.
4. *Submission: "Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ."* A person cannot be filled with self and the Spirit at the same time. A Spirit filled person is not selfish, aggressive or self-assertive, but he demonstrates the humility and gentleness of Jesus. Spirit filled people do not insist on their own rights. James beautifully illustrates Paul's meaning in the following: "The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit." (James 3:17) If these are the marks of Spirit filled living, a couple that is filled with the Spirit will enjoy a good marriage!

This last phrase – *submit to one another out of reverence for Christ* - acts like a bridge. It is the conclusion of Paul's direct teaching on the filling of the Spirit and the start of his application of life in the Spirit to relationships in the home and at work.

## **Bookend 2: Spiritual Battle**

Immediately after the section on relationships in marriage, home and work comes one of the best known passages on spiritual warfare:

Be strong with the Lord's mighty power. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies and tricks of the Devil. For we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms. (Ephesians 6:10-12 NLT).

Modern English bibles usually start a new paragraph at Ephesians 6:10 headed 'The Armor of God' or something like that. In the original Greek, there is no break between verses 9 and 10 and there is no heading. Paul probably intended us to connect the two sections to emphasize the reality of spiritual warfare in everyday life and relationships. Today we rarely consider them together. It is not often said that marriage and parenting are major battlegrounds for spiritual warfare! Yet when you look at what goes on in our homes, it makes a lot of sense.

For instance, here is a Christian couple who three years ago promised undying love and faithfulness at their wedding. And they really meant it. Their body language shouted to the world that they were deeply in love. There was no one else in the world for either of them. Today their home is a living hell. They cannot say a kind word to each other. She accuses him of seeing another woman. He responds by beating her up. When they come for counseling, they sit as far apart as possible. She tries in vain to hide her bruises and swollen eyes. What has happened? They did not put on God's armor and so were not able to stand against the strategies and tricks of the devil. They are right to seek advice and counseling may help them. However, their real hope is in taking the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God and praying in the Spirit with all kinds of prayers and requests.

Think of children and parenting. Physical and sexual abuse is a hidden horror in too many homes. And it is most often carried out by relatives and even by parents. That makes no sense at all. How can a father abuse a child who was and is so precious to him? But it is happening every day. The explanation is that the devil has deceived him.

Another example is of a mother who lost her temper with her toddler today. The child kept on whining until the mother picked him up, shook him violently and threw him away. Fortunately, he only broke an arm. It could have been much worse. She told the doctor that he fell. Now he is sweetly asleep and his mother is gazing down at the child she loves so deeply. She is crying in her heart, “O God, how could I have done it?” The answer is that Satan tricked her and she listened to him.

The good news is that God is with us and we can be strong with his mighty power. But let us not imagine we can do it on our own. We need to be alert, put on the whole armor of God and stand!

### **The Mystery of Marriage**

Why does marriage need spiritual bookends? Let us look at the marriage passage itself in Ephesians 5:22-33. It reaches a grand climax in verse 32. Paul writes, “This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:32). Wow! What on earth does that mean? What is a mystery? A mystery in the bible is not something too difficult to understand. Instead, it is something that we don’t understand because we are thinking about it in the wrong way. Our thoughts are going along an ordinary human track. We have to change to the God-track to grasp the mystery. But when we get it, it is so obvious that we say, “Why didn’t I see that before?” We use the word ‘mystery’ in the same sort of way today.

Children (and adults) love mystery stories in which nobody is sure what is going on. Everyone in the story seems to be good but one of them has committed murder. The suspense builds until right at the end when something happens to explain the whole mystery. Then it is so obvious that we say, “Well, of course, she was the bad one all the time.”

When we come to the passage on marriage in Ephesians 5:22-33, we will not grasp the wonder of the mystery if we only see what it says about the behavior of wives and husbands. That is the wrong way to think. We must switch to the God-track where there are references to God all the way through. More than 40% of the words in these verses are direct *God* words. We will not make sense of this scripture if we read it as if it is only about human marriage without reference to God. God is right at the center of Christian marriage. Here is the passage with the *God* words in bold:

Wives, submit to your husbands **as to the Lord**. For the husband is the head of the wife **as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior**. Now **as the church submits to Christ, so also** wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, **just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless**. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, **just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body**. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” **This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church**. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

When the passage is printed as above, we can see immediately that human marriage is more than just a man/woman affair – though of course it is that. The God references in the passage lead naturally to the dramatic new revelation in verse 32 that the ultimate meaning of human marriage is found in the profound mystery of the marriage of Christ and the Church. That was God’s plan from the beginning. John Stott explains it like this: “God did not create the union of Christ and the church after the pattern of human marriage: quite the reverse! He created human marriage on the pattern of Christ’s relation to the church which he had planned from all eternity.” (God’s New Society, 1979)

That is amazing! That is a mystery! It is saying that God created us male and female, and husband and wife to give the best possible picture on earth of Christ’s relationship with his people, the Church. For Christians, the spiritual significance of marriage in the plan of God must profoundly color the way we look at MCP. Marriage is more than a social convenience. It is more than just man and woman in relationship. It is a glorious picture of Christ in relation with his people. Other options dishonor our Lord Jesus. They are almost blasphemous.

Yes, we will take on board alternative lifestyles and the practical reasons for lack of relationship satisfaction-- poor communication, lack of sexual satisfaction, and other things. Yes, the Church needs to do a better job of engaging with the reasons that relationships fail, and help people to create strong and healthy relationships that *can* last and be faithful. One mistake we have made is to talk about faithfulness being important without explaining why it is important. Many Christian singles are saying to themselves, “Abstinence is the right thing,” while thinking, “I wish it wasn’t.” Many married Christians are saying to themselves, “Faithfulness is important,” all the while thinking, “I wish it wasn’t.” And we all know that when we start to think like that, our actions tend to follow our thoughts. It is more powerful to say, “My marriage is a picture of Christ and the Church. Christ is never unfaithful. I, too, will never be unfaithful.”

There is enormous spiritual significance in marriage. This means that we are involved in spiritual battle and we must be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power as it says in Ephesians 6:10-12:  
Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.  
For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the

authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Praise God that we do that in the sure confidence that victory belongs to our God. Our Lord Jesus has overcome the world and we are more than conquerors through him.

### **PART III**

#### **The Surprising Strength of Family**

John, the beloved disciple, has an amazing ability to use simple words, which anyone can understand, to say deep things that stretch our hearts and minds. One surprise in the gospel is that 5 whole chapters are devoted to the events of just one evening - the Last Supper on the night that Jesus was arrested. Chapter 13 starts with Jesus washing the disciples' feet and chapter 17 has Jesus' great High Priestly prayer before he goes with his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. So, most of chapter 13 and all of 14, 15 and 16 are the last talk Jesus had with his disciples before the crucifixion. There are as many words of our Lord here as in the Sermon on the Mount. I don't want to go into the great truths Jesus shares but simply point you to the conclusion in John 16:33. A person's last words can be very significant and in a real sense these are the last words of Jesus the Messiah to people. He says, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

Trouble, Peace and Overcoming. The twin themes of peace and overcoming are surprising. Jesus was about to be betrayed, arrested, denied justice in a mock trial and crucified, but he could say, "I have overcome the world!" The world is *cosmos* in Greek. It means the earth, the world system, or the whole universe. Especially in John, the world is a system opposed to God. Jesus has overcome the world system that is opposed to God. Therefore, we who follow him should enjoy a deep peace in the world. This is not a shallow triumphalism. We will face trouble and we will not overcome in our strength or wisdom but only through our Lord Jesus.

#### **Not of the World**

Immediately after Jesus talked about overcoming the world, he looked toward heaven and prayed. In his great prayer in John 17, Jesus wrestles with the tension that his followers are "in the world but not of the world". For example, "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it." (John 17:14-16)

As Christians, we are not of the world, therefore, Jesus prays for our protection. If we are his, the world will hate us. Sometimes Christians have reacted to this by becoming disconnected from the world. We are so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good. The Church and the world stand and shout at each other. There is no listening, no understanding and no communication. We have seen that in the issue of condom use where there has been much more heat than light from both sides.

## **In the World**

Being in the world is not the way of Jesus. We are called to live for him in the world even though we are not of the world. It was a dangerous place for the Lord Jesus and for his disciples then; it is a dangerous place for us today. And so our Lord Jesus prays in John 17:11, “I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one.” (John 17:11)

Sometimes as Christians we are so keen to be in the world that we forget we are not of the world. We are so connected with the world that we are no different from the world. We merge, we identify. We are so tolerant and anxious not to give offence that we end up being ‘of the world’. John Stott wrote, “Probably the greatest tragedy of the church through its long and chequered history has been its constant tendency to conform to the prevailing culture instead of developing a Christian counter culture.” We see that in Christian attitudes to family and marriage where the Church response tends to follow the world’s response a few years later.

We will not make a difference in the fight against MCP unless we embrace a Christian counter culture. We will not make a significant contribution in the area of MCP if we do not listen to God. In fact, that is absolutely necessary because God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and his ways are not our ways. In Isaiah 55, the Lord declares, “As the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” There is no chance that we will join our Lord in overcoming the world unless we are in communication with him. So, we too must grapple with the tension of a Christian counter culture. We are in the world but not of the world.

## **Family Life**

We need to consider the tension of a Christian counter culture with reference to family and ask the question: Is family life weak or is it strong?

We all know about family breakdown: domestic violence, unfaithfulness, multiple partnerships, concurrent partnerships, millions of orphans, teenage pregnancies etc. All that is true. We must be ready to deal with it. And we can praise God for so much that Christians are doing in showing care and compassion to people in need. But family breakdown is not the whole truth, or to me, the most important truth. Can we not also say that families are strong? It is not so common, or considered correct, to speak of the strength of family. But think of some examples by carrying out the following exercises:

- a) Write down the 3 most important people in your life.
- b) Go to a wedding or a funeral and see if you can say, “Family is weak and broken in Africa.”
- c) Go to a shop selling greeting cards anywhere in the world and look at who the cards are for.

In Africa, families are doing more to care for people infected and affected by HIV and AIDS than governments or international agencies. Here is a quote from the Economist magazine in October 2008: “In 2007, people working outside their country sent \$317 billion home to their families.” The significance to me is that the Economist is not at all a Christian magazine.

Zimbabwe is surviving on the money the diaspora sends home to their families for school fees and general support.

### **Family Comes from the Character and Creation of God**

The strength of family life is surprising. I believe that the strength of family comes from the character of God and flows from his creation. Everyone knows the first five words in the Bible, “In the beginning God created....” Now, it is interesting that the Genesis story of creation has in verse 2, “The Spirit of God hovering over the waters,” and in verse 26 God saying, “Let us make people in our image and in our likeness.” There are hints there of God as the three in one.

But what comes before the beginning? John’s gospel starts in deliberate parallel with Genesis: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made.” Note the word *with* that comes twice. Suppose you are chatting to another guest here<sup>3</sup> who says, “I have come to Swaziland with my husband for a holiday”. What does *with my husband* say to you? That this married couple enjoys being together; they do things together, they talk and share and they love each other. *With* speaks of companionship, communication and communion. It is a word of love and relationship. And the Word was with God. John is giving us a picture of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit with each other in joyful relationship and intimate communion before the beginning. That is from all eternity.

It is not as if God created the universe and people because he was lonely. You sometimes hear Christians speak like that and it is horrible! No, surely God created out of the overflow of the joy of the Father, Son and Spirit in their togetherness. God is not a solitary being. He is more like a family and we are social beings who relate to each other because he created us in his likeness. Family is strong because it starts in the character of our God himself.

Family flows from the creation of our God. God created a world of families. God the three in one created two in one people to be like him. You see the image of God in a man on his own, in a woman on her own but more completely in a man and a woman together- not only in marriage, but especially there.

Family is part of the very fabric of creation. I believe we can say that God has committed himself to families, including my family and your family. God is for family- and if God is for family, who can be against it? Family is not an endangered species as some would tell us. That is an important factor in our discussions on MCP.

### **God is THE Father**

Who was the first Father in the universe? In Ephesians 3:15, Paul writes, “I kneel before the Father from whom all fatherhood and his whole family in heaven and earth derives its name.” (If you look in the NIV bible, you will see that I have combined the reading in the main text with the alternative in the footnote. This is not an invitation to discuss which is right; it is to show that when there is a question about the meaning of a word, it is often a good principle of interpretation to take both meanings rather than argue about either/or. Every student writing an

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<sup>3</sup> Swaziland was the location of the consortium on Multiple Concurrent Sexual Partnerships.

English essay is taught to choose a rich word with layers of meaning rather than a plain word.) The point is that fatherhood and parenthood come from God. He is THE Father. That should be an encouragement and strength to every father and every mother.

We carry God's image in our innermost being, and one important lesson for us as parents is that we learn to respond to what God tells us in our hearts to do as parents. You can say this is a response to God's Father image in us or it is a response to his Holy Spirit. Either way, the Lord can help us to respond rightly to our different children and to different situations. Parenting is hard but the bible is the story of God the Father's dealings with his children. You can read almost every story in the Bible as a parenting story. Model your parenting on the way the Father has acted in the history of salvation and you will do well. Take time to consider how your heavenly Father has parented you and you will learn how to parent your own children. God the Father is with you in your family and he wants to help you do well. He promises to be your God and the God of your descendants after you for the generations to come. God is for family.

### **Family and MCP**

Now let us try to see what the surprising strength of family coming from God's character and creation means for our response to MCP. If God is for family, he is also for marriage. God's ideal for family is a strong marriage relationship between a man and a woman as the centre of an extended family network. This is the best environment for people, both children and adults, to grow and to develop in. "Honour your father and your mother that it may go well with you" is the first commandment with a promise (Ephesians 6:2). It assumes that the father is present and actively involved in bringing up his children. The world is concerned that MCP is not a good thing in the context of HIV. We agree but want to add that MCP is not good in society or for individuals whether children or adults. We want to uphold God's pattern for family, for parenting and for marriage in all its beauty and goodness. I think the Church has often failed here. We have somehow given the impression that God's plans for relationships, marriage and family are more like an unwelcome prison than a gracious path to joy and fulfilment in life.

The *in the world but not of the world* tension is very real. We must show love and acceptance to every person in painful and sometimes sinful, situations. As the Church, we will be non-judgmental and compassionate. But at the same time, we must not lose a clear conviction of God's ideal. We are in the world but not of the world. I find it helpful to think that we are called to be prophetic in declaring God's truth and pastoral in shepherding hurting people who God loves. It is not an easy balance to keep.

Finally, when we say that God is for family, it does not mean that family never has troubles or difficulties. In Romans 8, Paul asks, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" He does not answer his question directly but he does list lots of things that are against us: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and the sword (that is martyrdom). His point is that none of these things will overcome us. We will triumph - but only because God is for us and with us. So Paul concludes that great passage by saying, "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us" and "nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

God is for family even though individual families may be broken and marred. God is for family even though the institution of family may be threatened in some societies. But finally, family is

strong because God is committed to it. Family is strong today. Family will be strong in one hundred years from now if Jesus will not have returned. Praise God! He is our Father. Praise God! Jesus is our heavenly bridegroom! Be of good courage! Our Lord Jesus has overcome the world!