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Seventh-day Adventist Church  
NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION

# Journal of Family Research and Practice

*Blended Families*

Claudio Consuegra, DMin  
Pamela Consuegra, PhD  
*Editors*



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# JOURNAL INFORMATION

The Journal of Family Research and Practice (JFRP) is an annual publication of the Family Ministries Department of the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and is released once each year. The journal is authored by various experts in the field and is primarily intended for professionals, practitioners, pastors, and lay-people in the North American Division (Bermuda, Canada, Guam/Micronesia, and the United States), but may be accessed in electronic form by anyone, worldwide.

Each volume is intended to be both academic and practical in nature, dealing with the day-to-day challenges that families face. The topics of each yearly volume have been identified as key issues relevant to today's families.

Claudio Consuegra, DMin  
Pamela Consuegra, PhD

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# FOREWORD

The stereotypical picture of the family composed of a father, a mother, and a couple of children, is no longer the norm and instead we see a mosaic of family makeups as different as they used to be similar. According to a national Pew Center report (Livingston, 2014) 40% of all new marriages in the US are remarriages for one or both of the partners. In 1960, just 13% of married adults were in a second or subsequent marriage, whereas today close to 25% are (42 million adults). That means that the rate has tripled since 1960. In addition, of new marriages 40% are remarriages (20% for one partner, 20% for both partners). On the Smart Stepfamilies website they conclude that 42% of adults (102 million) have a step-relationship (either a stepparent, a step or half sibling, or a stepchild). When you add the 11.6 million stepchildren in the US (16% of all kids), the total is an estimated 113.6 million Americans that have a steprelationship. In addition, 13% of adults are stepparents (29-30 million); 15% of men are stepdads (16.5 million) and 12% of women are stepmoms (14 million). NOTE: This is only of stepmothers (married or cohabiting) of children under the age of 18 and does not include stepmothers of adult stepchildren. Adding those women could double the estimate to 22-36 million. The same could be said of stepdads.

In this second edition of the Journal of Family Research and Practice we are looking at the special dynamics of the stepfamily, a combination of other families trying to come together as one, like vegetables in a blender, trying to maintain some of its history intact while starting a new history together.

For this issue on Stepfamilies we invited article submissions from renown expert and best seller author, Ron Deal, university professors Drs. Thomas Luttrell, and Pauline Sawyers, pastors Eric and Ann Marie Bates and Willie and Wilma Lee, attorneys and financial specialists Sara Beth Swanson, Michael Harpe and Scott Coppock, marriage expert and international speaker and gospel singer Mike and Pam Tucker, and Family Ministries professional Karen Holford.

We also invited seminary professor, Dr. Anna Galeniece, who wrote about the family dynamics of King David and the problematic issues of his stepfamily and a pastor, university professor, and professional counselor, Curtis Fox, with practical ideas for those families in the process of blending.

Who is this journal for? We want it to be a useful tool for professional counselors, pastors, and those who teach in the fields of social sciences. But we also want them to be down to earth and practical for those who want to explore the topic and who may benefit by learning from the experience of others as well as from the theoretical framework of these articles.

We trust that this issue of the journal will be beneficial to you, whether you are a researcher, practitioner, or one who has an interest in this topic, and that you will share it with others as they seek to learn and practice forgiveness.

Claudio Consuegra, DMin  
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# MINISTERING TO BLENDED FAMILIES

*Blended family ministry represents the next big challenge for family ministry leaders. Blended families are a field ripe for harvest, but the workers are few.*

*When I first started working with stepfamilies in 1992 most of the blended family ministry around the country was a grassroots effort. In other words, the ministry being done in most churches was being done by stepcouples themselves. Very few ministry leaders had stepfamily ministry on their radar, let alone their list of priorities. I'm pleased to say that is beginning to change. In addition, FamilyLife®, a global marriage and family ministry provider and publisher, partnered with my organization Smart Stepfamilies™ in 2012 to begin a major international initiative to blended families now called FamilyLife Blended®. This ministry is providing resources and training to ministry leaders and families. Much has happened in the field of stepfamily ministry over the past three decades, but we still have a long way to go. In the meantime, the audience continues to grow. Consider these compelling statistics:*

- *The nontraditional family is the new traditional family. Today, so-called "nontraditional" families, including families with single parents, single adult households, cohabiting couples, and stepfamilies, now outnumber "traditional" ones in the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and most European countries.*
- *An estimated 113.5 million Americans have a steprelationship of some kind (a stepparent, stepsibling, or stepchild) and it is predicted that one of two Americans will have a steprelationship at some point in their lifetime.*
- *In the U.S., 40 percent of married couples raising children are stepcouples.*
- *Over the last decade 15 percent of first marriages created stepfamilies.<sup>1</sup>*

1. References for these and more stepfamily statistics are available at [smartstepfamilies.com/view/statistics](http://smartstepfamilies.com/view/statistics)

Despite the prevalence of stepfamilies and the blended family divorce rate, stepfamilies remain one of the most neglected groups in churches today. I'm thankful, however, that churches and faith-based organizational "sleeping giants" are beginning to awaken to the incredible opportunities for stepfamily ministry and community outreach. Stepfamilies lack a clear, coherent Christ-centered image of the 3-D family puzzle they find

themselves trying to build; churches can integrate scriptural principles with valuable research and give them the tools they need through practical training programs. The opportunities for ministry are remarkable.

## Family Life Ministry

Please respond if you can help. I'm not sure what to do. I have been married two times and have one son by each marriage. My current

wife has been growing increasingly hostile toward my first son. Just yesterday she complained that I am spending too much time with him and not enough with our son. She's bitter, jealous, and possessive (she even wants him written out of my will), and I'm caught in the middle. No matter what I do, somebody loses. I know it doesn't help that my first son's mother shows up my current wife (they're always competing)—and once again, I'm stuck in the middle. Any suggestions you might have would be greatly appreciated.

—E-mail from a father

Ministering to stepfamilies carries long-lasting benefits and opportunities to touch people's lives with the power of the gospel. Satan's best line of attack is (and always has been) against the home. If he can prevent a stepfamily from integrating successfully, for example, he can take captive multiple generations. Not all stepfamilies are unhealthy, but most could benefit greatly from practical education and a solid support system. The church is perfectly positioned to provide both.

I should, of course, remind us that the deceiver's efforts to hamstring families and stepfamilies are not new. I do receive countless e-mails from stepfamilies throughout the world, but the "e-mail" at the beginning of this section is not an e-mail at all. It is a fictional retelling of the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar found in Genesis 16 and 21. In contrast to the modern-day stepfamily, their "expanded family" included a man with two wives instead of a wife and ex-wife, but the dynamics are very similar to modern-day

blended families. Without support, dysfunctional family patterns that have been around a long time will likely continue from one generation to the next.

The church must always hold up God's design for the home. Nothing should replace this standard. But for those who find themselves in a stepfamily, the church must provide healing from brokenness or—without judgment. In addition, these families need and equipping to allow their home to so that their family is becomes a place of grace and discipleship. Said another way, *we must be just as serious about preventing divorce in second and third marriages as we are in preventing divorce in first marriages*. But to do that we must overcome some barriers.

### **Barriers to Blended Family Ministry**

The first barrier is that most church leaders don't perceive the need. We can't begin to address stepfamily concerns until we realize and acknowledge they exist. Despite the vast number of stepfamilies in the general population, they remain invisible to many church leaders in part because they remain in hiding.

"Closet stepfamilies," as I have come to call them, sit in our pews every Sunday, refusing to be identified as a stepfamily. They fear judgment for the past and reminders of their differentness. Many years ago, the leader of our stepfamily support group and I attended a conference on stepfamilies. I asked him how many stepfamilies he knew of in our church. In addition to those well known to me, he listed six couples that I had no idea were stepcouples. I was stunned. Even in a church that openly welcomed and ministered to stepfamilies, we had couples who feared their past becoming known.



Shame and a sense of unworthiness are among our greatest barriers to effective stepfamily ministry. Churches must begin to program stepfamily educational opportunities, but we must also convey a message of acceptance and grace or few will take advantage of the programs offered.

A second barrier to stepfamily ministry is spiritual marginalization. This comes about for a variety of reasons. The first is personal spiritual shame and guilt from divorce or past sin. The same shame or fear that drives some into the closet drives others away from God and the church altogether. One person said, “I am not sure if I am accepted by God in regard to remarriage. I am almost afraid to read the Bible because I’m not sure what I might find.” This doubt and shame move people away from God and God’s people.

In addition, some divorced and remarried persons are marginalized due to being socially shunned or spiritually judged by the church. One couple was told straight out by a minister, “I’m sorry. Your background and past might infect everyone else, so we can’t have you at our church.” Obviously, this pastor was direct in his effort to marginalize the family, but other times families experience much more subtle and inadvertent messages that create distance. One friend told me she shared during a women’s Bible study that she struggled with loving her stepdaughter. The women looked with disbelief at her honest confession, not understanding her feelings or how to respond. She felt completely rejected and awkward and made a clear decision never to entrust her blended family struggles to the women of her church again. Stepfamilies are made to feel like unclean outsiders and second-class Christians who don’t fit

socially or ideologically. This marginalizes remarried couples and gives them a strong sense of unworthiness.

Occasionally stepfamilies looking for a church home will visit a congregation and find subtle messages in church language and programming that separate them from other couples. For example, the advice given in parent education courses often doesn’t come close to addressing the daily struggles of stepparents or co-parents (between home parenting) because no one knows how to advise. The feedback stepcouples often give about typical marriage education programs goes something like this, “The material and speaker were wonderful, but I kept having to translate the material into our language.” For pre-stepfamily couples it goes like this, “We went to our pastor for premarital counseling. I think he went through the same things with us that he does with a young first marriage couple. We don’t need to talk about not borrowing money from our parents, we need help with complex family relationships and parenting our kids.” As I’ll explain in more detail later, stepfamilies swim in a different ocean. They need help learning to swim together in their ocean, not the ocean of first-marriage. General marriage and family training is helpful, but if it isn’t tailored to the unique dynamics of stepfamilies, we send an inadvertent and unfortunate message, “You don’t belong here,” and stepfamilies hear it loud and clear. As one woman said, “I got so discouraged going to my church, because no one listened to my pleas for assistance. It was as if my family was unimportant.”

The antidote to all this internal and externally imposed shame that marginalizes stepfamilies is, of course, grace. Churches must communicate messages of grace



in order to build bridges of hope that stepfamilies can then cross in order to come out of hiding and out of their shame. After attending one of my live conferences, a remarried father told one of his elders, “I’m so glad I came this weekend. I never thought I could step foot in a church again.” He obviously felt unworthy and unacceptable. By hosting the seminar, that church made a statement: “God’s grace is available here—if you feel you’re unworthy of God’s forgiveness—come join our club.” Churches who have vibrant stepfamily ministries work hard at communicating these messages throughout the year from the pulpit, in Bible classes and small groups, and personal dialogue with couples.

### **Theological Barriers**

The third key barrier to stepfamily ministry pertains to *theological struggles with marriage and divorce*. It is beyond the scope of this article to address marriage, divorce, and remarriage from a Biblical standpoint. Each minister and church need to study carefully the biblical text in order to arrive at a doctrinal position that informs their ministry. I have not answered all my own questions. But I have determined that divorce is not the “unforgivable sin,” and once married, no matter what their background, every couple should work to honor their vows.

And something else is very clear to me. Ministering to blended families is—at the end of the day—no different than any other ministry we do with imperfect people, couples, or families. The church is a hospital for sinners. Welcoming or ministering to them is not condoning sin. We welcome them, *then* teach them God’s

Truth and how to live faithfully from that point forward.

But don’t we already know that? Haven’t we already figured out that we can be pro-hospital without being pro-illness? Post-abortion ministry is not condoning premarital sex. Single-parent ministry does not ignore divorce. Recovery from porn addiction does not excuse porn abuse. Adoption ministry does not bless irresponsible procreation. And Celebrate Recovery does not celebrate addiction. It celebrates the grace of God! And then teaches delivered and redeemed people to live in light of grace.

### **The “How Do We Help?” Barrier**

Once we recognize the prevalence of stepfamilies in both our church and communities, have work through any theological questions that arise, and decide to overcome any marginalization that may be taking place, how do we effectively minister? FamilyLife Blended (and other independent leaders) has many practical resources for couples and ministry leaders including online video courses, a dozen books, a popular podcast (*FamilyLife Blended with Ron Deal*), virtual classes, and live conference events, as well as an online certificate course in blended family ministry and an annual two-day equipping conference for leaders. The “What?” and “How?” are easily accessible. You only need the desire to start. Below are a few practical suggestions to help you think through a local ministry.

### **Practical Ministry Suggestions**

The following are some practical ways your church can begin to minister to stepfamilies.

1. First and foremost, become educated about the unique dynamics of stepfamily living and learn the essential elements of blended family ministry. Offer grace and understanding for the stepfamily journey. Suggested resource: Certificate in Blended Family Ministry (online at [FamilyLife.com/blended](http://FamilyLife.com/blended)) and the Summit on Stepfamily Ministry ([summitonstepfamilies.com](http://summitonstepfamilies.com)).
2. Communicate messages of hope and determination. The "wilder-ness wanderings" can be long and frightening, but there is a promised land of marital fulfillment, interpersonal connectedness, child wellbeing, and spiritual redemption. Remind them not to give up but to endure the journey to reach the Promised Land.
3. Maintain an outreach (evangelistic) mentality. Even if you only have a few stepfamilies in your congregation, you have a lot surrounding it. Educate your leadership and staff to consider stepfamily ministry an outreach effort. Design your classes (titles, meeting times, etc.) with the unchurched in mind.
4. Start a small group or Bible class for stepfamilies. Recruit one or two stepfamily couples, and perhaps a non-stepfamily ministry couple, to co-lead the group. Equip them with, for example, our free online course *The Smart Stepfamily Small Group Resource* (Ron Deal) and the online version of our annual Blended and Blessed livestream. Be sure to add your ministry to our stepfamily ministry registry at

[FamilyLife.com/blended](http://FamilyLife.com/blended) so others can find your local ministry.

Can stepcouples benefit from attending your standard marriage enrichment and parenting classes or events? Yes, they can. But a few things demand that they also have specific training opportunities designed just for stepfamilies. First, stepcouples have a high need for fellowship with others "who get their story". Even with other married couples, stepcouples occasionally report feeling like an outsider; getting them together with others who share a similar experience and have similar challenges bolsters their courage. Second, a typical marriage enrichment course or premarital counseling, for example, is about half of what they need. Why? *Because stepcouples swim in a different ocean than first-marriage couples.* Their ocean has a cooler water temperature (trusting a partner can be a challenge after you have nearly been drowned before), different under-currents (most everyone in the stepfamily has experienced a loss that is always just under the surface), a few more sharks (ex-spouses, co-parenting issues, and the stress of bonding are just a few examples), and the water is less clear (stepfamily life is murky and ambiguous: What is the role of a stepparent? Do we combine our assets or leave them separate? How do we combine traditions & holidays? How do I balance my children's needs with those of my new spouse? Do we take the kids

to my ex-in-laws for Christmas or don't we?). Clearly, stepcouples swim in a different ocean.

To successfully swim in these waters, stepcouples must understand what's going on and how it impacts their couple relationship. There are two parts: what happens *between* the couple and what happens *around* them. Research David Olson and I conducted for our book *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage* found that:

- Before marriage couple satisfaction is closely tied to dyadic factors, that is, couple interaction.
- However, after the wedding couple satisfaction is increasingly tied to triadic factors, that is, the stepfamily ocean around them.

Most couples just can't see this coming until they're already in the ocean. What happens at that point is disillusionment. Stepouples, who naively thought they were going out for a nice swim in the ocean of marriage, discover cooler waters, unforeseen undercurrents, sharks, and murky waters that make swimming together hazardous. .

To help them beat the odds, then, you and I must help them learn all they can about the ocean in which they swim. We must help them become stepfamily smart which makes the swim, at first, manageable and eventually quite enjoyable.

5. When a stepfamily visits your congregation: a) Educate your welcome team not to ask too many questions about why their

last names are different. Asking probing questions may feel like an "inquisition" and may lead to more spiritual guilt and shame over a past they cannot change. b) If you have a discussion group, let them know about it once they offer information about their stepfamily, but don't require that they attend. Many will find it a comfort to connect with other stepfamilies, others will not want to be pigeonholed. Initially, let them "hide their past" if they need to.

6. Sensitize your Bible class teachers to stepfamily complexities. For example, during Father's Day activities give children the option of making two cards for dad and stepdad (but only if the child wants to). On Mother's Day encourage stepmoms in their role and sympathize with their struggles. Most stepmoms will tell you Mother's Day is the worst day of the year for them to attend church because of the anxiety around their role (to be honest, most skip it!). Use language from the pulpit on Mother's Day that acknowledges stepmothers. For example, when you welcome everyone say something like, "Today is, of course, Mother's Day and we welcome all our moms. If you are a mom, a stepmom, a foster mother, an adoptive mother, a grandmother, or a woman who is mentoring a child not her own, we want to thank you for all you do." This goes a long way to acknowledge the presence of different family types and affirms

the role these people play in the lives of children. Finally, because some parents coordinate visitation exchange at church, find out who is authorized to pick up the kids after Bible class and who is not. The custodial parent should put this in writing for the teachers. (FamilyLife Blended has free tip sheets available on children and student ministries, developing stepfamily leadership, and working with military stepcouples. Visit [FamilyLife.com/blended](http://FamilyLife.com/blended).)

7. Student ministries need to be sensitive as well. Here are just a few examples.
  - Medical releases should be signed by biological parents; stepparents generally do not have the legal right to provide consent for medical treatment.
  - If traveling with youth, chaperones should carry phone numbers to both sets of parents (i.e., both households) in case of emergency, not just the church member parent.
  - Class curriculum should include case studies that deal with common adolescent struggles. For example, how to "honor" stepparents in view of Ephesians 6:1-3, conflicts with stepsiblings, and uninvolved biological parents. Teens need a place to talk about such matters with youth leaders who understand their experiences.
  - Youth staff should develop counseling skills to help custodial parents when their child

leaves to live with the other parent. This happens occasionally during the teen years and can bring much grief to the parents left behind.

8. Discuss stepparenting and blended family pressures when doing general marriage and family enrichment classes or sermons. I've found that "sidebars" as I like to call them are an effective method of speaking to the diverse family situations that all of us experience these days. A sidebar is when you pause your regular presentation and speak for a few brief moments to a particular subgroup within your audience, usually to point out how the principle you just shared works differently for the subgroup. For example, when speaking to couples about how a strong marital commitment helps to stabilize their home and provides a backbone for parenting, you might sidebar and say, "For those of you in blended families, please know that in the early years of your marriage expressing marital commitment to your spouse, hugging them in front of the children, or even going on a date actually increases insecurities in your children because they may feel marginalized or unimportant. They've already had a number of losses in their life and your marital commitment to a new spouse may feel like another loss to them. Besides, they aren't as invested in your new marriage being successful as you are, not in the beginning, at least. Despite these reactions in

your children, however, a strong commitment to your marriage is very important. You just need to expect some reaction to it. Long-term there is a reward, though. While it might not start out this way, eventually most children do come to appreciate your commitment to your spouse.” This quick sidebar recalibrates the principle you just taught for the stepfamily couples and validates their experiences. You can then go back to your general marriage teaching.

9. Offer pre-blended family counseling to engaged couples. If you offer pre-blended family couples essentially the same as what you offer couples marrying for the first time without children, and if you aren’t including children in the process, you are giving couples a false sense of security. Use my book *Preparing to Blend: The Couples Guide to Becoming a Smart Stepfamily* (Bethany House, 2021) as your premarital program and you will go much farther in equipping them—and their children—for stepfamily living.
10. Sponsor a community event. Host a stepfamily conference or the Blended and Blessed livestream, sponsor a retreat, or offer a small/group or course for stepfamily couples. Events geared specifically for stepcouples communicates your awareness of them in the community and extends a welcome.
11. Offer competent pastoral counseling. When couples are hurting they will seek out help from their

local church. For years I have had to undo a lot of poor counsel from well-intentioned pastors who didn’t do their homework on stepfamily dynamics. In order to be helpful you must be able to provide good information related to their presenting problems. This requires a good understanding of stepfamily dynamics. If you want to make a referral, consult my list of Recognized Smart Stepfamily Therapy Providers at [SmartStepfamilies.com](http://SmartStepfamilies.com). Keep in mind that most therapists in your area have no specific training in stepfamily therapy and may cause more harm than good.

### **A Call to Ministry**

What would you say to someone who suggested that you could not minister to or evangelize half of your community’s population? Let’s just say someone told you to be dismissive of the needs of all the women in your community. My guess is you would not feel good about doing so.

Half of people in America will have a steprelationship at some point in their lifetime. It may be as a stepparent, stepchild, stepsibling, or stepgrandparent relationship, but 50 percent of us will swim in the stepfamily ocean in one way or another. Blended families are a growing demographic with tangible felt needs. Very few practitioners—secular or faith-based—are equipped to help them. The ministry opportunity is real.

The only question is, when will you begin?

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Pam Tucker  
Mike Tucker, M.Ed

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## WHEN THE FAMILY TREE BECOMES A FOREST

*Mike and Pam Tucker discuss the difficulties they faced in creating a blended family later in life. Mike lost his wife of forty years to cancer and Pam, following a divorce, was single for twenty-six years before marrying Mike. Additionally, Pam shares her experience when, as a small child, her nuclear family was torn apart by divorce and her father and step-mother formed a new family for Pam and her two siblings.*

*While Pam, a Canadian, and Mike, a Texan, come from very different backgrounds and life experiences, they agree on their advice for anyone attempting to form a blended family. Their advice includes: be patient; take it slow; respect the past; make sure family members feel free to share stories from the past; don't try to change traditions in your new extended family; don't force yourself as an authority figure for step-children; adjust your expectations; and rely on friends for emotional and spiritual support.*

The term “blended family” is not my [Pam] favorite. The image that comes to my mind is of one of the smoothies that I make for Mike. I combine a variety of ingredients into a blender and then hit the button. I assume that this new combination of flavors will be even better than the original. By looking on Mike’s face I can tell whether I’ve hit a home run or struck out. I must admit that I have thrown away more smoothies than Mike has ever drunk. The post blend result was not what either of us had in mind.

It may be better to view our new family model as a graft. An old friend of mine, an orchard grower in Ontario Canada, talked with me about the process of grafting two trees together to get a new variety of apple. He said not all trees are compatible with each other, and the grafting does not

reproduce the apple true to its original form. Grafting does not change the DNA. The two grafted plants keep their original set of chromosomes. It is possible to modify the genetic code rather than alter the code. Grafting and growing takes time. The good news is you can still get a delicious apple even if grafted

### **Pam’s Story**

I lived in multiple homes for the first few years of my life. My biological mom decided she couldn’t handle parenting, or marriage, and left dad to raise us three kids on his own. I was only a year old when that happened. When I was two, a new family model developed when dad met and married the woman who I call mom today. Mom took on a ready-made family complete with three children all under



the age of five. Very few twenty-year-old women would have ever done that back in the sixties, but she is a rare gem. Today I am ashamed to say I was not always kind to her. I played one parent against the other. Biology versus blend is a delicate balancing act, and conflict appeared regularly.

It took us years to adjust, but we eventually did. Being part of a blended family means you are making a choice to join your heart to another. Linda chose to be my mom. She chose to weather the rough waters and she sacrificed a lot to make sure we had a wonderful childhood, family, and home. My parents made the commitment to do it together.

I was twenty-eight years old when my marriage ended, and I became a single mom. I moved back in with my parents for assistance. This allowed me to work and provide a good environment for my daughter, Christina, to grow up in. I rarely dated, and if I did, I almost never introduced them to her to avoid confusion in the event things didn't work out. Subsequently I was single for twenty-six years.

Today, I am only two and a half years into marriage with Mike. Once again, I have been introduced to a new branch on the ever-expanding family tree.

After a relatively short engagement, Mike and I married in July of 2017. We both have adult children from previous marriages — mine from divorce, his from the death of a spouse.

A marriage later in life presents a whole different set of challenges and experiences. They are not the same things I faced as a child growing up nor as a single parent. However, there are some similarities.

Now I am trying to navigate the biological versus the non-biological. I

believe that it does come down to your perspective, even though this grafting process is the most painful. So, I choose to look for happier moments amidst the stress of the transition.

I was filled with euphoria at finding love after twenty-six years of singleness, but I was terrified to meet Mike's family and friends. Many people experience fear when they suddenly find themselves navigating the construction of a new family tree with remarriage.

In my case people were reserved, polite, speculative, and many scrutinized from a distance. I found out later that people who saw us walk into a church quickly spread the word via text to people who knew Mike, informing them that Mike had just walked in to church with "some blonde". Some people were sweet, welcoming me before even getting to know me. Most people were kind, but others said really dumb stuff. One person admitted they researched me so they could protect Mike. Another woman broke into tears telling me "we'll adjust" in the same breath as she told me how nice it was to meet me, while holding my hand and crying into Mike's shirt simultaneously.

Marrying "the marriage guy" comes with an extra measure of pressure as his public life causes us to constantly be under scrutiny. Adjustment is definitely that place between heaven and hell. I guarantee, everyone entering second marriages will have to experience it.

I wasn't sure I would ever be accepted. I prayed hard and long, weighing the decision to marry Mike. It is no easy thing to move into a marriage with someone who has grown children. I personally think it would be easier with younger children, because

you can grow up together. Young children are so much more forgiving!

Terrifying, awkward, and painful is the only way I could describe the first meeting with his daughters and a son-in-law. I remember the restaurant, the exact position of the table and what food I ordered, food that sat on the plate as I tried to swallow the massive boulder in my throat with each polite question and glance sent my way. I think I lost five pounds that first visit to Dallas.

There were rainbows in the storm, and one of them was meeting Mike's mom, Arlene. She was a sheer delight and loved me within the first few minutes of meeting. I feel very fortunate that our relationship has deepened over the years. She has done much to welcome me, even hosting a gathering of distant relatives so I could be introduced to my new family. She told me not long ago that she chose to love me when she heard about me. She chose to love me even before she met me because she knew that I made Mike happy. That was the most important thing to her. Thankfully we have become good friends and I have appreciated her love from day one.

Subsequent visits have helped Mike's friends and family get to know me a little better. Both Mike's grandchildren took less time to warm up to me, which I believe has helped ease some of the tension. Regardless of how much time has passed, whenever I am with the family, I am aware that my presence serves as a painful reminder that the original family unit is not the same anymore.

Family functions, whether it be the painful "firsts" or the tenth, are always a little strained for everyone. It's easy for me to feel like an outsider, but slowly we are

making progress. I am not always okay with slow, but we are working together at a pace that is comfortable for everyone.

I experienced an extra degree of loss with my decision to move to the USA and remarry. I left behind my entire support network of friends, colleagues, church, and family. Shortly after moving to Texas my father was diagnosed with a secondary cancer. Now we faced the added stress of traveling back and forth to Canada to be with my daddy in his final months. It is so important to have the support of friends throughout the transition years when someone is entering a blended family. It is especially important if you are faced with an impending loss.

I am now trying to create a new social circle, but that takes time to develop. I am thankful for my best friend Liz, who stays connected with me despite the distance. She prays with and for me and encourages me. When I start stressing, she will say, "Seven years! It takes the average family seven years to adjust. Be patient with yourself and with others,"

I have learned that it is healthy to allow Mike's family to reminisce and share stories about their life together as a family before us. Just because I am now married to Mike doesn't mean they can't share those stories. The stories are important, so I don't want anyone tiptoeing around being afraid to talk about a person who was a huge part of their life, memories, and history.

When there is an event, for example a grandchild's birthday, I don't force conversation. This allows everyone to process their grief and talk if they want to. I had to become comfortable with silence. I'm getting there, slowly. Sometimes I am even brave enough to ask questions,

knowing that the conversation sometimes stings a little.

One of the most difficult things to do is to try to integrate two unique family styles and preferences. Each family has years of history, traditions and family customs. For example, I am Canadian. We celebrate Canadian thanksgiving in early October. After Thanksgiving Canadians consider it to be acceptable to put up Christmas decorations and a tree. Here in the USA, Thanksgiving is much later. So, despite some gentle ribbing, the tree goes up before the US Thanksgiving holiday.

My daughter Christina is developing her relationship with Mike's side at a speed that is comfortable for everyone. Christina, having grown up as an only child, is enjoying the expansion of now having half sisters and brothers-in-law. She loves sharing the antics of her "niece and nephew" with her friends. I send videos and the kids talk to her on FaceTime periodically. It is the sweetest thing to see how excited they get when they find out that she is coming for a visit! It is important that Christina be with the Texas branch as often as her work and schedule permit.

Mutual respect for one another and co-parenting is a priority. It doesn't impact us as much with grown children, but I think it is an important standard to apply whether there are young or older adult children. With Christina's dad, the hurts that were inflicted during our marriage seeped out into the interactions between mother and child. Her father sent subliminal (and not so subliminal) messages to Christina in the hopes of obtaining loyalty with her. Today, Christina's father is not involved much in her life, so Mike has offered to be involved to whatever degree of comfort Christina

has with him. Because he doesn't pressure, their relationship has grown naturally and at a comfortable pace. It is important to me as this family expands, that everyone is made to feel a part of it and included. It's even more important when you have an expanded forest to nurture relationships.

Laughter helps me greatly. I try to find something to laugh about every day. My sense of humor is important to my maintaining sanity and getting through some of the tougher experiences that we have faced and will face in the future.

I encourage Mike to take his girls for lunches or on father-daughter dates, and we make sure I have time to spend with Christina, although my dates with my daughter require air miles.

We are not attempting to mold Mike's side of the family to be the same as my side, and vice versa. We are learning to celebrate what we uniquely bring to the family forest. If we try to control it one way or another, it undermines the commitment we have made to each other and it pits one family against the other. We have committed to never do that!

Mike and I are continuing to grow together emotionally, physiologically and spiritually. It's not perfect and we know it will take time. We were intentional in our decision to date and marry, and we are as intentional today in our day-to-day decisions to work together to nurture and develop a healthy dynamic in this new family.

### **Mike's Story**

On the evening of December 28, 2015, being part of a blended family was not on my radar. That evening I celebrated forty years of marriage with Gayle. But not quite

three and a half months later, Gayle died leaving me devastated, confused, and adrift.

As time passed and grief took its course, I eventually came to realize just how empty my life was without an intimate partner. Life was too good and too short to experience alone. At least that was my view.

It would be untrue to say that our venture into a blended family was easy or without its challenges. Remember, I am a counselor who has taught tens of thousands of people how to “do” relationships! Well, suffice it to say, “blending” two families was far more challenging than the literature suggests. I have made more than my fair share of mistakes through this process.

I realized, perhaps too late, that my daughters were not ready for me to remarry as soon as I was. If I regret anything at all through this process, it would be the pain I brought to them by remarrying more quickly than they were comfortable with. They were taking longer to work through their grief than I and had not yet come to the place where they could think of Daddy moving on with a new relationship.

There is no good “rule of thumb” for how soon is too soon. While it is often said that one to two years is ideal, I find that most men of long-term, successful marriages who lose a spouse to death, remarry within ten to fifteen months after the loss. By the way, most of those marriages do quite well. But few families, daughters especially, are ready for their father to remarry so soon.

My daughters were not unhappy with my choice of marriage partner, they were unhappy with how soon I wanted to marry her. Truthfully, it is difficult for children, even adult children, to see their parent with someone else. Whether the change comes

via divorce or death, seeing mom or dad with another person is a tough transition.

I had always wondered why men tended to remarry quickly. My theories were wrong. For me, when Gayle died I soon realized that I had only had one truly intimate relationship in my life. This is true for most men. If men have an intimate relationship, that relationship will normally be with their spouse. When that spouse dies the man realizes just how empty and meaningless life is without that intimacy. I craved intimacy and when I realized I could have it again I was overjoyed!

Now that we are two and a half years into our marriage, I can see things have improved and that Pam is better accepted. It was never ugly with the family. No unkind words were spoken, no hateful things were done. There was, however, an unspoken tension as my grieving children struggled to accept the fact that their father had moved on with a new marriage.

My grandchildren, six and four at the time of my marriage to Pam, have received her with open arms. They quickly bonded with Pam and are delighted to have her in their lives. While “Grammy” will never be replaced, Pam is fun and a happy addition to their lives. They look forward to every visit and love sitting next to her, playing games with her, swimming, and more.

By the way, Pam has wisely asked the grandchildren to simply call her Pam, not grandmother or any “pet” name that would suggest she is their grandmother. This has helped my daughters adjust with less resistance and honors the memory of their mother by not attempting to “take her place” as the grandmother.

On the other side of the family, my adjustment to my new family has been less

stressful. Pam had been single twenty-six years before marrying me. My addition to the family, while still awkward at times, was without much resistance. I was more of a pleasant surprise than an uninvited intruder. Pam's mom and dad were not thrilled that their daughter would be moving from Toronto, Canada to Dallas, Texas, but once that traumatic hurdle was settled, the rest has been easy. Well, perhaps not "easy," but less stressful than Pam's transition into my family.

Imagine yourself a sixty-four-year-old man who flies from Dallas to Toronto to meet your girlfriend's parents. The word "awkward" does not even begin to describe my discomfort. I kept asking myself, "What on earth has happened to me?"

Pam's daughter, Christina, could have presented a challenge. Pam and Christina are exceptionally close as mother and daughter since Pam essentially raised her daughter alone after her divorce. Christina's father has been less than an active participant in her life, so she is very close to her mother. Christina realizes the sacrifices Pam made to raise and educate her. The two share a very close bond.

When I was ready to ask Pam for her hand in marriage I asked if I should seek permission from someone. Pam said I should do so from her daughter. So, I made a phone call that resulted in my having secured permission and Christina bursting into tears. She claims they were tears of joy for her mother, but they were tears nonetheless!

Even though Pam's daughter was thirty-years old when I married Pam, I did not want Christina to think I would attempt to "replace" her dad. I wanted her to know that I was open to as close or as formal a

relationship as she desired. I asked her to set the pace and promised I would honor her request. To my delight, Christina has chosen a close relationship with me. I am careful to acknowledge and respect boundaries, and I am careful to never speak negatively of her father. With Christina's permission I refer to her as my daughter. I also make certain that Pam and Christina have enough time together without me. Mother-daughter bonding time is essential especially since Christina lives in Alberta, Canada, and Pam and I live in Dallas, Texas. Frequent flier miles have been a true blessing!

Family traditions differ, so accommodations must be made. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, birthdays and more present opportunities for misunderstandings and tension. It doesn't help matters that my Canadian wife celebrates "Canadian Thanksgiving" in early October while I celebrate in late November. Compromise and accommodation are essential.

Comparisons that represent one family or family traditions as superior to the other family are unhealthy and unwise. It is better to find similarities to share while being willing to be flexible and accommodating to things that are not exactly what you might have wanted.

Pam and I are both careful to be respectful of our prior marriages. Pam's marriage ended for different reasons than mine since she is divorced and I am widowed. Still, it is important that neither of us speak disparagingly of the previous marriage and both of us allow for memories to be shared. Honoring the past does not negate the value of what we have together currently.

Through this process I've learned many important lessons. Among them is this: Almost all of life's transitions are birthed in pain. Pam transitioned from married to being divorced - an experience of pain. I transitioned from married to widowed - another experience of pain. Now, as we both made a more positive transition to remarriage, even this transition is not without pain. Birth pains are necessary for new life to emerge. It may not be the life you had planned on, but it can be a new and exciting life just the same.

### **Blending families of adult children – Our Advice**

My [Mike's] advice is to move more slowly than I did, and to adjust your expectations. I was ready to remarry before my children were ready for me to move on. I wish, for their sake, I had moved more slowly than I did. And it would have been helpful if my expectations for their readiness to accept Pam had been more realistic.

Children, whether small or adults, can struggle with a parent's readiness to remarry. Their timeline will be different from yours. While the readiness of adult children should not dictate your choice, if the process is slowed down a little, it might help with the adjustment.

[Mike and Pam]

Once the decision to remarry is made, be patient with yourself and your spouse. Give it time. Give yourself time. Patience is your ally.

Be open to allowing your new family to share stories of mom or dad. This is important for their healing. Remembering is a sacred act and is necessary for a healthy adjustment to that which is new.

Don't attempt to change long-standing family traditions. While the two of you will likely establish hybrid traditions for your new nuclear family, when you are with your new extended family, fit in to their traditions rather than forcing your own preferences on them. Hopefully, your spouse will do the same for your extended family as well.

Make certain you have a good support system of friends who are strong spiritually. Their prayers and support will help you through the tough times. We are creating a new circle of support, slowly and with intentionality.

### **What We Would Do Differently**

[Mike]

As I already mentioned, I would attempt to move more slowly than I did. While my decision was right and the time was right for me, my children were not ready for me to move on. Also, I would adjust my expectations for how difficult the adjustment would be for Pam and for my children.

[Pam]

Anyone experiencing a second or third marriage knows that every situation is unique. I, like my stepmom choosing to marry my dad, chose to join my life to Mike's. It is not without pain, but I've also experienced growth. We are making new memories daily. Secretly I do wish I could have at least moved my daughter, and best friend, to Texas, but that might have been a little too complicated. And since I must wait five years to become a citizen of the United States, I will not make any jokes that could be held against me. (Of course, that was a joke!)





# SOWING AND REAPING: DYNAMICS OF DAVID'S FAMILY

*David sowed the poisonous seeds of sin and self-destruction. Consequently, he reaped what he had sowed, and it was bitter reaping, mirrored in the atrocities that visited his family through the dysfunctional behavior of his children. The anger, rape, murder, conspiracy, intrigues, and hostility present a somber warning of how sexual sins can destroy the family's fabric and mess up the lives of children and those with whom they associate, and consequently affect the future generation. The hope that is still available to them is through a new identity in Christ.*

On the one hand, David's lifestyle demonstrated his adherence to the customary morality of his day by perfectly exhibiting it before the subjects of his kingdom. The story of David and his family reveals some hidden threats and why it is so dangerous to adopt popular societal philosophy and to conform to customs that are not based on clear principles of the Word of God, its purity, and godliness. From the theological and ethical viewpoints, the dynamics of David's life function as one of the most important hubs in the Scripture, echoing many intertwined themes. Besides such issues as David's ancestry, wives, children, etc., this research will discuss the tragic consequences of the loss of moral leadership in one's family, when children are left without an authority figure who would teach and guide them in their life's path. Finally, the purpose of this article is not only to inform and instruct but to lead parents to personal application of the revealed spiritual truths to one's daily life.

## Introduction

David is one of the most controversial and complex characters in the entire Bible. He is mentioned in the Bible more often than Moses. Some people have been inspired by David's victories against God's enemies. Others have idolized him as the king who reformed the nation and established true worship (Leland Ryken, 2000, 194). There are also those who have become cynical reading about his evil intentions and lewd acts, and some have become confused and puzzled about his contradictory life altogether. Indeed, the Word of God shows David from all the possible angles: as a shepherd and musician, king and politician, poet and prophet, soldier and fugitive, lover and friend, father and husband, adulterer and murderer, repentant and believer, and as a "type" of Christ. Undeniably, David is one of the most unique and distinctive human characters found in the Bible. There are some lessons to be learned and some bitter experiences to be avoided.



## David's Ancestry

It would have been nice to have more detailed information about David's birth and childhood, absent in the Bible. For example, it is strange that there is no clear information about David's mother. According to a Jewish tradition (Chana Weisberg), her name was Nitzevet, the daughter of Adael and the wife of Jesse. The Babylonian Talmud (Baba Batra 91a) describes Jesse, the grandson of Ruth (Ruth 4:17), and his plan to stop marital relations with Nitzevet after she had her seventh son in order to marry his Canaanite servant-girl. Having compassion for Nitzevet, the maidservant had a plan to secretly switch places on the wedding night so that Nitzevet would sleep with Jesse one more time. As a result, Nitzevet became pregnant with David, her eighth son. She never told Jesse what had happened. That is why she became despised as an immoral woman, and her son, David, grew up an outcast in his own family (Vamosh, para. 7). Again, this is extrabiblical material, and there is no way to confirm the accuracy of the tale of Nitzevet. Carter (1984, 9:392, 394) mentions that other scholars think that David's mother's name was Nahash (2 Sam 17:25). However, Payne (1979-1988, 871) agrees that it is impossible to reach a specific conclusion because of a lack of information. On the other hand, the story about Nitzevet could explain why his family did not accept David. He lamented, "I have become a stranger to my brothers, and an alien to my mother's children" (Ps 69:8).

The Bible contains only concise information about David before prophet Samuel anointed him as king, revealing some details about this man and his family. David was the youngest of the eight sons

of Jesse the Bethlehemite from the tribe of Judah (1 Sam 17:12-14; 1 Chr 2:13-15; McCarter, 2008, 8:276). He had at least two half-sisters, Zeruiah and Abigail (1 Chr 2:16), daughters of Nahash (2 Sam 17:25). The genealogy of Ruth 4:18-22 traces their ancestry to Perez, Judah's son by Tamar (Gen 38). Hughes and Laney (2001, 106) point out one more important link concerning David's ancestry—his great-grandparents. David's great-grandmother Ruth had a Moabite background, who lived during judges' lawless and corrupt period. Thus, his ancestry was not pure Judean. He was partly Moabite through Ruth and partly Canaanite through Tamar (see Ruth 4:18-22; 1 Chr 2:1-15, Matt 1:2-6; Luke 3:31-38). Humanly, as Grayson (2017, 3) notes, people's beliefs and values shape their expectations. A king of Israel must come from a pure Israelite background. With God this is not so; the references above show that the Lord did not depend on pure nationalistic expectations when He decided to choose David, "for there is no partiality with God" (Rom 2:11; Deut 10:17).

## Fatal Seeds Sown

The process of sowing fatal seeds, which grow and then ripen for the future bitter harvest, started with David's marriages, when he married one woman after another, till he established a harem, which was a typical characteristic of the Near Eastern monarchy. In other words, it was not considered as something wrong for a man to have more than one wife during Old Testament times. As Spence-Jones (1909, 71) notes,

Estimated by the customs prevalent in the East at that time, this acquisition by David of wives and sons was

supposed to add to the splendor and stateliness of his regal position. All the paraphernalia of a court, the wise-reaching influence of family connections, and the imposing show of a large household would lead the ordinary men to regard him as among the great ones of the earth ... but it is not God's standard.

Although the prevalent and widespread view of people in David's days was that numerous wives would strengthen the monarch's image and kingdom, the reality usually turned out to be the opposite, that is, multiple wives always weakened one's kingdom and generated lots of envy, trouble, and strife in their own family. Nevertheless, David continued to multiply wives and concubines in order to strengthen his political kingdom and alliances by means of various maneuverings. Through the special warning given to the future Israel's kings, the Lord forbade this practice. "Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away [from God]; nor shall he greatly multiply silver and gold for himself" (Deut 17:17). Unfortunately, David had become a victim of his culture, which counteracted the clear Word of God. Thus, the Bible attributes to David at least nineteen women as his wives and concubines, who were not an asset to his kingdom, but an aggravating liability.

### **David's Wives**

The Bible contains interesting information concerning the composition of David's wives, which hints at what various developments and unhealthy atmosphere can be expected in his family. Thus, 1 Chronicles 3:1-9 contains the names of seven women, six of which David married

while living in exile in Hebron. It also includes the names of David's sons, and the paragraph ends with the words, "these were all the sons of David, besides the sons of the concubines" (1 Chr 3:9). The parallel list of David's wives is found in 2 Samuel 3:2-5. However, these lists only mention the wives from whom David had sons. There is one woman whose name is not mentioned in any of these lists. This was David's first wife, Michal. She appears in other contexts that describe David's adventures. Finally, the lists of David's wives may not be all-inclusive, as quite often they refer only to prominent family members; it means there could be more David's wives whose names are not even revealed in the Bible. Consequently, David had established a consisting of wives and concubines (2 Sam 15:16; 16:21-22; 20:3). To this fact, Ellen G. White (1870, 1:377) pens down that

He often conquered, and triumphed. He increased in wealth and greatness. But his prosperity had an influence to lead him from God. His temptations were many and strong. He finally fell into the common practice of other kings around him, of having a plurality of wives, and his life was imbittered by the evil results of polygamy. His first wrong was in taking more than one wife, thus departing from God's wise arrangement. This departure from right, prepared the way for greater errors. The kingly idolatrous nations considered it an addition to their honor and dignity to have many wives, and David regarded it an honor to his throne to possess several wives. But he was made to see the wretched evil of

such a course, by the unhappy discord, rivalry and jealousy among his numerous wives and children.

Taking a brief look at David's eight wives, it is seen that the first one was Michal, Saul's daughter, whom David won by killing 100 Philistines (1 Sam 18:24-27). It seems that David never loved Michal, but despite that, he was willing to become Saul's son-in-law. There are many details (2 Sam 3:13), which point to the fact that this so-called marriage was artificial with political nuances. Michal was childless (2 Sam 6:23), so she could have an heir neither to Saul's throne nor David, and this was an opportunity for David to marry another wife. Later, after a series of various events, Michal was married off to Paltiel, the son of Laish, but when David became the king of Judah, he took her back to himself (2 Sam 3:12-16).

Abigail was David's second wife. According to 1 Samuel 25, she prevented bloodshed after her husband, Nabal (meaning "fool"), had provoked David's wrath and rage. Abigail wisely pleaded with David not to kill Nabal but to show him mercy. After Abigail told her husband that she had saved him from sure death, Nabal died from a heart attack. In short, Abigail brought to David Nabal's wealth, social fame, and political status. David's marriage to Abigail functions as a crucial phase in his ascent to the throne of Judah. Ellen White (1890, 668) calls David's judgment perverted. "He was already the husband of one wife, but the custom of the nations of his time had perverted his judgment and influenced his actions. . . . The bitter result of marrying many wives was sorely felt throughout all the life of David."

Ahinoam was another David's wife. He married her while he was hiding from Saul in exile. For an unknown reason, she often appears together with Abigail after he moved to Judah. Beecher (1979-1988, 80) describes this in the following way: "Three times they are mentioned together, Ahinoam always first" (1 Sam 25:43; 27:3; 30:5; especially see 2 Sam 2:2). Another point of interest is that she may have been identical to Saul's wife of the same name (1 Sam 14:50) because there is no other woman by the name Ahinoam in the Bible. This would explain Nathan's statement that the Lord had given "your master's" wives, that is, Saul's wives, to David (2 Sam 12:8).

The fourth wife, Maacah, like Michal, was a princess. She was the daughter of King Talmai of Geshur. David married Maacah while he was in exile, and most likely, this marriage sealed a treaty between the two kings (2 Sam 3:3; 1 Chr 3:2).

The next one was Haggith. She became David's wife while he was still in exile (2 Sam 3:4; 1 Chr 3:2). According to 2 Samuel 3:4; 1 Kings 1:5, 11; 2:13; and 1 Chronicles 3:2, Haggith was the fifth wife of David. Her name appears three times in the phrase, "son of Haggith" as a reference to Adonijah (1 Kgs 1:5, 11; 2:13), thus alluding "to the rivalry between Solomon/Bathsheba and Adonijah/Haggith" (Scheering, 1992, 23)

Abital was another David's wife whom he married during his exile. Abital's name is found in the context of her sons born to David at Hebron (2 Sam 3:2-5; 1 Chr 3:3) or, more precisely, within the description of the conflict between the houses of Saul and David.

Also, Eglah became David's wife while he was in exile, but there is almost no information about her in the Bible (2 Sam

3:5; 1 Chr 3:3). Eglah was distinguished from the other wives by her special designation as David's "wife." Whether or not this epithet indicates that Eglah held a favored position is difficult to establish.

Bathsheba became one of the most well-known David's wives. It seems that she was the last one of his wives, at least, according to the Bible. David's marriage to Bathsheba was driven, exceptionally, by passion and not by politics. David already had problems with his many wives and struggling sons, but as if it was not enough, being led by lust and fear, he murdered Uriah the Hittite in order to take his wife, Bathsheba. However, after introducing Bathsheba into the royal family, intrigues, rivalry, and challenges were only growing. The Bible tells that later Bathsheba advanced the cause of her second son, Solomon, against David's older sons.

Finally, there was one more woman by the name of Abishag, the Shunammite, who was "very beautiful" (1 Kgs 1:1–4; See also 1:3, 15; 2:17, 21, 22). She was brought to David to care for him and "lie in his bosom" (1 Kgs 1:2), but David "knows" her not (vv 3–4). Some scholars would say that Abishag was David's nurse, a concubine, or even his queen. After 1 Kings 1:15, there is no mentioning of Abishag. Upon David's death, Adonijah asked Bathsheba to intercede with Solomon so that Abishag would become Adonijah's wife (1 Kgs 2:16–18). "So Bathsheba said, 'Very well, I will speak for you to the king'" (v. 18). But Solomon replied, "Ask for him the kingdom also" (2:22), and Solomon immediately put Adonijah to death (1 Kgs 2:24–25; Balchin, 1979-1988, 10).

## **David's Bitter Harvest**

As it was mentioned earlier, the breakdown and chaos in David's family started when he took at least eight women to be his wives and more than ten concubines (1 Chr 1:1-9; 2 Sam 6:23, 20:3). The Scripture hints that after David settled in Jerusalem, he took other wives as well. David had nineteen sons. Six of them were born in Hebron: Amnon, Daniel, Absalom, Adonijah, Shephatiah, and Ithream (1 Chr 3:1–4). Other thirteen were born in Jerusalem: Shimea, Shobab, Nathan, Solomon, Ibhar, Elishama, Eliphelet, Nogah, Nepheg, Japhia, Elishama, Eliada, and Eliphelet (1 Chr 3:5–9). David also fathered unnamed sons of his concubines. One unnamed son, who was born in Jerusalem, died in infancy as the result of David's adulterous relationship with Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:16–23). He also had daughters, among whom only Tamar is mentioned by name.

To better understand the dynamics of David's family, his fatherly role of his many children, to see what seeds he has sown and whether his blended (to put it gently) family is sick or healthy, it is necessary to briefly look, at least, at three of his sons. They are presented in the Bible as extremely notorious characters. They are involved in rape, murder, intrigues, and conspiracy in one way or another (2 Sam 13:1-15:13).

## **Rape: Amnon Walks in David's Footsteps**

Amnon was the firstborn son of David of Ahinoam, a Jezreelite woman, whom David took as a wife at the same time as Abigail (1 Sam 25:42–43). He is represented as one of the most wretched and obnoxious characters in the entire Bible. It is an irony that his name means

“faithful.” 2 Samuel 13 contains a quite detailed description of Amnon’s rape of his half-sister Tamar, David’s daughter, by another wife. He is lovesick and obsessed with lust for his beautiful half-sister. Things began to develop rapidly when Jonadab, his cousin, who “was a very crafty man,” gives ill advice to Amnon to play a trick (2 Sam 13:1–5). Jonadab proposed a clever scheme, not to mention the tragic results of his evil plan, and it worked out perfectly. Thus, pretending to be sick, Amnon tries to persuade Tamar to lie with him; but she rejects his offer without their father’s approval (vv. 6–13). Then swiftly, after the sudden and forceful rape of Tamar, Amnon’s love or lust is turned into hatred and disgust (vv. 14–19; 22).

According to Wimberly (2019, 76), “unresolved family-of-origin issues” are often transferred to the spouse or child, “who is expected to make up for the deficits” people sustained in their own childhood. In Amnon’s case it was his half-sister. The rape of Tamar mirrors David’s adultery with Bathsheba. It reminds about the murder of her husband Uriah the Hittite. It becomes a clear demonstration of how the sin of the father leads to the sins of the son. Both David and Amnon lust to have a beautiful woman they see; both use all the available means to get her. If David attempts to cover his sin by murder, then Amnon himself is murdered. As usual, it does not take long for the sinner to discover that sin does not satisfy. Amnon’s rape of Tamar revealed a total dysfunction of David’s family. Although David became angry to found out about Amnon’s sin, he did nothing to discipline Amnon.

## **Murder: Absalom’s Revenge for Tamar’s Rape**

Absalom was the third son of David, born at Hebron, and his mother, Maacah, was a daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur (2 Sam 3:3; 1 Chr 3:2). The Bible portrays Absalom as a very handsome man without any blemish, with amazingly thick hair (2 Sam 14:25–26) who, at the same time, was in the spotlight of a continuous, unceasing, chainlike series of troubles that David had in his family. The first encounter with Absalom takes place in the context of Amnon’s rape of his full sister Tamar (2 Sam 13). When Absalom found out what had happened with his sister, he started to hate Amnon (13:22) with the same exceeding hatred that Amnon had shown towards Tamar (13:15–19). The Bible says, “And it came to pass, after two full years” (v. 23) that Absalom decided to take revenge upon Amnon. It is important to note that during this time period, Absalom had shown no signs of outward anger or hostility towards Amnon (v. 22) that would cause David to suspect of approaching revenge by bloodshed. Again, the reckless king failed to discern dangers. He could not detect evil because he allowed his own life to be stained with sins that paralyzed the sharpness of his discernment. The strategy Absalom used to take revenge upon Amnon consisted of four parts: 1) celebration (2 Sam 13:23; 1 Sam 25), 2) solicitation (vv. 24–27), intoxication (v. 28), and assassination (v.29). Seeing the bloodshed, “all the king’s sons arose, and each one got on his mule and fled” (v. 29). One cannot blame the king’s sons for running for their lives as they did not know what was in Absalom’s mind. The crown prince to the throne was assassinated by the second in line, that is, Absalom (2



Sam 15-18), who usurped David's throne. Moreover, to establish his authority as the new king, Absalom took ten of his father's concubines and slept with them "in the sight of all Israel" (2 Sam 16:22). According to Reck (2016, n.d.), the description of Absalom's demise, when he was killed by Joab, the commander of David's army, and his armor-bearers, is extremely intense and vivid. The Bible specifies that "his head caught in the terebinth, so he was left hanging between heaven and earth" (2 Sam 18:9). Robinson (1993, 247-248) adds to this by saying that Absalom's "long and thick hair (2 Sam 14:26), once the object of his pride and joy, now became the snare of his death. Joab hears about it and mercilessly kills him."

### **Treason: Adonijah's Ambitions and Rebellion**

Adonijah was the fourth son of David, born of his wife Haggith in Hebron, while David was king of Judah (2 Sam 3:4; 1 Chr 3:1-2). In the given historical context, technically, Adonijah was an heir to the throne. It is interesting to note several similarities between Adonijah (2 Sam 15-18) and Absalom (1 Kgs 1-2) in their physical description, character, and actions. It is said that Adonijah was a "very good-looking" (1 Kgs 1:6) and attractive man like Absalom; at the same time, the Bible points out that both grew up without adequately being disciplined by their father (1 Kgs 1:6). Adonijah exalted himself, and he prepared for himself "chariots and horsemen, and fifty men to run before him" (1 Kgs 1:5); that is exactly what Absalom had done earlier (2 Sam 15:1). Both sought the crown without David's knowledge and support, and both came to a tragic end.

"Adonijah was a spoiled child—spoiled by an overindulgent father. As a child, this aspirant to the throne had been allowed to have his own way, and now he was beyond restraint. Many a life has been ruined by an excess of paternal affection" (Nichol, 1976, 2:725).

The starting point of events that rapidly moved towards the death of Adonijah took place when he prepared a great sacrificial feast near the spring En-Rogel, to which he invited "all his brothers, the king's sons, and all the men of Judah, the king's servants" (1 Kgs 1:9), except Solomon, Nathan, Zadok, and Benaiah. Adonijah's plans to become king were thwarted by the prophet Nathan, the priest Zadok, and Benaiah, the commander of the royal bodyguard, who informed Bathsheba about the latest developments. Bathsheba, at once, went to David and told about Adonijah and the events at En-Rogel and the threat to her own life if he became king (1 Kgs 1:21). Then David did something extraordinary; namely, he "took an oath" (1 Kgs 1:29) and ordered that Solomon be seated on his own royal mule and led to the spring at Gihon to be anointed and proclaimed as the new king by Zadok (1 Kgs 1:33). As soon as Adonijah and his supporters heard about Solomon, they all fled, but Adonijah took refuge in the temple sanctuary (1 Kgs 1:40-53). Soon after David's death, Adonijah petitioned Bathsheba to intercede with Solomon in order that Adonijah might marry the beautiful Abishag, his father's concubine and nurse. Adonijah said, "You know that the kingdom was mine, and all Israel had set their expectations on me, that I should reign" (1 Kgs 2:15). Construing this as a treasonous ploy by his older brother,

Solomon ordered Adonijah's execution at the hands of Benaiah (1 Kgs 2:13–25).

### **Practical Implications**

The echoing dynamics of David's family are obvious. The poisonous seeds sowed by the head of the family yielded a deadly harvest. How true is the saying that man reaps what he sows! David is often used as a negative model, especially because of the incident with Bathsheba, where his crime and its results provide quite detailed information. He sowed adultery and murder and reaped them in his own family. Unfortunately, the crimes of rape, murder, the rebellion of David's sons cry out more than loudly about serious weaknesses and problems that characterized David, his parenting, and his married life. Although David's desire and motivation was always to please and be in relationship with God, he was a human being who miserably failed as a parent. Ellen White (1870, 1:379) provides a succinct summary concerning his parenthood:

... when David was pure, and walking in the counsel of God, that God called him a man after his own heart. When David departed from God, and stained his virtuous character by his crimes, he was no longer a man after God's own heart. God did not in the least degree justify him in his sins, but sent Nathan, his prophet, with dreadful denunciations to David because he had transgressed the commandment of the Lord. God shows his displeasure at David's having a plurality of wives, by visiting him with judgments, and permitting evils to rise

up against him from his own house.

The Bible beautifies nothing; it unmasks the evil, which continued to permeate David's own life and with it his entire family, and all because of his actions. No wonder that Amnon had royal blood in his veins, but he did not have royal thoughts in his heart. Amnon's thoughts were dirty and polluted, and this led him rapidly downward morally to the destruction of his body, soul, and character. Absalom's reaction, in turn, to Amnon's rape of his sister Tamar involved various actions and manipulations, where the final step was the murder of Amnon. Concerning Adonijah, Ellen White (1903, par. 7) states that he "had ever had his own way, and he thought that if he made a demonstration showing his desire to reign, David would yield to his wishes."

The dynamics of David's life reveal how the sins of the father led to the sins of the sons. "Cause was followed by effect. By indulgence David forfeited the respect and reverence of his children. He had never displeased them" (White, 1903, par. 3). Tragedy of David's family life reveals that family life is never to be ignored. "David's sons had been a great grief to him. Wayward and rebellious, they had been as a thorn in his flesh. Their conduct was a heavy grief to him; yet in his fondness for them he had not in their childhood reproofed and restrained them, and now they would not bear reproof" (White, 1903, par. 3). David, as the father raising his children, did not teach them properly nor discipline them accordingly. It is no wonder that they grew up without submission to his father's and God's authority. In this note, White continues to say that David "excused their sins and indulged their perverse desires; and

they grew up willful and selfish, refusing to honor their father or their God” (White, 1903, par. 3). Beyond being angry from time to time, David did nothing more. Sadly, he had lost the moral authority as the father and as the righteous king who loves the Lord. How could he judge his own sons for sexual sins, which he had committed himself?

### **Concluding Remarks and Lessons to Learn**

Looking at the dynamics of David’s family, there are several lessons to learn. First, the fulfillment of Nathan’s promise to David (2 Sam 7), which refers to the kingship that would come through the Davidic line and that it would be established through David’s descendants despite the wicked actions of humans. This development is traced through David’s family, when after tremendous sins, blunders, and the maze of human evil on David’s part, Solomon is installed as the succeeding king. The fulfillment of the ultimate purposes of God does not depend upon human individual choices. God fulfills what He has promised because He does not change (Ps 33:11; Heb 13:8; Jas 1:17).

Secondly, the judgment of God came upon the Davidic house as it was exactly foretold by the prophet (2 Sam 7). Even though with time the Davidic kingdom totally degraded, God continued to carry out His purpose concerning the coming King through the Davidic line. Christ came the first time at it was prophesied (Matt 1:6); and despite human failures and unbelief, the King of Kings will come again as the Bible predicts it (Rev 22:7, 12, 20). This testifies that while God uses groups of

people, He works with individuals despite other or their parents’ mistakes.

Thirdly, despite David’s blatant sin and failed parental responsibilities, he cast himself on the “tender mercies” of the Lord (Ps 51:1). He did not run away from God but to Him who is “merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth” (Exod 34:6), and who keeps His promises because He does not want “for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (1 Pet 3:9). This fact provides hope for parents and children from blended and broken families. They can turn to God and be saved because His mercy and grace are in abundance for every sinner who comes to Him with a broken heart of repentance. Moreover, while contemporary parents, who have failed in their marital life and child raising, cannot undo the damage, God’s grace is still abundant to fix the broken bridges of one’s life and reveal another, brighter side of the picture.

Fourthly, starting with David’s ancestry and throughout his life of acquiring many wives and the bad choices of his children it is evident that the whole family was not only blended, broken, but also dysfunctional. The life of such families differs significantly from each other and from a monogamous family. These families may have more major setbacks and various challenges placed upon the parents and their children, as it is seen above. Therefore, as Diana Garland (1999, 568) observed, such families in a Christian community of faith need “to be listened to concerning the challenges of their life.” It is not for the church to judge them, but to become a safe place where broken hearts can find a healing touch of God. In addition to love and active listening, Garland (1999, 568) suggests for the church to have



“available educational seminars, counseling, and other experiences that give particular attention” to their perplexing issues. In other words, these troubles souls need to experience God’s redemption in practice so that the scars of life would be plastered with the balm of Gilead (Jer 8:22) as Christ gives them a new beginning (Col 3:10), or as Tripp (2016, 71-84) calls it—a new identity of Christ instead of identity in one’s own family.

Lastly, the story of David’s family calls contemporary spouses and parents to do a serious self-examination to see whether their life demonstrates that they are true spiritual leaders of their home or not; whether they are sowing good seed in the hearts and minds of their children or indulge in various forms of own self-gratification. The truth of the idiom, “like father like son,” has been manifested in the life of David’s son, Solomon, with shocking precision, even though he was a powerful king. He inherited and multiplied his

father’s sins a hundredfold. The Bible says that Solomon “had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart” (1 Kgs 11:3, 4-6). It took many years for him to learn the basic lessons of life. Only close to the end of his earthly journey, Solomon was able to realize the purpose and meaning of life and to challenge every individual to hear and act upon the hearing of the most important thing, “fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all” (Eccl 12:13). How much better it would have been if he would be taught this very thing in his father David’s house! How much better it would have been if contemporary parents had learned the basic lessons from the life of David and choose not to repeat them in their life but to submit themselves and their families to God by saying, “But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Josh 24:15)!

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## LOSS AND THE BLENDED FAMILY

*While the concept of blended families brings to mind the joys of providing all its members a new start, before they came together as one blended, families experienced many and great losses. To have a good chance at a successful family relationship, their losses, and the grief associated with them, should be addressed. In this article/workshop, we provide some ideas and suggestions to help blended families journey through their losses and associated grief so they can have a smoother ride on their path to being fully one.*

When the doors of the chapel opened and I saw my bride-to-be in her white, satin gown, she had never looked more beautiful. I had waited a long time for this moment. I don't mean that I had waited all that long for our wedding day to come. Our engagement had been short. I mean that I waited in an unheated backroom of that chapel on that cold December day for nearly an hour past the scheduled time of our wedding. I waited for my bride because my soon-to-be father-in-law was dragging his feet in driving his "little girl" to the chapel. My grandfather, the officiant for our wedding, started the ceremony as soon as my fiancée arrived. The rest of the ceremony went without a hitch until the very end when Grandad forgot to introduce us to the congregation as "husband and wife." Ann Marie and I stood there for what seemed like minutes waiting for him to remember his next part. Grandad stood beaming at us and the congregation. We finally gave up, and we walked out of the chapel. The organist caught on to what was happening--or to what hadn't happened--and she began to play the recessional. All these years later, I sometimes wonder— Is a

couple really married if the minister doesn't introduce them? Our wedding day was the best day of my life and one of the most stressful.

### **Loss in Blended Families**

For those who are married, what do you remember about your wedding day? What pops into your mind? What stands out about that day the most? Do you remember looking down the aisle of the church to see your radiant bride? Or perhaps looking up the aisle to see a nervous groom? Or perhaps a memory of a groomsman fainting on the church platform in the middle of your nuptials? Do you remember family from near and far gathered to celebrate your special day with you? Do you remember the toasts at the reception and the wedding gifts poured out on you in honor of your marriage? Do you remember your wedding day as the beginning of your life together with your beloved— the birth of a new family? Maybe what you remember most is the stress of the wedding preparations, or the stress of family who didn't get along all gathered in the same room. Maybe your

wedding followed an unplanned pregnancy or your parents just did not approve of your marriage.

Every new marriage has its share of joy mingled with stress. This is also true with blended or step-families when partners make a life together with their children from either or both previous relationships. Jeanne Segal and Lawrence Robinson (2020) point out in their article *Blended Family and Step-Parenting Tips* that parents are likely to approach remarriage and a new family with great joy and expectation, the children involved may not be nearly as excited. As they state, “They’ll likely feel uncertain about the upcoming changes and how they will affect relationships with their natural parents. They’ll also be worried about living with new step-siblings, whom they may not know well, or worse, ones they may not even like.”

In speaking of blended families, Ron Deal (2002, 2014) writes, “Stepfamilies are born out of the loss of previous family relationships; that is, they are created when a marriage follows death, divorce, or an out-of-wedlock birth. This loss creates a paradox of emotions for the new stepfamily: hand in hand with joy and hope linger sadness and grief.”

We do not tend to think of loss in the context of marriage, but clearly the circumstances that exist prior to two families joining together into a blended family lead individual family members to a mixture of feelings— feelings of joy and a renewed awareness of their deep personal loss.

Divide into groups of 4-6. Take the next 10 minutes to answer and discuss the following questions in your break-out group.

## Break Out

1. What memories stand out about your wedding, comical, good, or bad?
2. Ron Deal speaks in terms of joy and loss as families blend together. What losses do blended families experience?

(Facilitator has volunteers from each group share some of their answers with the larger group.)

There are numerous reasons members of blended families experience a sense of loss. Here are a few examples:

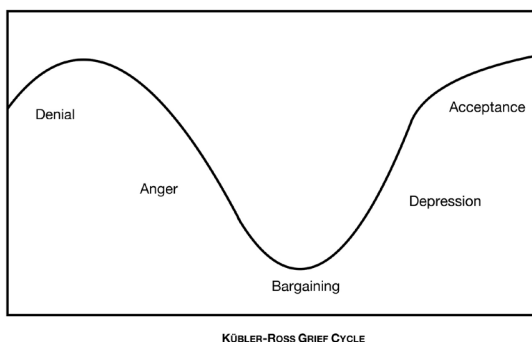
- Loss of a spouse (whether through death or divorce)
- Loss of a parent
- Loss of hopes (that divorced parents will re-marry)
- Loss of privacy
- Financial loss
- Loss of a church family
- Loss of innocence
- Loss of valued traditions
- Loss of routines
- Loss of birth order/seniority in the new family
- Loss of familial roles
- Unrecognized loss and unaddressed grief
- Loss of a well-loved job in order to relocate
- Loss of schools, friends, and community

## Stages of Grief

In 1969, Swiss Psychiatrist, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, published her book, *On Death and Dying*, which introduced her model on stages of grief. From her experience working with terminally ill patients, she identified five stages of grief; denial, anger,

bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Kübler-Ross used this model to describe the process that patients go through in coming to terms with a terminal diagnosis. The stages of grief model was later applied to grieving friends and family members who seemed to go through a similar process after losing a loved one. When illustrated, Kübler-Ross's model looks like this:

The first stage she observed is denial. Denial may appear as avoidance, an inability to process and make sense of what is happening, lack of emotion in general, or even fear. Individuals often describe the anger phase as feelings of irritation, frustration, and/or anxiety. The bargaining stage can find one making



promises to themselves or to God to change in a specific behavior if only they get what they desire. This is also the stage when those suffering loss will seek out others to tell their story. The fourth stage of the grief cycle, depression, is characterized by the feeling of helplessness or the desire to flee or withdraw. The final stage of Kübler-Ross's grief cycle is acceptance. In this stage individuals assess their options and establish new plans and move forward beyond their sense of loss. Acceptance

does not mean that one will never feel sad or experience grief when they remember their loss. It simply means that they are now able to process their feelings and move forward with their life.

The statements people make and the questions they ask as they process their loss are good clues as to the stage of grief they are currently experiencing. For example, those in denial are apt to say, "This can't be happening to me." Those in the anger stage will often ask, "Why is this happening to me?" The bargainer will declare, "I will do whatever it takes to change this situation." One in the depression stage may ask, "What's the point of moving on?" Finally, one in the acceptance stage of the grief cycle might say, "I can cope with this situation and it's going to be alright."

Kübler-Ross first presented these stages of grief as linear; that is, she stated that these stages happened sequentially. Anger did not occur until the denial stage was past and bargaining led to the depression stage and then to the acceptance stage. It is now universally accepted that individuals do not always experience all five stages of grief, and the stages do not always happen in a linear order as Kübler-Ross first presented them. Those grieving loss oftentimes find themselves skipping stages altogether and even will circle back and re-experience a stage of grief already completed. From this we can conclude that everyone grieves loss differently. Because of this, our approach to helping blended families overcome loss cannot follow a "one size fits all" approach. We must listen more than we speak, observe well, and be slow to draw conclusions before we tailor our approach to the real needs they are experiencing.

## Break Out

1. Besides the death of a loved one, when have you experienced a sense of loss?
2. Did you experience any of the stages of grief we have discussed in this seminar?
3. Was your experience a linear passage from one stage to the next or more circuitous?

(Facilitator has volunteers from each group share some of their answers with the larger group.)

## Assessing Loss

How do I know if my child or spouse is sensing loss? When processing loss, there are physical, emotional, and spiritual symptoms. Physical symptoms may include low energy or exhaustion, headaches, or upset stomach. Some may sleep excessively, others may find they are pushing themselves to extremes at work. These changes in activity level may make an individual more susceptible to illness. Emotional symptoms may include memory gaps, distraction and preoccupation, irritability, depression, euphoria, rages and passive resignation. Spiritual symptoms of grief may include a sense of being closer to God and more open to religious experiences than before, or conversely, people may express anger and outrage at God. People may even feel cut off from God— that He is either distant and uncaring or that He is impotent to help them in their loss.

Children of different ages and genders tend to adjust differently to now belonging to a blended family. Jeanne Segal and Lawrence Robinson (2021) identify these differences:

### 1. Young Children Under Ten

- a. These children may adjust more easily to losses because they thrive on cohesive relationships. Strong relationships between a biological parent and a stepparent provide a sense of security and this security aids adjustment to loss.
  - b. Young children are more accepting of a new adult in their lives and adjust better than those who are older.
  - c. Young children also feel competitive for their parent's attention and may find a stepparent as an interloper of the attention once received from their biological parent.
2. Adolescents Aged Ten-Fourteen
    - a. Adolescents may have the most difficult time adjusting to a blended family.
    - b. These children need more time to bond with the new parent before a stepparent corrects behavior. This bonding process provides the relational capital permitting a stepparent to speak to the hearts of adolescents.
    - c. Adolescents may be less likely to demonstrate their feelings openly. This should not be interpreted as the child not struggling with adjustment. Adolescents may also be more sensitive than younger children are when it comes to needing love, support, consistent discipline, and attention.
  3. Teenagers Fifteen or Older
    - a. Older teens may have less involvement in the life of the



- blended family. They may withdraw from the building of the new daily routines and traditions of the blended family.
- b. As the blended family creates its new identity, teens often prefer to distance themselves from the rest of the family as they build self-awareness and form their own identities.
  - c. Teens may not be open to many outward expressions of feelings, affection, or sensitivity. However, this does not mean that they do not need to feel important, loved, and secure.

Before we move on, it is important to note that minors are not the only children who experience loss and at times struggle with adjusting in blended families. Sabrina Beasley McDonald (2020) shares that the sense of loss in blended families, and the difficulties processing that loss, are not just limited to young children. She writes, “Remarriages are not necessarily easier for grown children. Grown children don’t need parents *less*, they need them *differently*.” When we define loss as a sense of sadness or disappointment caused by unfulfilled expectations, it is easy to see that a parent remarrying can lead to an adult child grieving the perceived loss of a parent as their advisor, mentor, child’s babysitter and even the loss of the ability to “going home.” Major events like weddings, births, and other ceremonies change as couples marry adding stress to already stressful events, compounding emotions and fears.

### **Helping Blended Families Navigate Loss**

Now that we have identified the causes of feelings of loss in blended families and

covered a few ways to assess whether or not a child is experiencing a sense of loss, that leaves us with how to walk alongside someone who is struggling with loss. The following seven points of counsel are not exhaustive, but they do provide a broad, helpful approach to working with blended families and any other individual or family processing loss.

#### **1. Be available.**

There is an ongoing debate about relationships and time investment in them. Is quality time better or is it all about quantity? It is not really as simple as one or the other. In a study by Milkie M, Nomaguchi K, and Denny, K. (2015), published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, the authors stated that quality time is more important than quantity. However, the chief concern from the researchers is that quantity of time is more harmful when the parents are stressed out, anxious, and distracted. According to *Focus on the Family* (2010), “Research shows that kids need both (quality and quantity of time) with their parents. In fact, the more involved parents are with their children – and the word “more” here is used with direct reference to the concept of quantity – the less likely they are to have social, emotional, or academic problems, use drugs or alcohol, become involved in crime, or engage in premarital sex.” This much is clear, quality and quantity of time both “set the table” so to speak for communication and relational connection to happen. The investment of both types of time expresses



commitment to the relationship, builds trust and confidence, and creates the opportunity for heart connection. This can take the form of regular meal times, reading together as a family (which not only benefits relationships but also increases the reading comprehension and vocabulary of children who are read to on a regular basis), lowering your stress by getting enough sleep, proper diet, exercise, maintaining a regular spiritual discipline of Bible reading, prayer and witnessing, and building into your after work schedule a time to decompress. There are many ways to create a space of time with one another, but the key is to remove distractions that draw our attention away from the moment and the person you are with (think technology and screens of all sorts) and simply be available.

## 2. Listen Actively.

We all like to be heard and we also know how challenging it can be to really listen—to be physically and mentally still and focus on the thoughts and feelings being verbalized to us. Many of us have heard of the aspect of communication called “active listening.” In general terms, active listening is a skill in which the “hearer” responds to the “speaker” with comments such as, “What I hear you saying is...” paying special attention to feeling words the speaker uses. According to Marriage and Family Therapist, Corinne Gonzalez (n.d.), there are

five top reasons for active listening.

- a. Builds trust and respect. Using active listening skills shows the other person you care and are interested in what they are saying. People are more likely to come to you when they feel trusted. This might be a partner whom you had a conflict with, a child or teen wanting to confide in you or a colleague hoping to solve some issues at work.
- b. Non-verbal communication skills such as eye contact, leaning in or nodding your head, indicate that you are engaged and truly listening. You appear interested, allowing the speaker to be more honest and forthcoming. People are more likely to talk openly if they are feeling heard.
- c. Practicing active listening offers a better chance of truly understanding the person and their situation or need. You have empathy for the other person. In the simplest terms, empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of the other person. The door is open to solving a problem if needed or talking through the issue more freely. By listening you are allowing yourself to gain insight from what they have to say.
- d. Using active listening skills reduces the chance of miscommunication (especially if the other person is also using the same type of communication skills). However, even if it

is one-sided, you will notice less conflict.

- e. Active listening skills can help eliminate conflict, anger and resentment. When we don't communicate well with people, we tend to assume what someone is thinking and feeling. Unfortunately, this can lead to miscommunication and possibly create anger, resentment and other negative emotions. If you choose to use active listening skills you will learn, rather than assume, what others are thinking and feeling.

### 3. Refrain from counter-story.

As we listen to others share their story, it often reminds us of a story of our own— a narrative from our own personal experience. These stories sometimes seamlessly connect with the story we already know. Oftentimes, our story has little to no connection with the story we have just been told. Instead, a memory of our own has been randomly prodded by something we heard. Resist the temptation to share your story. When we share a counter-story with someone who is sharing, it tends to shift the focus of the conversation from them to us. It is better to stay engaged with the one who is sharing and walk alongside them in their narrative without inserting our own.

### 4. Allow expressions of loss.

It can be challenging to listen to others share their grief. This is especially challenging in a blended fam-

ily situation where a parent is ready to move on with their new marriage and his or her child is grieving the loss (either by death or divorce) and the child is still struggling with that loss. This is especially challenging when the family member is expressing anger at us and it can be frightening when they are expressing anger at God. It is important that we do not stifle expressions of loss regardless of how uncomfortable they make us. We need to avoid being critical of these expressions & recognize that these feelings, even anger, are normal and natural. With that said, it is important however to express their feelings appropriately. There are many ways that a sense of loss can be expressed. Sharing loss with a trusted family member or friend verbally will be helpful for some, while journaling is helpful for others. If one is musical (or want to be) they can write a song expressing their feelings. Some find creating other forms of art or making crafts healing, while some are blessed by writing a letter (whether sent or not) or by joining an organization or doing charity work.

### 5. Loss cannot be bypassed but must be journeyed through.

In college, when I was dealing with the fear of public speaking, I received a lot of advice. This bit stuck with me: "Pretend that there is no one in the audience." This avoidance of the facts might help overcome the fear of public speaking, but there are far too many ways cul-

ture teaches us to ignore the things that hurt and push through

### Break Out

1. What are some reasons that one might not process their sense of loss?

(Facilitator has volunteers from each group share some of their answers with the larger group.)

it. Too many athletes have suffered debilitating injuries because they ignored pain and pushed through minor injuries making things much worse. Dr. Kenneth Haugk (2004) says that it is the same with grief. He writes, “You cannot not grieve any more than you cannot *not* bleed. If you cut your finger, you bleed. If you lose someone you love, you grieve. It’s as simple and natural as that.”

People resist or put off grieving loss for a number of reasons. Sometimes they are too busy taking care of others, they don’t take the time to grieve. Or some don’t know how to grieve or how to express their emotions. Sometimes the loss is so overwhelming they are emotionally paralyzed to process. Others some shift their sense of loss from the heart to make it an intellectual exercise. But, as Haugk (2004) states, “You can’t think your way through grief. You need to feel your way.” While there are numerous reasons people avoid the process of dealing with loss, there is no way around processing

loss. One must go through it.

### 6. Be patient.

As we mentioned earlier, processing the sense of loss is not linear. It is not tidy and neat. You may feel that adequate time has passed. You have been available both through the quantity and quality of time spent with the one struggling with loss and yet, they still have moments where they are still grieving their loss. Even when loss has been addressed and individuals have adjusted well, something can trigger memories and feelings of grief. An emotional trigger is something that is the catalyst of an intense emotional reaction. Triggers can take many forms. A trigger can be a birthday, a date of a parent’s death, an anniversary. In addition, triggers can be common, everyday events like a favorite dish, a song heard on the radio, even the smell of a brand of cologne. To this day, I cannot help but think of my own grandfather when I smell the cologne he always wore. These emotional triggers can catch people off guard and be disconcerting. By nature, we cannot avoid emotional triggers altogether. Recognize potential triggers and plan to honor them. For example, if the birthday of a deceased parent is coming, anticipate that it very possibly will trigger a strong emotional response. For many, it is helpful to be proactive and plan a special day to honor the parent and their memory— plan a picnic at her favorite park, buy flowers together and place them on her grave, make

a donation to his favorite charitable organization. Whatever you decide to do, make the decision together as a family after much sharing and active listening. Some step-parents feel a bit threatened by activities like this, but it's helpful to not feel threatened. Your stepchildren will be more endeared to you if you are able to honor their biological parent well.

#### 7. Be there for the long haul.

Dealing with loss is a lengthy process. Members of blended families will typically feel some sense of loss as times throughout their lives. How long it takes to process the loss varies. And since not all people process the same way, we must be patient with one another. But knowing that parents will not be chased away by the struggles their children are facing and that they are committed to them, and their blended family, will bring much encouragement and hope and provide the place for growth to happen.

### Final Thoughts

Feelings of loss are common in blended families, but is there a time when a family should seek professional counsel in order to deal with those feelings? J. I. Packer (2002)

identifies three pitfalls of recovering from loss. If someone falls into one of these pits, professional counseling is recommended. The first is a fixation on their loss. This is a psychological fix to the loss by mentally keeping the lost person or relationship ever present. By nature, this keeps the grief process perpetual and never healing. The second pitfall is permanent depression. Feelings of self-pity can create ongoing depression that affects one's ability to experience joy or even accomplish activities of daily living. The third pitfall is internalization of grief. This is a type of denial where mourning is driven deep creating bitterness, cynicism, apathy, and unforgiving spirit towards anyone who is seen in any way to have contributed to the loss.

When new families begin, it is a time of great joy, stress, and with blended families especially, a time for dealing with unresolved loss. But these times of working through loss should not be viewed negatively but viewed as opportunities for growth and healing and as a place to grow together as a family as past experiences are celebrated, and new experiences created. By making yourself available, listening actively, allowing expressions of loss, journeying through the loss together, a lot of patience and perseverance, the blended family can thrive.

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# ALTERNATIVE DISPUTE RESOLUTION (ADR) IN FAMILY LAW: A BIBLICAL MODEL IN A WORLD FULL OF CONFLICT

*Have you ever contemplated the impact of conflict in families (and specifically for families experiencing a transition from one home to two homes)? I have witnessed these conflicts over the past 20 years, and the cost is high to all members of these families. Not only does family conflict involve hurt and pain for the parents, but it can often be even more intense for their children who are far too often caught in the middle of these disputes. There is a better option than court to resolve these conflicts - alternative dispute resolution (ADR). This article will look at the two primary types of ADR - mediation and arbitration (and specifically Christian mediation and arbitration). We will then explore what the Bible has to say about conflict resolution (which is quite a bit actually). Then, we will consider some of the benefits of ADR, which include less stress, less money spent on court fees, witness fees, expert witness fees, and legal fees, less time and energy expended, the abilities of parties to “own their own outcome,” and a decreased risk of returning to court in the future. Finally, we will consider which types of cases are and are not appropriate for ADR.*

## Introduction

As a family law attorney for the past 20 years, I have witnessed the devastating impact of conflict in relationships on a daily basis. Not only does family conflict involve hurt and pain for the parents, but it can often be even more intense for their children who are far too often caught in the middle of these disputes. There is often a better option than court to resolve these conflicts – alternative dispute resolution (ADR) - and the benefits to parents and children are worth serious consideration. The Bible has guidance on this topic too, and together we will look at some of the key Bible verses that encourage us to settle our conflicts peacefully. Finally, we will look at

the benefits of ADR for stepfamilies (and eventually all families).

## Defining ADR

So, what is alternative dispute resolution? A basic working definition of ADR would be the employment of any method used to resolve a conflict outside of court. The two most common methods are mediation and arbitration. Let us look at these two types of ADR.

### 1. Mediation

Mediation is a structured process involving settlement negotiation, facilitated by a trained third-party neutral, the mediator. Many mediators are also

attorneys, but not all are. The mediator is specially trained to help parties engage in communication that is respectful and productive, moving the conversation from "what happened?" to "where do we go from here?" Often people need a guided conversation to talk about the past and how that has led them to the present, but mediation should also help create a path forward. The mediator is not typically a therapist, but the mediator should be able to help people communicate in a safe and respectful way by laying out appropriate guidelines for the conversation and process. After mediating family law cases for over a decade, I have come to understand that a good mediator needs many skills – here are a few: objectivity, being a good listener, a good facilitator of discussion, patient but firm, knowledgeable about the law, and able to keep the “train on the tracks” in a difficult/often tense situation.

As a Christian mediator, I also try to understand the heart issues underlying the dispute and provide a forum, if possible, for gracious restoration of offenses. I try hard to help parties be realistic about expectations, to identify mutually beneficial outcomes to a conflict, or to negotiate a settlement to a legal dispute that is satisfactory to both parties. The process of Christian mediation endeavors to restore relationships in a manner that glorifies God and honors the other person. If the relationship cannot be restored to its previous form, mediation can help the parties define what the new relationship will look like and how they can each move forward in genuine peace. In the context of family law, this is typically working with parents to help them create a parenting plan and parenting schedule. Even though these can be very tense

discussions, it typically beats the alternative – leaving it up to a stranger to make these life-altering decisions for the children (a stranger who will never know the children as well as the parents). I know that judges try their hardest to make the best decisions possible when the decisions are left up to the court, but the reality is that this leaves impactful decisions up to strangers.

## **2. Arbitration**

Unfortunately, sometimes parties to a dispute cannot come to an agreed-upon resolution themselves, even after several attempts at peacemaking. As the verses below show, God encourages believers to resolve disputes between them outside of a secular court when possible. Arbitration is one such alternative. The arbitration process provides a definitive outcome to a dispute, oftentimes with binding, legally enforceable orders. To proceed with arbitration, both parties must have signed a written agreement to give an arbitrator, a neutral third-party, the authority to decide their dispute for them. The written agreement of the parties will set forth the scope of the issues to be decided and the arbitrator's procedural requirements of the parties and for the process. Christian arbitration can occur by agreement of the parties with an arbitrator who will decide their dispute and do so according to Christian principles and biblical wisdom.

Both mediation and arbitration are typically faster and more cost effective than the courts. Because these decisions involve more direct input from the parties they tend to result in less future conflict or litigation. The reality is that most courts are backlogged, and family disputes can drag from months into years. But even putting



those benefits aside – let us look at what the Bible has to say on this topic.

### Direction from God's Word

So, what exactly does the Bible have to say about resolving our disputes outside of court? A lot. Here is my summary of some of the “conflict resolution” verses:

- **Matthew 5:9** - *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called Children of God.”* This is encouraging not only to mediators, but also be to the participants. What an honor to be called His children. And what a beautiful invitation to bring peace in a world full of conflict.
- **Romans 12:18** - *“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”* This verse packs a lot of punch (no pun intended). Not only does it recognize the reality that we cannot always resolve our conflict and be at peace, but it also points out that our obligation is just that - our obligation. We can only own our own part of process.
- **Matthew 5:23-24** - *“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”* Again, strong words of advice to reconcile our differences, so that we might worship with a clear conscience. And how interesting that it states, “if your brother has something against you” - calling us to attempt reconciliation regardless of who “started the fight.” How often have we come to worship without attempting reconciliation (even in small matters) with those with whom we live and interact? A good question for self-reflection.
- **Galatians 6:1** - *“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”* I just love this text. How much kinder and better the world would be if we all treated each other with a spirit of gentleness. And if we felt that our job was to come alongside each other in gentleness it would transform our communities and our world. And could one of the transgressions that Paul is referring here to be that of having unresolved conflict in our lives? It is impossible to live in peace when we have conflict with others.
- **Matthew 18:15-17** - *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.”* While this verse has some applicability to conflict between spouses, I think it speaks mainly to conflict resolution or disputes within the church body. Of course, in the context of broken marriages and broken promises, a spouse should go first to his/her spouse and to that person alone



(except in cases of domestic violence where it would be unsafe. I will address that shortly). Ideally, the second step of this Matthew 18 process would involve trusted and confidential members of your church family coming alongside you. Sadly, this is not always an option. If that is the case, a good Christian therapist may be able to help. As Christian professionals working with families, it is our obligation to understand that our clients/patients may not have the social supports to work through these conflicts on their own. I grew up in a relatively sheltered Adventist home on an academy campus. I knew few families who were divorced, and I had a very naïve opinion about “broken” families. I did not really understand the concepts of abuse, neglect, chemical dependency, and mental illness, and how those dynamics impact marriages and families. It was easy to put people in a box until I began working intimately with individuals that in many cases have spent years if not decades in dysfunctional and often abusive relationships. A few years ago a pastor friend shared a book with me that I now give out regularly to clients – *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* by David Instone-Brewer. I would highly recommend it to all Christian professionals working with families, and to all church members who are facing this issue (or have a friend or family member facing this issue - which is most likely all of us). I am certainly not recommending that

spouses bring their interpersonal conflicts to the whole church. If a couple’s issues are unresolvable with Christian counseling (because a spouse is unwilling to get help so that he/she can learn how to love, honor, and cherish as God has called us to do), then Christian mediation would be a better next step as opposed to heading to court (in most cases).

- **1 Corinthians 6:1-8** - *“When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So, if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers...”*

I think the applicable principle here for couples is that most would be better served by a conciliatory process involving competent Christian professionals as opposed to a secular court process. I would caution here that competent is a critical factor. I am not suggesting that Christian couples should be uninformed about their state’s specific laws, but simply that they should attempt to resolve issues peacefully with knowl-

edgeable Christian professionals whenever they are able to do so.

## Domestic Violence (DV)

Let us pause for a moment and spend a bit of time talking about the issue of domestic violence, and specifically how that relates to my advice regarding utilizing ADR when possible. First, let us be clear that DV is about control. Abuse can manifest itself as physical, emotional, or verbal abuse, but it all stems from the same root - power and control. After practicing family law for over 2 decades, I can say confidently that DV knows no socio-economic, no educational, and no cultural boundaries. I have had an elderly client murdered by her husband (before he then killed himself), and I have seen such horrific child abuse cases that I could hardly eat or sleep for days. A few years ago, I represented a DV victim (a professional woman with two daughters), and the judge hit the nail on the head when he wrote:

*"Domestic violence is, by its nature, is not something the offender typically broadcasts to the world. The control, the manipulation, the violence almost always occurs behind closed doors, when the offender is trying to control the behavior of the victim through power and violence, real or threatened. For that reason, it does not surprise the Court that a friend might not appreciate that the offender is a different person at home. [This was related to testimony from the abuser's friend, who happened to be an attorney]. Respondent's testimony that he has learned in counseling how to 'manage his anger' better underscores a critically important fact about domestic violence: it is not about anger or about having a temper. Rather, domestic violence is all about power and control (of course, anger might be used as*

*a means of exercising power). That respondent failed to articulate any understanding of domestic violence, aside from claiming that he controls his temper better, is of deep concern to this court, for it does not appear that he has internalized any understanding of why he committed violence against his family."*

Sadly, not all judges, attorneys, or mediators understand this complex issue as well as the judge I just quoted. Sadly, because DV is present in so many family law cases, it is important to consider whether ADR is appropriate in cases with DV. As an attorney, I still support mediation in many of my DV cases (if the parties can be in separate rooms where the victim does not have to sit in a room with her/his abuser). My experience is that mediation is usually much less harsh to DV victims than courtrooms are. I have been appalled when DV victims are basically re-victimized on the stand. The process of mediation, when done correctly, should give DV victims the ability to not only have a voice, but also to move out of an abusive relationship with a clear path forward. Admittedly this is easier said than done.

In an ideal world, all parties would have a competent Christian attorney guiding them through the difficult time of divorce. I know that is not a reality; all I can say is that even in cases of DV, mediation or arbitration (in separate rooms) is still often a better path than a contested divorce trial. This is particularly true in cases where the abuser doesn't have an attorney, which means he/she would have the chance to cross examine the DV victim (thereby causing further trauma).

- **2 Corinthians 13:11 - "Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one**

*another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.”* This is one last verse encouraging restoration. Of course, God’s ideal is that we would all have fully restored relationships. When that is not possible for spouses, there is a type of restoration that involves a peaceful path forward separately. As much as God hates divorce, He knew that it would exist, He knows why it happens in each case, and He has given us advice in His Word about what to strive for in relationships. It is certainly possible for couples to figure out how to parent in separate homes when the vows to love, honor, and cherish each other were not honored by one or both parents. A good Christian mediator can help parents figure this out. And many states (such as my home state of Minnesota) actually require that litigants try ADR before trial (except in cases of DV, where it is still encouraged but not required).

### **Benefits of ADR for Stepfamilies**

So now that we have reviewed what ADR is, and what the Bible has to say about conflict resolution, let us spend a little time examining how ADR can work for stepfamilies given their unique dynamics.

An interesting statement I recently read about stepfamilies is “They don’t blend. They combine, they expand, but they don’t blend.” This comment was shared by Dr. Margorie Engel, MBA, Ph.D., the president of the Stepfamily Association of America. Dr. Engel wrote, “The first couple of years are usually chaotic because the

family is reassigning everyone to new roles. Everybody’s jockeying for position in a new family. The order changes: the baby may no longer be the baby, or the eldest child may no longer be so. Everybody has to figure out where he/she fits.” The author continues, “The challenge of a stepfamily is to make order out of chaos: all family members need to learn their respective roles, and to work/play together as a team, if not a family” (Cottrill, 2019).

What an improvement those first few rocky years could be if stepfamilies sought the help of a neutral mediator (or a good therapist) as they work on establishing those new roles and learn how to work together as a team for the benefit of all. Sitting down and having an honest directed conversation (with a professional leading the conversation) could save a lot of aches and pains with this transition.

### **Final Questions and Thoughts**

So, when is ADR appropriate? I submit that in almost all family settings ADR is a superior option for resolving conflicts than going to court (or dealing with painful transitions for stepfamilies).

When is ADR not appropriate? There are certain types of domestic violence cases, specifically restraining orders (Orders for Protection (OFPs) and Harassment Restraining Orders (HROs)) where ADR is unlikely to be successful and where time is of the essence. However, after a restraining order has been granted, ADR is still appropriate to consider in a divorce action (assuming that parties can be in separate rooms, and it is safe for the DV victim to be in the same building, etc). Obviously, in high-danger DV cases, ADR is likely not safe or appropriate even in a

subsequent divorce action. And if it appears that the DV offender is attempting to use the ADR process to manipulate or control the DV victim, mediation should be ended promptly.

In summary, what are some of the benefits of ADR? Here are just a few:

- Less stress (in the context of family law, it is typically a more casual, relaxed process and usually a warmer environment than a sterile courtroom, and in the case of stepfamilies, it can open up a healthy conversation about adjusting to a new normal for everyone)
- Less money spent on court fees, witness fees, expert witness fees, and legal fees
- Less time (likely weeks to months for the process instead of months to years)
- Parties “owning the outcome” - this is especially invaluable as the parties should be in the best position to know what is best for their unique situation
- Less likely to return to court (I have heard that parties who are able to figure out a resolution in their divorce or custody dispute are three times more likely to figure out future disputes. That has been my experience as well).

I have been representing a gentleman for approximately 7 months, and he

was thinking of canceling an upcoming scheduled mediation (a 2nd session). He is in the midst of a highly contentious divorce with a large and complicated marital estate (in addition to custody and parenting time issues). This was my advice:

***Without going into a very long explanation via email, I'll give you my brief opinion about why returning to mediation is far and away your best option - time, money, and mental energy. IF mediation is unsuccessful, you will end up on a very long, very expensive and very stressful path. I am willing to walk that path with you, but I hate to see you and your spouse waste thousands (if not tens of thousands) in expert fees, motion fees, and legal fees that could very likely be avoided if an agreement is reached in mediation. Protracted litigation would only help put my kids through college - not yours.***

In all but a very few cases, my advice to clients is, “Let’s try to get this resolved outside of court.”

One final thought about Christian ADR. When we trust God’s wisdom through even the most difficult times of conflict, we honor Him. And when we strive to reflect His love, forgiveness, grace, and compassion to those whom we are in conflict with, we provide a beautiful witness to His character. Here we have the very best reason to seek to resolve our conflicts as peacefully as possible

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## WEDDING FOR A DAY OR MARRIAGE FOR A LIFETIME

*As the number of “blended” families grows in the United States population, there is a need for the “blended” family to develop steps for success. Pre-marriage education is a means to provide a foundation for a successive marriage. Since the relationship of the parents directly impact the health of children, their well-being, and overall success, the entire community benefits from pre-marriage education. The pressures of today can be so overwhelming that the primary focus on the marriage relationship can be lost. Couples can be intentional in developing skills to ensure their marriage remains their priority. The Christian community needs to provide consistent preparation for the sacred institution of marriage. A review of pre-marriage education and the principles that are developed gives an overview of expectations and resources available. Pre-marriage education will help couples creating a “blended” family realize they are not alone and that a lasting marriage requires daily investment.*

I must admit, I have not heard a lot about this – Jesus was a member of a blended family! Joseph, His earthly father, was a widower, and Mary was his second wife. So, when we look at how blended families are in the twenty first century, we can appreciate the words of Hebrews 4:15 (NLT) *“This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for He faced all of the same testings we do, yet He did not sin”* (NLT). No matter what your family looks like, Jesus knows, feels and understands.

The statistics today are not promising for marriage, either a first marriage or subsequent ones. Information from the US Bureau of Census show that 1300 new stepfamilies are forming every day. Over 50% of US families are remarried or recoupled. 16% of children are living in

“blended families,” defined as a household with a stepparent, stepsibling or half-sibling.

There is a challenge today for all marriages – the time crunch! It seems that there are not enough minutes in a day and time spent building and maintaining a marriage relationship; it is not a top priority. Consider the following words from White (1900):

*“Our time belongs to God. Every moment is His, and we are under the most solemn obligation to improve it to His glory. Of no talent He has given will He require a more strict account than of our time.”* (p.342)

If we are to be held accountable for our time, it means that marriage, the sacred institution which has come down in history since the Garden of Eden, must be made a priority.



There are many ways that time for a committed marriage can move to the background. There is the pressure for success: job, finances, and/or home. Our society has become very child-focused, so children and their activities leave little quality and quantity couple time. Another thing which intrudes upon our time is social media through the use of cell phones, tablets, televisions and computer screens. It is easy to become distracted and think there will always be time when all the other boxes are checked, to pay attention to the person to whom you committed your life.

The interesting fact is that couples who are marrying for the second time think they KNOW what went wrong the first time, and they can just do things differently. Yet, without skills and awareness, old habits are difficult to change and bound to be repeated. Add the dimension of children to the second marriage and their challenge with a “new” parent and the ground is ripe for turmoil.

A couple needs to have a plan in place, just as they would for a budget, or for when they will purchase their first home, or any other major acquisition. A marriage is for a lifetime, but it won't last if they don't make an intentional preparation for it. What is the priority for a lifetime?

Pre-marriage education is the foundation upon which is based the preparation for the marriage, not for the wedding ceremony. A couple may think that they “know” each other, but when two become one they bring their families to this relationship in ways that they do not anticipate and cannot plan for unless they have made some decisions on how they want their home to be formed.

Fortunately, there is something that should be a priority for every couple getting

married, especially if this marriage will “blend” families. The process is called **Pre-marriage Education**. Please notice we are talking about pre-marriage education, not counseling. The onus of the word counseling gives most people pause and raises walls of resistance. On the other hand, most healthy people are open to education. Research shows these “programs are generally effective in producing significant immediate gains in communication processes, conflict management skills, and overall relationship quality, and that these gains appear to hold for at least six months to three years.”

There are some principles that Pre-Marriage will teach the couple. Among them, there are communication skills, conflict management, the role of commitment, the benefits of marriage and the role of spiritual beliefs and values in a healthy marriage. The list itself shows this is not something that can be shared in just a few minutes during the wedding rehearsal, much less the wedding ceremony. These will require time to explore, process, and apply to the couples' relationship in advance of that special day.

It is even more important for a “blended family” to avail themselves of pre-marriage education. Couples who marry again, and have children from previous relationships, need to learn how to effectively communicate with one another, with their respective children and families, and even with their former spouses, if they are still living. Words have weight and mean different things to different people. As challenging as communication sometimes is between two new people, adding children to the mix adds complexity to the situation. Since many principles are caught rather than taught when children see the parents

modeling effective communication, they learn as well; of course, the opposite is also true.

Effective communication is a dialogue, not a monologue, it is a sharing of feelings, not just opinions. Communication that is relationship building begins with “I”, not “you”. Sadly, most of us have not learned to express and share feelings. *“Whatever you have to say let your ‘yes’ be a plain ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ a plain ‘no’”* (Matthew 5:37 PHILLIPS). Many disagreements in families could be resolved if communication were plain.

Another feature of effective communication is making certain that the message being shared is what the listener hears. Remember that words have different meanings to different people. Effective communication requires time. The listener must listen attentively, without interruptions or stopping to defend, clarify, or explain their own view of the issue, and instead give feedback to clarify they understood what was shared. Without giving priority (time) to communication, situations can deteriorate very quickly.

Another important aspect dealt with during pre-marriage preparation is the important skill of conflict management. For many years people have referred to the ability to navigate the stormy waters that couples in a relationship traverse as **conflict resolution**, but a more realistic term that should be used is **conflict management**. When two people join their lives together, there will always be areas that are viewed differently. Each person was raised differently, their worldview is different, and their temperaments are different. Just think about it, we are **ALL** created in the image of God! That simply means our God is big enough to have all of us view life differently,

and still be His! When moved to the human realm, to the sacred institution of marriage, we must learn to manage conflict, since we will always be who we are. That is to say, that there may be areas of conflict in our life as a couple which we may never resolve, and yet we can manage the conflict in a positive way which will not disrupt our relationship, our marriage, or our family.

Conflict Management becomes a goal when the relationship is valued and neither person seeks to exercise power and control. A marriage that is safe for everyone, parents and children, requires grace, humility and above all, forgiveness! The Bible gives us timeless and valuable counsel:

*“Fathers, don’t over-correct your children or make it difficult for them to obey the commandment. Bring them up with Christian teaching in Christian discipline”* (Eph. 6:4 PHILLIPS)

*“Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church—a love marked by giving, not getting”* (Eph. 5:25 MSG).

*“Wives, be subject<sup>1</sup> to your own husbands, as [a service] to the Lord”* (Eph. 5:22 AMP).

These Scriptures illustrate what conflict management looks like in the Christian home. This is another concept that pre-marriage education will provide to a couple seeking to “blend” a family. This concept will have a lasting impact on the family.

Another concept pre-marriage education focuses on is commitment.

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1. Ephesians 5:22 – “subject” - The wife to her husband, not to men in general; not as inferior to him, nor in violation of her Christian ethics, but honoring her husband as protector and head of the home, respecting the responsibility of his position and his accountability to God. (authors’ note)



Developing a healthy marriage that has commitment requires boundaries. One of the concerns in a “blended” family is what constitutes a healthy boundary? A “blended” family represents more than one set of parents, more than one set of grandparents, and sundry other relatives. How can this new family set boundaries that are safe for them and not exclude those who are important to all?

White (1971) writes, “There is a sacred circle around every family which should be preserved. No other one has any right in that sacred circle. The home circle should be regarded as a sacred place, a symbol of heaven, a mirror in which to reflect ourselves. Friends and acquaintances, we may have, but in the homelife they are not to meddle. A strong sense of proprietorship should be felt, giving a sense of ease, restfulness, trust.”

This sums up how boundaries look in the Christian family. However, if a couple has not given thought and intention before they are married, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to determine what the boundaries will be in the new “blended” family. The Officiant of the first marriage gave this counsel: *“This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one”* (Gen. 2:24 NLT). As important as it is for us to establish clear boundaries with our families of origin, it is even more so as we have them with all the families involved in the blending process.

Another component of commitment is the realization that a marriage is not a contract, but a covenant. Because marriage is one of the two gifts from God we still have today that began in the perfect Garden of Eden, we must treasure it as the Divine

institution it is. While a contract is legally binding, a covenant is a spiritual agreement. A contract is an agreement between parties while a covenant is a pledge. A contract is an agreement you can break while a covenant is a perpetual promise. A contract exchanges one good for another, while a covenant is giving oneself to the other.

Couples must be made aware that a Christian marriage is a part of their covenant with God, and it must be taken that seriously. The prophet Malachi writes, *“Because God was there as a witness when you spoke your marriage vows to your young bride, and now you’ve broken those vows, broken the faith-bond with your vowed companion, your covenant wife. God, not you, made marriage”* (Mal. 2:14 MSG). It is evident the Lord takes our marriage vows seriously; the question is, do we?

We have established that in a marriage that re-creates that which was established in Eden, there will be some very important components:

- Effective Communication
- Conflict Management
- Commitment: Boundaries and a Covenant.

All of these components represent the need for trust. A marriage not built upon trust is one with fewer opportunities for success. When there is a “blended” marriage, trust is a topic that should be explored prior to the new marriage taking place. Since two flawed human beings are planning to join their lives, it is critical to learn no one is perfect. Mistakes will be made, but the commitment to the covenant of marriage will preserve the trust of the relationship.

Pre-marriage education will also delve into what forgiveness means in a day-to-day relationship. Couples must

be made aware that because they were raised in different homes, and they have different temperaments, they must be able to communicate their feelings and then deal with conflict management with the gift of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a special component of a relationship because it does not begin with humans, it is the gift of God! *"Where is the god who can compare with You— wiping the slate clean of guilt, Turning a blind eye, a deaf ear, to the past sins of your purged and precious people? You don't nurse Your anger and don't stay angry long, for mercy is Your specialty. That's what You love most. And compassion is on its way to us"* (Micah 7:18 MSG).

There are many ingredients of a "blended" marriage that will of necessity cause a couple to practice forgiveness: Managing their own and the other spouse's children, the different and perhaps changing roles everyone plays, the variety of responsibilities each member has, how finances are managed, and even how their faith is practiced. The ultimate marriage manual states: *"We all make mistakes in all kinds of ways, but the man who can claim that he never says the wrong thing can consider himself perfect, for if he can control his tongue he can control every other part of his personality!"* (Jam. 3:2 PHILLIPS)

Without the intentionality of forgiveness, couples and members of the blended family will find themselves with a tall wall of miscommunication or perhaps even dysfunctional communication between them, which they will find themselves unable to scale.

Forgiveness is the tool that does not allow walls to grow, and if the walls are there it is the tool that breaks down walls and leads to reconciliation. Here's the counsel from

the Bible: *"Post this at all the intersections, dear friends: Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear."* (James 1:19 MSG).

When couples realize that a marriage takes work on a daily basis, not just on the wedding day, they must determine if they share the same values. Amos 3:3 is often used to talk about marriage to people who do not share the same religious beliefs.

*Do two people walk hand in hand if they aren't going to the same place?*  
(Amos 3:3 MSG).

However, a couple can share the same religious beliefs and not be agreed. Since value means a person's principles or standards of behavior; one's judgment of what is important in life, priorities come to the top of the list. If one person values money, and the other values time together, it's easy to see where conflict can arise.

In today's world, to acquire money means giving one's all to the business, employment to get to the top and remain there. Yet, where will be the time for the spouse who needs presence? Communicating one's values will have a lot to do with the success of the relationship.

In a "blended" family, priorities such as children, families of origin, where and how we live, or where we will worship, all come into question. After all, there are already more than two people involved. If these areas have not been explored in a neutral environment with an intentional plan, watch the storm clouds form.

Children raised in a Christian "blended" family have the confidence of trust: first and foremost, in their Heavenly Father, then in their earthly parents. They also need to realize they did not play a part in the dissolution of the relationship into which

they were born. They *catch* the need for forgiveness and how to share feelings.

Many clerics have the proper training and preparation to help pre-marital couples learn these skills. Many pastors use instruments such as PREP, Prepare-Enrich, or SYMBIS, or books like “The Couple Checkup” or “The ReMarriage Checkup” as tools to help couples prepare for a lifetime of marriage. Pastors often ask couples not to set a date prior to pre-marriage education which allows for time to process issues which may arise during the sessions.

Couples may realize during the pre-marriage education process that they need personal counseling. If the children are experiencing some challenges, they may also need a therapist. A prepared pastor will have a list of appropriate referrals which should include at least three licensed, professionals. Since therapy is effective when the “chemistry” works, there may be a need for more than one referral until you get the best fit. Licensing is necessary because the individual should feel confident the person they have been sent to is capable, competent, and properly trained.

If the pastor is not able to provide a referral, then professionals who are licensed can be found at the state’s licensing site. Any licensed therapist can be located this way. There will also be information about the therapist, such as complaints, censures, etc. Finding a licensed therapist may be a challenge; however, licensure is a protection for everyone. Just because someone states they are qualified, does not preclude checking the state website. Often Christian Counselors, do not have to have licensure.

Churches who wish to minister to the needs of all the congregation as well as the community, may develop support

groups for “blended” families. The 1990 US Census predicted there would be more stepfamilies than original families by the year 2000. As of the time of this writing, we are in the year 2020 and 50% of the 60 million children under the age of 13 are currently living with one biological parent and that parent's current partner. Unfortunately, those statistics don’t provide specific information of the difference for those who are church and unchurched.

Support groups are a group of people with common experiences or concerns who provide each other with encouragement, comfort, and advice. A church support group will have a facilitator who will fulfill the following qualities:

- A safe physical and emotional environment – easily accessible, accessible restrooms; confidentiality, boundaries
- A supportive environment – All demographics: age, social class, educational levels, language, ethnicity must be respected
- Awareness of Affect – awareness of verbal as well as non-verbal cues
- Leadership – a model or appropriate group behavior and a group resource.

A healthy, well-trained facilitator will not encourage dependency upon themselves, but will encourage members to accentuate and emphasize their individual abilities and strengths to increase their own leadership skills and help them take more initiative for themselves.

Pre-marriage education for “blended” families helps them to realize no one can have it all. However, they can choose to cherish and nurture what they want most. Couples will realize that making their

relationship a priority is an important legacy to pass to their children so that when those children are launched, they will still enjoy life in a vibrant, love-filled marriage.

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# POWER STRUGGLES IN BLENDED FAMILIES

*Blended families or stepfamilies are different from other families in that they involve children from different relationships from the start. People often assume that blended families function like traditional nuclear families. However, blended families have unique struggles that healthcare professionals and church leaders need to be attentive to, as power struggles make them vulnerable to being more dissatisfied with their relationships, and religious teachings can help or hinder them in the process.*

*Blended families face more challenges than nuclear families. Yet, there is no point in making people feel bad for building close relationships in our world. Ginther and Pollak (2004) argue that we need to look more carefully at the reasons for why blended families have worse outcomes than just generalizing blanket conclusions drawn from statistics. The goal of this article is to elaborate on some of the power struggles that blended families face so that helping professionals can be better equipped to address them.*

*There are multiple factors that can intersect to cause partners to experience power imbalances in their relationships. These factors can include traditional gender roles and parental status, which lead to partners holding power differently, especially when children are involved.*

*On one hand, being a parent within the family can give a partner additional power and authority over family functioning. Parents will often prioritize their biological child over their spouse, which can unfortunately create an unhealthy alliance and leave the other partner feeling like an outsider to the family, with little say about what's going on with the children. For an unmarried couple that is cohabitating, the non-parent partner may feel especially powerless given the circumstances. On the other hand, in the case of stepfamilies where only one person has children from a previous relationship, that partner may feel that they are imposing a burden on their partner and believe that the responsibility for childcare is all their own. Due to traditional gender roles, mothers often assume this responsibility for childcare to be theirs.*

## Background

A review of the literature found little recent research specifically on power in blended families. Therefore, this article looks at research on blended families in general and how parenting intersects with power.

## Parenting and Power

In reviewing research on mutuality processes and relationship satisfaction, Steil (1997) made observations about how the impact of personal power affects partners' happiness. Mothers tend to be more financially dependent on their partners,

which affects their well-being (Steil, 1997). Unfortunately, the income that mothers contributed did not make any difference in their personal power. Instead, the presence of children decreased the relative power for mothers (Steil, 1997). When husbands empower wives to be involved in decision-making and helped her with childcare, they were happier (Steil, 1997).

A qualitative study of couples with children by Knudson-Martin and Mahoney (2005) revealed three categories of how couples used gender ideology to structure their relationships: post-gender, gender legacy and traditional. They believed that post-gender couples are aware of how gender can pull them into patterns, while gender legacy couples tend to still use gender to justify behavior (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2005).

In a study by Moore (2008) of stepfamilies, it was found that while both partners were of the same gender, the biological mothers did significantly more housework. While our study was focused on heterosexual families, this information is revealing about how gender roles can still influence us. Housework gave them greater responsibility and authority over the home, including the finances and childrearing. Due to traditional gender roles, mothers may feel that having more control over the home gives them a greater sense of power, even when they earn less money (Moore, 2008). However, they still carried an unequal burden.

### **Blended Families**

Komal Kumar (2017) proposed a “blended family life cycle” that involves the following nine theoretical stages:

1. An event, such as death or divorce, disrupts the nuclear family and causes a separation of family members.
2. Co-parenting agreements between ex-spouses are negotiated.
3. Parents go through the process of dating and selecting a new mate, ending with remarriage.
4. A preblended family begins to form. Family counseling is recommended at this point.
5. The stepparent defines their expectations for the new family.
6. The stepparent meets the ex-spouse or biological parent of the stepchild.
7. The children and stepparent meet if they have not met already.
8. The blended family system becomes defined by boundaries and role expectations for parents and children.
9. The new blended couple consider the possibility of adding new children to the family.

One study identified four unique challenges for blended families. Martin-Uzzi (2013) used grounded theory to conduct a qualitative analysis of fifteen remarried couples in blended families. The themes that emerged are as follows. First, couples were very cautious when considering remarriage. Second, biological parents often felt a divided loyalty between their partner and their children, causing the stepparents to often feel that their needs were last priority. Stepparents also often felt a sense of role confusion. Lastly, conflict with the ex-spouse often united the new couple but left them feeling frustrated and powerless (Martin-Uzzi, 2013). On



the other hand, previously married spouses seemed to appreciate having another chance at marriage and the spouse with children appreciated the stepparent for joining the family (Martin-Uzzi, 2013).

In a study of Finnish families with children that compared blended and nuclear families (Raijas, 2011), it was found that blended families were far likelier to hold separate bank accounts than nuclear families. These separate bank accounts were used to pay for expenses for their own biological children so that their partner would not be responsible for this.

As blended families tend to be compared to traditional nuclear families, they tend to face unrealistic expectations and social stigmas (Visser & Visser, 1979; Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). Focusing on stepfamilies, Visser and Visser (1979) identified some differences between the traditional nuclear family and stepfamilies. They recommend suggestions for therapists working with these families that focus on enhancing self-esteem and adjusting to losses, setting realistic expectations, helping children adjust to changes that are out of their control, strengthening the couple's relationship, managing conflict and rewriting their family history (Visser & Visser, 1979).

Narrative therapy is one approach that is recommended by Shalay and Brownlee (2008) to help blended families to challenge the dominant language in social discourses to make space for them. They may be asked to consider how the media and society influence their expectations for how a family ought to be. Especially when stepparents experience role strain, they may be encouraged to think about how their new circumstances must be adapted to and that

they should not try to compare themselves to traditional nuclear families (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007).

## Questions

Rather than labeling blended families as problematic, it is more helpful to identify the factors that cause instability among blended families, as suggested by Ginther and Pollak (2004). Therefore, this research seeks to answer the following questions.

1. First, does being divorced set couples up for problems later or are there specific factors related to power that contribute to problematic outcomes?
2. More specifically, how does gender and other factors contribute to power inequalities in blended families?
3. How do Christian teachings contribute to these problems?

The advantage of quantitative research is that we can empirically and objectively compare factors.

## Method

This article is using a subset of data drawn from the Gender and Relationships Study conducted by the author (Luttrell, 2016; Luttrell, Distelberg, Wilson, Knudson-Martin & Moline, 2018). This study involved dyadic surveys of 91 paired heterosexual couples and 268 individuals. The study involved the creation of a measure of relative power balance, the *Relationship Balance Assessment* (RBA; Luttrell, et al, 2018) using factor analysis. The RBA was then correlated with several relationship outcome measures to explore the connections between the power balance and marital/sexual satisfaction and measures of conflict (Luttrell, et al., 2018).

The participants in the study were predominantly Christian (91% of couples) and the majority (76%) had at least one Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) partner (Luttrell, 2016). As SDA's have a range of socio-political beliefs, this helps us to research the impact of varying Christian beliefs about family roles on families.

The *Gender Theology Scale* was designed to measure Christian beliefs about gender roles. It asks participants to rate their religious beliefs on a dichotomous scale between conservative and liberal positions, on a scale of 1 to 6. It has a good reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha=.827$ . The *Gender Ideology Scale* did not involve religion but merely asked participants to identify whether they adhere to traditional gender roles in the larger culture. This also has good reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha=.789$  (Luttrell, 2016).

For the purposes of this article, a secondary analysis of the data looks at blended families through several questions on the questionnaire specifically asking if the partners were previously married and divorced, and how many children they brought into the marriage from previous relationships.

Out of the 268 individuals that participated, only 10% of individuals reported that they had been divorced previously, but roughly 18% of participants skipped this question. However, since blended families only require that one partner is in a previous relationship, the question that asked about children brought into the relationship was also looked at. Out of 268 participants, the average number of children from previous relationships was  $M=1.5$  ( $SD=1.5$ ). Men had a slightly higher average than for women.

## Results

This research confirmed that it was not so much the couples' status as divorced and remarried but rather that specific factors related to power differences contributed to instability and conflict. For both men and women, their status as previously divorced did *not* correlate directly with any relationship outcome variables, calculated with either a Pearson's  $r$  or a Spearman's  $\rho$ . Because only a small number of partners had identified as previously divorced, it is possible that a larger sample could produce more significant findings. A larger sample may be required to definitively rule out possible outcomes. On one hand, the relative lack of a direct association is somewhat good news for divorcees. On the other hand, partners who had previously divorced tended to have significantly different perceptions of power in the relationship, explaining about 30% of the variance (Spearman's  $\rho=.30$ ,  $p<.01$ ), which reflects a significant potential for conflict (Luttrell, 2016).

In addition, the study found that it wasn't so much that the partner was a parent (had no significant outcomes), but that for both partners, having a *different* number of children prior to the relationship was significantly related to dissatisfaction with the relationship. This "difference" includes (but is not limited to) one partner having prior children and the other not having children. For both men and women, the difference in the number of children they had prior to the relationship had negative correlations with their relationship satisfaction,  $r=-.28$ ,  $p<.01$  for men and  $r=-.39$ ,  $p<.01$  for women. Otherwise, parenthood status alone did not seem to relate to their collective sense of the power balance (Luttrell, 2016).

Traditional gender theology was significantly correlated with the man spending more money or making social decisions. Men with traditional beliefs think they care for children more than she believes, and she thinks she cares for the children more than he believes. She also tends to think she initiates or is assertive about sex more often than he thinks he does.

## Discussion

Rather than stigmatize blended families because of their increased risks, those in helping professions and church leadership should be aware of the various struggles that blended families face. Couples in blended families are at risk for power struggles due to perceived power differences. Power is important for blended families because stepparents only have as much authority with their children as their partner empowers them to have. This article identifies several factors that intersect to affect the balance of power in blended families: differences in income, having children prior to the relationship, and gender.

Cultural traditions about what it means to be a man or woman can contribute to inequality among remarried couples. For example, having traditional beliefs that the mother is responsible for children seems to cause him to underestimate how much parenting he does, or underestimate her contributions because it is taken for granted that parenting is an expected part of what the mother does (Luttrell, 2016). Holding ideals about what is a man or woman's responsibility often blinds people to when their partners are performing what is expected of them. When women do housework or childcare, it is not as

appreciated as when men do it because it's simply expected of her.

Religious beliefs about traditional gender roles seem to exacerbate power differences, as they do for all families including nuclear families. Christian beliefs about gender create a culture of invisible power differences that hides partners' worth in the relationship. Several aspects of gender theology correlated with differences in perception of the power balance, or differences in perceptions about which partner did what, which were strongly correlated with dissatisfaction with the relationship. Traditional beliefs are associated with partners believing that the other has more power than they think, while egalitarian beliefs are associated with awareness of one's power in the relationship.

As Kumar (2017) described the possible stages that blended families go through, the parents also must go through shifts in prioritizing their children or their spouse. The biological parents often feel a divided loyalty, caught between the competing needs of their child and their spouse with the stepparents often feeling that their needs were last priority (Martin-Uzzi, 2013). From my clinical experience, many biological parents describe prioritizing their biological child over the stepparent, at least in the beginning of the relationship, because children are dependent on their parents, saying things like, "Blood is thicker than water." Parents can choose their partner, but they do not choose their child. Some parents will choose not to date someone unless they get along with their child. Yet many children must go along with their parents' relationship choices.

In some families, the stepparent may not get along with the stepchild or may be

vulnerable to rejection by the stepchild because they are forced to live together. Thus, stepparents may not feel empowered with much authority in childrearing. Even biological parents may feel at the mercy of their child due to the fear that the child could want to live with their ex-spouse instead. Biological parents who are in a relationship where they are financially dependent on their partner may feel guilty for being a burden on a partner who is not a parent.

In all families, it takes conscious work to ensure that both partners feel equally empowered. This is even more true in blended families. At some point, parents may want to make a conscious decision to prioritize each other at least as much as their children, and to empower stepparents with equal authority in childrearing. As they say, it “takes a community” to raise a child.

## Conclusion

For Christians who care about their families, we have guidance to help us specifically with power struggles, and this applies to blended families too. In the Bible, the apostle Paul encourages us to, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Ephesians 5:21, NIV) Both partners need to be willing to prioritize each other and consider the other person’s

needs. Unfortunately, too often people skip over that and focus on the next verse out of context where Paul writes, “Wives, [*submit*] to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.” (Eph. 5:22, NIV, brackets added). The word “submit” does not appear in the original Greek manuscripts and is added by translators to complete the sentence. While some couples may be okay with this focus on male authority, it may also inadvertently create a family culture in which the woman is not valued as an equal human being nor appreciated for her contributions to the family as she becomes taken for granted. We should remember the rest of the passage also says, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” (Eph. 5:25, NIV). While the word “submit” is not part of the original language for the wives, the word “love” is part of the original instruction for the husband. Therefore, perhaps due to the world we live in, men have an even greater imperative to love and serve their partners. When men set the example in sacrificing, serving, and empowering their wives like Jesus would, the entire family may be happier as a result. When both partners in either nuclear or blended families mutually serve each other, then both will feel equally valued and appreciated in the family.

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# IMPLICATIONS OF BIRTH ORDER IN STEPFAMILIES: A BRIEF STUDY OF THE BRADY BUNCH

*The intent of this paper is to provide a brief overview of birth order theory. We will look at a famous television stepfamily of the 1960's and 1970's, The Brady Bunch. This television show highlighted a stepfamily with six children in unrealistic ways in that it shied away from some of the challenges that would most certainly affect a real stepfamily. We will explore how birth order theory relates to stepfamilies, uncover some potential challenges, and highlight the need for communication and understanding between husband, wife, and children before a second marriage and establishment of a new family takes place.*

## **Introduction**

The validity of Birth Order Theory has been debated since Alfred Adler proposed it more than half a century ago. Psychologists have gone through periods of support and acceptance and alternately of rejection and criticism of Adler's theory. If everyone were born in a perfectly aligned family where there are only boys, or girls, born at equally distant periods of time, and one could control everything in their environment equally, it may be easier to analyze and study the effects of birth order in their lives. However, birth order theory itself presents many variables such as the gender of each child, the number of years between them (in families with multiple children), and the family history. In addition, particularly in our day and age, there are other dynamics that may come to play a significant role in how each child grows up. For instance, we need to account for stepsiblings,

half-siblings, and siblings who don't even know that the other exists. Therefore, we need to consider biological, adopted, and stepfamilies. As if that were not enough, the children's parents vary in their ages as well as in the ages they were when they had their children. All of this comes to play as we consider the impact of birth order.

The intent of this paper is to provide a brief overview of birth order theory, see how it applies to a large famous television stepfamily of the 1960's and 1970's, and examine the lessons stepfamilies of today may learn as they navigate the challenging waters of such a relationship.

## **Brief Historical Background**

Austrian psychiatrist, Alfred Adler, a contemporary of the famous Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, conducted research to determine whether the order in which a child is born into the family determines the type



of person they will grow up to be or what their personality will be like. Adler, in what came to be known as *Birth Order Theory*, believed that the order in which a child is born into a family and the child's familial environment could help predetermine to some extent their personality through life.

### **What is Birth Order Theory?**

Now, just because you were born in a specific order in your family does not mean that is your destiny of sorts. In an article for *Psychology Today*, Susan Krauss Whitbourne (2013), explains that what may be more important is what order in your family you perceive to be. She cites research which concludes that, "Actual and psychological birth order can deviate for a number of reasons, including illness of one child, size of family, and degree of separation between siblings. Your role in the family based on your age may not be the same as the role you have come to occupy."

Birth Order theory describes first-borns as having leadership qualities which they may have developed because of the amount of attention they received from their parents and because they in turn became teachers of their younger siblings. However, in a paper co-authored by Eckstein and Kaufman (2012) they showed that as much as the younger siblings are taught by the first-born, they also become teachers for the first-born. Perhaps the way the approach things may be different, due to their position in the family configuration, so the teaching and learning direction is not just one-way. In family dynamics we know that everyone in the family affects everybody else. Not only do parents affect their children but the parents are also affected by each of the children and each sibling affects every other sibling. This

reciprocal dynamic means that we may not simply be the objects of some arbitrary and unyielding positional mandate but rather than we may assume the position we believe to be in. In other words, I may be a middle child who may feel ignored or overlooked by my other siblings, and even parents, or I may develop particularly good social skills to keep from being unnoticed.

So, considering that birth order is not destiny, many psychologists recognize that there indeed seems to be some validity to Adler's theory. At this point we need to stop and explore some of the characteristics of each of the positions in the family constellation.

### **The First-born**

From the very beginning, the first-born receives one hundred percent attention from their parents. This could be their only child, and even though they are inexperienced, they devote a lot of their time and effort to make sure they turn out right. As a result, first-borns like being the center of adult attention. Because they spend a lot of time during the first couple of years around adults, they prefer adult company and even use adult language. In fact, sometimes people even think of them as "little adults." They tend to be over-protected and spoiled, and sometimes they may even develop a sort of rivalry with one of the parents.

When a new sibling is born, suddenly the first-born feels dethroned, which may at times be the beginning of sibling rivalry. First-borns often have difficulty sharing with siblings and peers. Often, the parents' expectations of the first-born are very high, so they find themselves under a ton of pressure to succeed. White (1954) gave special counsel to parents of first-borns

when she wrote, “The first child especially should be trained with great care, for he will educate the rest. Children grow according to the influence of those who surround them. If they are handled by those who are noisy and boisterous, they become noisy and almost unbearable.”

Some of the personality traits of a first-born include confidence, determination, a born leader, organized, eager to please, and likes to avoid trouble. In the bible we find some famous first-borns such as Cain, who was so jealous of his brother Abel because he seemed to be the “good” one, that he killed him (Gen 4), Esau (Gen 25), and Jesus, who was Mary's firstborn (Luke 2:7). A researcher examined the birth order of US presidents and found that fourteen were first-born children, including presidents James Madison, Harry Truman, Richard Nixon, George W. Bush, and Barak Obama (Cain, 2018).

### The Only Child

The only child enjoys many of the characteristics of the first-born except that since they never have any siblings, they never have competition for the love and attention from their parents. Because they spend a lot of time with grown-ups, they are often confident and well-spoken. Some of their personality traits include being confident, paying attention to detail, are good in school, but they also tend to be overly critical.

The list of famous only-children is quite extensive and include such people as Robert DeNiro, Walter Cronkite, Leonardo da Vinci, Charles Lindbergh, and Isaac Newton, as well as Charlize Theron, Indira Gandhi, Nancy Reagan, and Carol Burnett.

The prophet Samuel may have also been an only child (1 Sam 1).

### The Middle Child

The middle child figures out quickly that he/she is already a year or more behind the first born, so he/she is more competitive and wants to overtake older child, but that competition may deteriorate into rivalry. Because the older brother or sister is usually stronger, smarter, and obviously bigger, the next born typically goes off in another direction. But if he/she can see they can compete with their older sibling, they may just do that. In trying to outdo everyone, they may become a rebel of sorts.

While they may be competitive, they



also tend to be pacemakers, diplomatic, good negotiators. He/she feels “sandwiched” in and squeezed out of a position of privilege and significance, which in some cases leads them to take a position more in the background and tend to be even-tempered with more of a “take it or leave it” attitude. Middle children also tend to make friends easily and once they have them, they often work hard to keep them.

Some biblical examples of middle-born children may include Andrew, who brought Peter to Jesus (John 1:40-41), James, brother of Jesus and head of the Jerusalem council (Acts 12, 15, 21), and perhaps Barnabas, who brought Paul to the apostles and later took John Mark with him when Paul didn't want to (Acts 15). According to Cain (2018), the most US presidents have been middle children, including such renown leaders as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy, and Richard Nixon, George H.W. Bush, and Donald Trump.

### The Last-born Child

By the time the last-born arrives, other children have taken a lot of time and attention from their parents, so they have to find their own role in the family. Last-born children, or the baby of the family, tend to be carefree and vivacious, the clowns of the house, school, church, etc. It is their way to get attention from the adults, and even the other siblings, in the family. However, as a result they're not always taken seriously. The last born has many mothers and fathers in their older siblings, which means that the older children try to educate them. One of the advantages of the last born is that they are never dethroned. They can be charming, outgoing, affectionate, uncomplicated, but at the same time they can be rebellious, temperamental, manipulative, spoiled, impatient, and impetuous. In many cases they end up being very spoiled by both adults and older siblings. They also tend to be persistent, great storytellers, and very affectionate.

Among history's famous babies of the family are Copernicus and Harriet

Tubman. And, from the bible you remember how Joseph, Rachel and Jacob's first born, received preferential treatment of a last-born (Gen 37:3). Cain (2018) found that only seven of the US presidents have been the babies of their family, including Andrew Jackson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan.

As stated before, there are many caveats that may alter how each child functions in the family. For instance if you are a pair of twins, or a ghost child (one born after the death of the previous child), or if you have been adopted, an only boy among girls, or conversely the only girl among boys, if all the siblings are boys or all girls, the family size, the years in between siblings, and many other variables come into play. One of the biggest variables of all is a stepfamily relationship.



Greg



Marcia

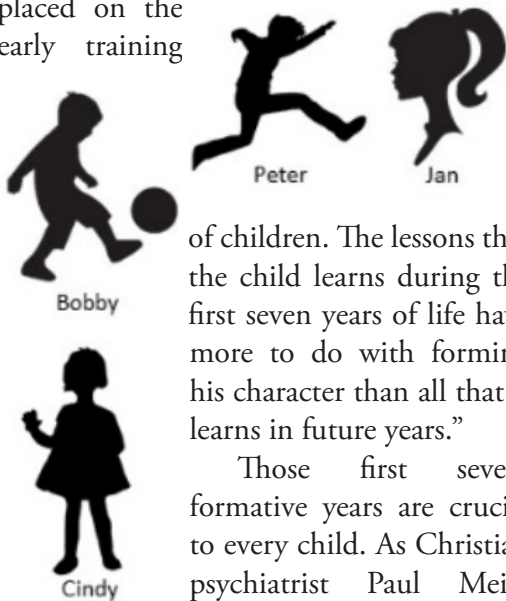
### Birth Order in Stepfamilies

Birth Order helps us understand how people may act, think, or feel under certain circumstances in life.

Many have seen its application in their own life and family. If it is an accurate description of the personality of the children in a family it can be very helpful as parents maneuver through potential minefields, particularly during the first five to seven years of their life, while the child's character is being shaped, but also during the transitional year between childhood and adolescence (ages eight to twelve), and the teenage years.

Those first seven years of a child's life will determine much of what they will become. Researcher and pollster, George Barna (2003), writes, "Social scientists have

known for years that the moral foundations of children are generally determined by the time the individual reaches age nine. Our research confirms a parallel outcome in the spiritual dimension: By age nine, most children have their spiritual moorings in place.” His assessment fully agrees with what Ellen G. White (1954) wrote many years ago: “Too much importance cannot be placed on the early training



of children. The lessons that the child learns during the first seven years of life have more to do with forming his character than all that it learns in future years.”

Those first seven, formative years are crucial to every child. As Christian psychiatrist Paul Meier (n.d.) stated, studies by psychiatrists reveal that approximately 85 percent of an adult’s personality “is already formed by the time the individual is six years old.” Well-known Christian psychologist, Kevin Leman, in his book *The Birth Order Book* writes, “the child’s personality is pretty well formed by the age of five.” Charles Spurgeon (n.d.), the great pastor and preacher of London’s yesteryear is quoted as saying, “A child of five, if properly instructed, can as truly believe and be regenerated as any adult.”

So, it’s critically important that we understand those first seven years in the life of our children so we can help them maximize their potential for their future, while at

the same time minimizing the problems and difficulties that begin early in their life. Those critical years can be challenging for any child, and for their parents, but much more so for children in a stepfamily. Even with the very brief description of the different birth positions we can begin to see what potentially happens in a “normal” family. But when a person divorces their spouse, and then marries someone else who also has children of their own everything gets turned upside down.

Just by the simple fact two people with their children marry, some of their children’s birth order will be haywire. In fact, it could be downright traumatic to some of the kids. Not only is their home life completely disrupted, so is the way that they are used to operating within the context of their family order.

Consider just a few simple examples. Think about your oldest son who must give up his throne and yield it to an older child of their new stepparent. Or consider what happens to a middle child, who may already feel lost in the shuffle, who now takes a further step back under the shadows of their siblings. Or the youngest of your children, the baby of your family, who suddenly loses all the attention they are used to getting because they are now a middle child while their new stepparent’s youngest child continues to enjoy being the center of attention.

The idealistic experience many stepfamilies go into is that they will simply come together naturally, love one another, and live happily ever after. That idealistic view was propagated, at least in part, by a popular sitcom of the 1960’s and 1970’s, the *Brady Bunch*. Without going in depth through each of the 117 television

episodes, plus special sequel movies, we want to explore how this idealistic view of the stepfamily may have given viewers the incorrect expectations for their own family.

## **The Brady Bunch, a Stepfamily**

### **Illustration**

The Brady Bunch is the story of a couple, each with three children of their own, who got married and formed this popular television family. For those who may have never seen the show, or who may have forgotten what it was about, here's a brief description of each of the nine main characters.

The father, Mike Brady, was an architect and a widower who brought his three sons into the marriage with Carol Brady, who had three daughters of her own, thus becoming the stepfather of her three girls. Nothing is ever mentioned of Mr. Brady's parents, extended family, nor of his ex-wife's family. If it were that easy to have a clean-cut separation from any extended family, in-laws, or previous familial history, it could make it easier to become a new family, but how often is that the case?

The mom, Carol Brady, had three daughters. Again, nothing is known about their father and he never comes into the picture. Neither Carol nor her daughters ever mention him, never mourn his absence, and don't seem to miss him at all. Not having ex-spouses, or their families to deal with probably made their life a lot easier than otherwise. It was definitely not reality television.

Let's take Mr. Brady's sons in order. The oldest son, Greg Brady is a high

school student who plays football, plays guitar, surfs, and aspires to be a singer. He is portrayed as self-confident and brazen at times, and often acts as leader and spokesman for the other kids. Being the oldest of the Brady children, Greg is usually the one who concocts their plans. As Greg got older, he often tried to distance himself from the younger siblings and eventually got his own room in the attic. At the same time, Greg always sticks up for his younger siblings, including his stepsisters, and helps them out whenever he can.

Mr. Brady's middle son is Peter who seems to have very low self-esteem and often thinks badly of himself. He also tends to be the clumsiest of all the kids and often gets overexcited and acts before thinking. Whether this was intentionally done or not, Peter's character mirrors many of the characteristics of a middle child who doesn't play a prominent part in their family, or in this show.

Mr. Brady's youngest son, Bobby, is bright but often overlooked. Bobby was often portrayed as a witty dreamer, fantasizing about having adventurous lifestyles, like being a race car driver, a cowboy, and even an astronaut.

On Mrs. Brady's side, her oldest daughter was Marcia, a beautiful, mature, and popular girl in high school and at times Greg's second-in-command for the other children. Her popularity is an ongoing source of envy for her younger sister Jan. Despite Marcia's reputation, she has her own set of challenges. For instance, she had several unrequited crushes, felt insecure over having braces, and was devastated



when a stray football thrown by Peter threw her into depression. Even though she is very pretty and popular, she has a fragile ego that sometimes gets the best of her.

Mrs. Brady's middle daughter, Jan, is often portrayed as being jealous of her evidently more popular older sister, Marcia. Again, whether this was intended or not, Jan's awkward position as the middle child is clearly seen in the show. Now only does she have to contend with the good looks and popular personality of her older sister, but Jan is also insecure about having freckles and wearing glasses, is embarrassed because she does not have a boyfriend, and worried what she will look like when she gets older.

The youngest of the three Brady girls, Cindy, is a naive but sometimes precocious little girl. She often liked to snoop and share the secrets she had found out.

As if life in the Brady household were not interesting enough, they also had a housekeeper, Alice, who had played that role for Mr. Brady, his previous wife (who supposedly died), and their three boys. So, Alice continued working in the home of Mr. Brady and his three boys, which grew to include the new Mrs. Brady and her three daughters. It was almost like having a second mother under the same roof, although Alice was generally impartial toward the children and followed what Mr. and Mrs. Brady told her.

That, in short is the description of the each of the main characters in this stepfamily. But we now must consider the dynamics which were not shown on this TV family but that most certainly would have affected a real stepfamily. For stepfamilies formed after the divorce of the couple their relationship is much more complicated. For instance, if Mrs. Brady had been divorced,

there could have been custody and/or visitation issues with her ex-husband. Instead of the relative peace and harmony portrayed from week to week on television, the Brady girls might have had to spend every other weekend with their father, and possible his new wife. Mrs. Brady might have had to deal with child support issues, since all three girls were minors.

Holidays would have also been challenging since her daughters would have several homes, traditions, and histories to contend with. They had their tradition and history as a family with their mom and dad, the tradition and history with their father's family, and the tradition and history with their mother's family. But now they also have to sort through the traditions and practices in their newly formed family. Think of birthday celebrations. How many different branches of a person's family would be involved?

In the television show, both Mr. and Mrs. Brady seemed to have a harmonious relationship with all six kids, and their transition into their new family seems to have gone seamlessly and peacefully. There were never disagreements between the Brady parents about the discipline of the children and most issues were resolved quickly and lovingly.

Let's think for a moment about the two older children, Greg and Marcia. They both were the leaders in each of their homes, enjoyed popularity, and seemed to do well in their studies and extra-curricular activities. However, when Mr. and Mrs. Brady married and their families merged, naturally Greg would have remained the first born, since he was older than Marcia, but she would have lost her normal position as the first born in this newly-formed family. She still

maintained the first-born status among the girls, but not in the overall order for all six kids. Being dethroned from her position as the first-born, particularly after holding that position into her teenage years, would have caused turmoil in the family and possibly a lot of inner conflict for Marcia herself. She probably would have become jealous, angry, and resentful of Greg for robbing her of that first place in the family.

The middle children, Peter and Jan, were probably the most accustomed to being lost in the shuffle, and as natural peacemakers would have probably gotten along the best between themselves and with the other siblings. The biggest drawback for them is that they were already in the background and now would be farther back in the shadows of their combined sibling group.

The two youngest ones would have also had some challenges of their own. Cindy, the youngest of all, remained the youngest and would probably continue to enjoy the privileges of that position. Her antics would make her the center of attention and she would be protected and somewhat spoiled by an increased number of members of the family, including Alice, the housekeeper. Bobby, on the other hand, would no longer be the youngest sibling and might be relegated to the role of a middle child. Instead of receiving the attention he was used to as the baby of the family, he would suddenly find himself in no man's land position, the forgotten one.

If there was any natural tension between siblings before they merged into one family, it would be accentuated now that there are six instead of three living under the same roof, sharing the same

rooms and bathrooms. You don't have to be a professional psychologist to see all the real and potential challenges a family like this would face from day one. While there were a few minor situations of conflict from time to time, they were all solved peacefully and happily within the thirty minutes of the show.

### **Media Portrayal is Not Real Life**

Many stepfamilies are not quite as large or complicated as the Brady Bunch, although there are some that are even more so. Another movie from 1968 showed an even larger blended family. *Yours Mine and Ours*, starring Lucille Ball and Henry Fonda, is a similar story of the Brady Bunch but with a lot more children and the addition of children they adopted once they were married for a total of eighteen. Through the miracle of movies, they manage to live happily and with no conflict, most of the time. In real life, however, new siblings in a blended family can collide and they will not easily relinquish the personality traits which have already been formed. More than likely there will be serious competition, or outright battle, to determine who is the boss for every position in the family constellation.

The addition of naturally born or adopted children into the mix can only add more chaos and challenges to a family that may be barely hanging on by the skin of their teeth to survive. Here's another example of a smaller family than the ones mentioned before. Jonathan, a father of two, Michael and Susie, marries Stephanie, mother to Kimberly. Michael is older than Kimberly and will try to retain his position as the first-born of this newly formed stepfamily. Kimberly, on the other hand, is not only a



first-born but an only child. She will fight for the control she is used to having and will do her best to not be a quiet, overlooked middle child.

A couple of years later, Jonathan and Stephanie decide that they want to have a child of their own, so Rene is born. With her addition, several things change in the family configuration. While Michael remains the first-born, he is also in the biggest minority, literally surrounded by girls. Susie, on the other hand, is no longer the last-born or baby of the family. She is dethroned and relegated to a middle child position. The fireworks are bound to erupt, and frequently! These are just a few examples that media portrays of stepfamilies in non-reality ways.

### **Former Spouses and Another Stepfamily**

As if Jonathan and Stephanie's life was not challenging enough, Stephanie's ex-husband, Bob, married Charlene, a widow with two sons, Pete and Albert. Now, whenever Kimberly stays at her father's home, she must contend with that other family configuration where she is the youngest one, the only girl, and the baby of the family. On the other hand, Jonathan's ex-wife, Rose, married Frank, who has three children of his own: Sharon, Tammy, and Tim. So, whenever Michael and Susie stay with their mom, they must sort through the confusing arrangements with their three new stepsiblings on that side.

If you think that is confusing to read, we assure you that it is even more confusing to live through it. In fact, we also need to throw another complicating ingredient into the mix and that is grandparents and extended families for all these children. They will have their own grandparents, that

is the parents of their own parents, on both sides of the families, plus the grandparents of their stepsiblings. Holidays, birthdays, vacations, discipline, schoolwork, finances, and a host of other things will make their lives chaotic, challenging, and cumbersome.

### **Communication is Key**

In a podcast, Brian Mayer (2019) shared some useful ideas to help people trying to navigate through the troubled waters of a stepfamily. He suggested that you discuss birth order theory as one of the dynamics that could influence how all your children may react to living under the same roof. Understanding that if the age gap between the children is more pronounced it will tend to have less of an impact on them. You may also remember that the oldest, and possibly the youngest, of the siblings will experience the least amount of change in their birth order. But that should make you more aware of the feelings and experiences of those who may be dethroned in the process and who will become middle children.

While communication with your potential future spouse is important, it is also critical that you communicate with each and all of the children and help them understand how birth order has affected who they are and how it will potentially affect them in their new family. Because of all these changing environments and dynamics, it is important that each child still has their own place. This could be their own room, if possible, or at the very least a well-defined area of the room with their own space. Teach them to respect everyone's space and maintain proper boundaries. Because every family has their own traditions, include each child in the planning of events so they

can feel they're part of the whole and not strangers coming in.

## Conclusion

Our intent is not to discourage anyone with children from pursuing getting married again but rather to help them understand the complications and challenges that such a decision may bring to themselves, and especially to their children. Many stepfamilies have been able to sort through these difficulties and have managed to thrive in spite of the obstacles along the way. We simply want to provide you with important

information to consider before making the decision to remarry, particularly if you or your potential spouse have children of your own. Ignoring these dynamics could make your future home a battlefield, and your children, or you, the wounded on that battlefield.

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## JUST BLEND AND CHILL!

*Laughter, shared experiences, and discovering points of connection together can all help blended families to grow trust and build healthy relationships. This article is a collection of ten different activities designed to help blended families, and other families, explore their strengths, stories, values, needs and preferences. They have been created to help families get to know each other better and have fun.*

### Introduction

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### I. The Incredibles

Some science fiction movies include several superheroes with different skills. In order to solve a world-threatening problem, all the superheroes need to work together as a team and use all of their special skills. Discover the superhero skills of everyone in your family so that everyone feels valued and able to contribute something important.

### Bible Connection

God gives each one of us special gifts so that we can help each other, work together and be stronger as a family.

*“There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but they all come from the*

*same Spirit. There are different ways to serve the same Lord, and we can each do different things. Yet the same God works in all of us and helps us in everything we do. The Spirit has given each of us a special way of serving others” (1 Cor. 12:4-7 CEV).*

### Supplies

- Paper
- Colored markers or pens
- Pencils
- Simple button/badge blanks purchased from a hobby store

### Instructions

- Invite each person to describe their favorite fictional or Biblical superhero, say what they like best about them and name their hero’s main super-skill.
- Then think about the people in your family. What are their special skills? What kind of superhero are they? How do they use their hero-skills to help your family solve its everyday challenges?

- Who is the super-comforter, super-fixer, super-tidier, super-driver, super-cheerer-upper, super-gardener, super-brave-person, super-nurse, super-peace-maker, etc?
- Once you have worked together to identify each person's super-skills, ask them to design their own special superhero button/badge to wear. Then have each person create a special poster to remind everyone else in the family of their super skills.
- Choose a special sound-maker or bell to ring, whenever you need the help of one of the superheroes in your home. Say, 'I think this situation calls for our super-peace-maker!' or think of another fun way to invite the appropriate super-heroes in your family to help when they're needed.
- Coach each child in their super-skill so that gifts and character strengths are encouraged and nurtured.

### Another Idea

- Design superhero t-shirts with your own family logo. Create the design on your computer and use special t-shirt printing paper. Iron your printed logos onto a set of plain t-shirts.

## II. Family Values Tower (for families with older children)

### Bible Connection

Paul describes some of the values that help to create healthy relationships in Romans 12:9-18. Study this together and make a list of all the family values that you can find hiding in this passage.

*"Be sincere in your love for others.*

*Hate everything that is evil and hold tight to everything that is good. Love each other as brothers and sisters and honor others more than you do yourself. Never give up. Eagerly follow the Holy Spirit and serve the Lord. Let your hope make you glad. Be patient in time of trouble and never stop praying. Take care of God's needy people and welcome strangers into your home. Ask God to bless everyone who mistreats you. Ask him to bless them and not to curse them. When others are happy, be happy with them, and when they are sad, be sad. Be friendly with everyone. Don't be proud and feel that you are smarter than others. Make friends with ordinary people. Don't mistreat someone who has mistreated you. But try to earn the respect of others, and do your best to live at peace with everyone"* (Rom. 12:9-18 CEV).

### Supplies

- About 30 blank postcards or index cards
- Marker pens
- A handful of colored buttons

### Preparation

Write one of the following relational values on each postcard:

- Being truthful
- Sharing what we have
- Welcoming each other
- Being respectful
- Spending time together
- Being kind
- Putting others first
- Being patient with each other
- Forgiving each other
- Speaking calmly to each other

- Living together peacefully
- Staying out of debt
- Having fun together
- Celebrating each other's achievements
- Supporting each other
- Encouraging each other
- Helping each other reach goals
- Doing what's best for everyone
- Talking about future plans together
- Celebrating family traditions
- Taking care of the world
- Nurturing each other's faith journey
- Keeping each other safe

### Instructions

- Lay the cards out on a table so that everyone can walk around them, read them, and choose their most important values.
- Give each person five buttons and ask them to place one button on each of their top five family values.
- Use the number of buttons placed on each card to help you identify your family's top ten values. The card with most buttons indicates your top value.
- Arrange your values in a 'tower' with your most important family values at the top of the list. If some values have the same button score discuss whether one is slightly more important or decide that all your top ten values are equally important. It's up to you how you arrange them.
- Once you have created your family values tower, discuss what was challenging about this activity. What did you learn about your family as you talked about your shared values?

If there was a blank card on which you could write another value, what would you want to write on it?

- Design or print a poster of your top ten values to remind everyone what's most important to your family.

### Other Ideas

- Every week, or once in a while, check in with your family values. How have you been living them out together? Try to find one practical example of how you have lived out each value to show how they work in your family life. This can be very encouraging.
- Also, if there is a crisis in the family, or a disagreement, look at the values together and wonder which ones might support each of you through the current challenge.

### III. Family Timeline

Make a family timeline to help everyone understand each other's stories, and how their stories connect, overlap, or vary.

### Bible Connection

Psalms 107 describes part of Israel's timeline.

### Supplies

- Roll of strong plain paper, such as plain, smooth, unpasted wallpaper
- Thick marker pens
- Ruler
- Sticky notes

### Instructions

- Decide on the best way for each part of the family to create a time-

line for their life before your family was blended.

- Give each part of your blended family 3-4 yards (meters) of paper.
- Decide on the best scale for the time spans of your family so that your scales are the same (e.g. maybe 3" (7cm) equals one year)
- Work on your different timelines together and then work on a shared timeline covering the time you have been together.
- On your timelines mark births, deaths (if appropriate), special events, answered prayers, significant vacations and special achievements.
- Use drawings, photos, short stories, etc, to mark the events on your separate and shared timelines.
- Place your timelines where you can see them often and add to them.
- How did making your separate timelines help you to get to know each other better? What was helpful or challenging about creating your shared timeline?

#### **IV. Invent a Machine**

Invent the machine your family (and probably many others) really need right now!

#### **Bible Connection**

*"Live in harmony with one another"*  
(Rom 12:16 NIV).

*"Bear one another's burdens"*  
(Gal. 6:2 NIV)

#### **Supplies**

- Large sheets of plain white paper
- Pencils
- Erasers
- Marker pens

#### **Instructions**

- Ask each person to design a brand-new machine that your family really needs, but nobody has invented yet. Maybe you need a lunch-packing machine, a helping-children-go-to-sleep-machine, a finding-things machine, or a peace-making machine.
- Give everyone up to 15 minutes to design the machine that they think the family needs the most. It can be as imaginative as you like!
- When everyone has finished their machines, give each person time to introduce their machine to the rest of the family. Explain how it works and what effect the machine might have in your home if you could really have one.

#### **Some things to talk about together**

- What will you call your special invention?
- What difference would this machine make to each of your lives?
- If you can't have this machine, what could you do as a family to solve the challenge by yourselves?

#### **Other Ideas**

- Instead of using paper, use construction toys and build machines in 3D.
- Alternatively, use all kinds of boxes and plastic packaging to build a machine out of junk. Include things like elastic bands, paper fasteners, string, and paper clips so that you can create a moving model if you wish.

#### **V. Celebration Garland**

Decorate a garland to reflect your family's celebrations during the past year.



## Bible Connection

*“With all my heart I praise the LORD! I will never forget how kind he has been” (Psalm 103:2 CEV)*

Psalm 103:2. King David invites us to remember the good things that God does for us, because those memories help to keep our faith in Him strong and alive. What are the good things that God has done for your family this year?

## Supplies

- A base for your garland or bunting, such as brightly-colored wool, rope, artificial greenery, etc.
- Scraps of parcel ribbon or string for tying objects onto the garland
- Scissors
- Objects that remind you of your different family celebrations and events

## Instructions

- Talk together about the different blessings and significant milestones that your family has experienced during the past twelve months.
- Think of a small symbol or object that represents each of the good things or blessings that you have listed, and then go on an object hunt to find them.
- Use recycled parcel ribbon, string or fabric scraps to tie your objects to your base garland in their time sequence.
- Display the garland in a special place and thank God for His blessings every time you look at it or add more items.

## Other Ideas

- Use a purchased wreath and decorate it with objects.
- Or write your blessings on luggage or gift tags and tie them to the garland or wreath.

## VI. Present Time!

Here is an opportunity to give each other imaginary and wonderful gifts – the kinds of presents you would like to give each other...if only you could!

## Bible Connection

If we know how to give good gifts to each other, just think of the gifts that God, would love to give us! Or maybe He’s already given them to us, but we haven’t noticed them, or bothered to open them yet?

*“As bad as you are, you still know how to give good gifts to your children. But your heavenly Father is even more ready to give good things to people who ask” (Mat 7:11 CEV)*

## Supplies

- Large blank greetings cards, or sheets of white card folded in half
- Marker pens and art materials
- Pens, pencils and erasers

## Instructions

- Give each person a blank card.
- Ask each person to draw a simple picture of a gift on the front of their greetings card, add a gift tag to the gift, and write their name on the tag to show who the card belongs to.
- Pass all the personalized gift cards around the family.
- When you receive a card, draw or write a description of the gift you would like to give to the card’s own-



er if you could give them anything in the whole wide world.

- When everyone has written in everyone else's cards, return the gift cards to their owners so that they can see and read about the gifts that everyone else would like to give them.
- Don't forget to thank each other for your 'virtual' gifts!
- Keep your gift card as a memento to remind you of the generous thoughts of each person in your family.

### Other Ideas

- Give each person enough sheets of plain paper to make a paper gift for everyone else in their family. The paper can be cut, torn, folded or written on to create imaginary gifts that you can give to each other.

### Some things to talk about together

- What did you most enjoy about giving the imaginary gifts to each other?
- What did you most enjoy about receiving the imaginary gifts from each other?

## VII. Comfort Menu

Create a special menu together of all the different ways the people in your family like to be comforted when they are sad or distressed.

### Bible Connection

When we show we are sad, other people can comfort us.

*"God blesses those people who grieve. They will find comfort!"*

(Mat. 5:4 CEV)

### Supplies

- A sheet of thin card or sturdy paper
- Marker pens

### Instructions

- Create a list together of at least twelve different ways that the members of your family like to be comforted after a hard day, such as being hugged, being listened to in a supportive way, having a mug of hot chocolate, enjoying a back rub, being helped with a challenging task, spending time together doing something relaxing and fun...etc.
- This list is your family's 'Comfort Menu'. Whenever anyone in the family feels sad or distressed, they can choose a comforting activity from the 'menu'.
- Add 'Something else' to the end of the menu in case anyone needs another option that's not on the list.
- Laminate the menu and fix it onto your fridge. Give each person their own fridge magnet to place on their favorite comfort item whenever they're feeling in need of some comfort. Remember to look at the list to check if anyone needs something.

### Another idea

- Create a comfort 'quilt' by writing your favorite ways of being comforted onto different squares of lightly patterned paper. Arrange the squares into a patchwork collage and stick them onto a larger sheet of paper, like a quilt.

### Some things to talk about together

- Think of a time when someone comforted you in a way that really helped. Why was their way of comforting so helpful to you?
- When do you think each person in your family most needs to be comforted?
- How do you let others know when you are sad and you need comforting?
- How can you make sure that you're comforting each other in the best possible way?

### VIII. Happy Jellies

What makes you feel happy? What makes the other people in your family feel happy? How can you use this information to make each other even happier?

### Bible Connection

Cheerfulness makes you feel better!  
*"A friendly smile makes you happy,  
and good news makes you feel strong"*  
(Prov. 15:30 CEV).

### Supplies

- A pack of assorted jelly candies (babies, bears or beans) – each person in your family will need three candies of the same color (i.e. Jane – 3 green jellies; Tom - 3 red jellies; Mum - 3 yellow jellies; Dad – 3 orange jellies, etc.)
- A large plate
- Lots of little dishes or saucers
- A pack of mini sticky notes
- Marker pens

### Preparation

- Pour all the jelly babies/beans/bears onto a large plate.

- Arrange the little dishes or saucers around the large plate.
- Write the following sentences on sticky notes and stick each note onto one of the smaller dishes or saucers:
  1. I smile when someone does or says something funny.
  2. I smile when I read or hear a funny story, or see a cartoon, or a TV comedy.
  3. I smile when someone does something kind for me.
  4. I smile when I know I've done something really well.
  5. I smile when life feels good.
  6. I smile when I see something beautiful.
  7. I smile when I'm with people who love me.
  8. Something else makes me smile.

### Instructions

- Give each person a little saucer or dish for their three jelly candies. Starting with the youngest person, let each person pick out a different colored jelly candy and then find two more jelly candies that are the same color, so that each of you has three identical jelly babies/beans/bears in a little dish.
- Read the different sticky labels out loud, so that everyone understands the different choices.
- Choose the top three things that make you smile.
- Put one of your jelly babies/bears/beans into a dish or saucer with the label that best describes what makes you smile. Repeat with the other

two candies for your second and third favorite ‘funnies’.

- When everyone has finished, see where you have all placed your jelly candies and talk about the following questions.

### **Some things to talk about together**

- Where are most of the jelly candies? Are they bunched together in two or three dishes, or are they evenly spread?
- Which dish has the least jelly candies, or maybe no jelly candies? Why do you think no one put their jellies in that dish?
- Ask each person to describe why they chose to put their jellies in the different dishes. If any jellies were placed in the ‘Something else makes me smile’ dish, find out what the something else is.
- What have you learned about each other that you didn’t know before? How can you help the other people in your family to smile more often?
- After each person has explained what makes them smile, have a jelly eating party. Maybe you could suck the jellies until they dissolve, or see whose jellies last the longest!

### **IX. Knowing Me, Knowing You**

How much do you really know about each other’s lives? Here’s a way to find out more about each other...

#### **Bible Connection**

*“Even the hairs on your head are counted”* (Mat. 10:30 CEV).

Read also Psalm 139. Who knows you really well? How well do you know each other? God knows us so well that He even

knows the number of hairs on our head. Even though He knows all about our brokenness and our funny little ways, He still loves us! God cares for us in the best possible way, because He knows us best, and the better we know each other, the better we can care for each other, too.

### **Supplies**

- A packet of plain index cards or slips of paper
- Marker pens for writing

### **Instructions**

- Give each person several cards or pieces of paper.
- Ask them to write a different question on each of the cards or papers that would help them to find out more about the other members of their family. These could be factual questions such as ‘Who was your best friend when you were 10 and are you still in contact with them?’ ‘What would you do if someone gave you a million dollars?’ ‘What’s your least favorite vegetable?’ ‘Which Bible character, apart from Jesus, would you like to have as your best friend?’
- After several minutes collect all the question cards together, shuffle them and place them face down in a pile on the table. If you used paper, fold the papers in half and put them in a large bowl.
- Take it in turns to pick up a question and answer it. If the question doesn’t quite fit (perhaps because you are only 8 and you pick up the first question suggested above) adapt the question to suit you or take another question.

- Give everyone a chance to answer at least three questions.

### **Other ideas**

- Bring out the question cards or papers at a family gathering and so you can all get to know each other better.
- Add more questions from time to time.

### **Some things to talk about**

- How can asking more questions help us to get to know each other better?
- Which question did you like answering the most?
- What have you learned about your family members that will help you to care for them better, understand them better, or feel closer to them?

## **X. Generation Game**

What would happen if the parents and children in your family swapped places for a day? Or even for a few minutes? Turn the generations upside down and see what happens...

### **Bible Connection**

It's important for parents to encourage their children to make good choices -without annoying them! Ephesians 6:4, NIV.

### **Supplies:**

- Blank white postcards or plain index cards
- Pens
- Timer
- Things to write on the scenario cards (you can add other ideas suitable for your family):

- The children are refusing to eat their spinach.  
The parents are encouraging their children to eat the spinach.
- The children are refusing to clean their teeth.  
The parents are trying to persuade the children to clean their teeth.
- The teenager son or daughter wants to borrow the car to go to a party with three other friends.  
The parents are trying to talk to the teenage son or daughter about driving safely when borrowing the car and getting home on time.
- The parents are encouraging the children to tidy their rooms.  
The children want to watch their favourite programme on TV instead of tidying up.

### **Instructions**

- Place the generation game 'scenario' cards upside down on the table.
- The parents will need to pretend to be the children in the scenario, and the children will need to pretend to be the parents.
- If there are more than two children in a family, let them take it in turns to act being the parents.
- Turn over one of the cards and read the scenario aloud. Make sure that everyone understands the role they need to play.
- Start by inviting each person to say something about themselves in their new role, to help them feel at ease with their character.

- Set the timer for five minutes.
- Then start to play out the scenario together, pretending you are your new characters.
- When the buzzer goes, pick up another card. Swap roles, if necessary, and set the timer for another five minutes.
- At the end of the activity de-brief by saying three things about the real you, so that you can move smoothly back into your normal roles.
- Then talk about what you learned from swapping roles.

### **Some things to talk about together**

- What was the funniest thing about playing a different person in your family?
- What was the hardest thing?
- What did you learn about each other from doing this activity?
- What might you do differently in the future after experimenting with the role-swap?

### **Another idea**

- Gather some simple props to help identify who is mom, dad or the children - such as hats, aprons, ties, toys, etc.

# FINANCIAL PITFALLS IN BLENDED FAMILIES

## Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to delve into some of the financial pitfalls to building a new home with a blended family. Blending families takes time, and each family will need to determine what works best for them to avoid these financial pitfalls along their journey. Like all families, the actions taken today will need to evolve to meet the ever-changing needs of the individuals in the family. We will cover some basic principles in this article that should help individuals uncover and overcome the unique challenges of merging two families into one.*

## Introduction

A train wreck is massive and distressful, with tons of steel, plastic, and glass crushing and breaking, bending, and scraping, with no respect for the limits or boundaries of the humans inside or in its path. In a similar scenario, victims of divorce, a terminal illness, or survivors of spousal loss must likewise walk a path of healing. “There’s a path of healing that every victim of a serious [traumatic] accident must take” (Maxwell, 2015).

## Transitioning to a New Normal

When home life transitions from what some call normal to a new normal, whether it’s from divorce or death of a spouse, new realities emerge. The lasting trauma of the breakup, the grieving process, and expenditures not covered by insurance are emotional crosses to bear, as well as the accompanying heartbreak, employment status concerns, possible housing needs, transportation concerns, economic impact, possible attorney’s fees, effect on children,

etc. All together it becomes a crisis of significant proportions. This new normal may not be so normal at all.

Just as an accident victim is triaged immediately to assess the level of care needed, broken families and divorce candidates will need quick triaging to curb further trauma in the crisis. As defined by Merriam-Webster, triage is “the sorting of and allocation of treatment to patients...” and “the assigning of priority order...” At this point in the crisis, triage is essential to prioritize the immediate status of one’s life, resulting in a reality check and a path of healing that every victim of divorce or subject of a loss must seek. With God’s help and the help of others, healing can begin.

Trust God and seek His help daily. David implies this trust by saying, “...I’m leaping and singing in the circle of your love; you saw my pain, you disarmed my tormentors. You didn’t leave me in their clutches but gave me room to breathe” (Psalm 31:6-8, MSB). In all circumstances,

whatever the crisis, God draws near, understands our pain, and gives us room to pause and breathe.

### **Align Values and Goals with Finances**

During this pause conduct a reality check and determine your financial realities right away. Some studies show that a high percentage of divorced couples point to financial problems as the key reason for ending their marriage. “A woman who finds herself in the jaws of a divorce or who has recently lost her spouse and now struggles to call herself a widow is forced to deal with many challenges. These traumatic events can cause a person to experience emotional stress, fear and, perhaps most common and detrimental to functioning on a day-to-day basis - confusion” (Wibberley, 2015). Some spouses may not be personally involved with the family finances or long-term financial planning and are forced to become abruptly proficient in these matters. “The number one issue couples fight about is also a topic many couples avoid discussing - money. According to a new survey by Ramsey Solutions, money fights are the second leading cause of divorce, behind infidelity” (Ramsey, 2018). With some preparation and planning, individuals can protect their financial interests and take charge of their future well-being.

Along with conducting a financial reality check and fully grasping the new normal, individuals should take a good look at their values before plotting a course forward. When building a new home after a divorce a real pitfall many people fall into is reacting to all the forces around them and making hasty decisions concerning what to do next, not unlike a rudderless boat on the ocean being tossed about by the wind

and waves. It is in times of turmoil that one should look at their values and assess what is truly important in their life. With a firm grasp of their values individuals can make decisions that align with the vision they have for their life, rather than unintentionally creating a more difficult problem to deal with in the future.

Take for example, Paul, who found himself living on his own after his 12-year marriage ended. Looking at his finances he determined he needed to make more money to pay for his living expenses and child support. He knew the factory he worked at paid a premium for third shift workers, paying 1.5 times more than his current salary. So, he moved to third shift but soon found he often ended up missing activities his kids were involved in. When he attended their events, he usually had to sacrifice sleep and was tired and cranky around his kids. His desire to make more money negatively impacted something he truly cherished, which was to spend time with his children.

To avoid these unintended consequences individuals can ask themselves, “What do I feel is most important in providing for my family?” For example, they may want to maintain emotional and spiritual support in the raising of their children, they may want to prioritize financial needs, or they may value providing a good education. All of these are worthy goals, and priorities will be different from person to person, but it is wise for each to assess which of their goals is the highest priority so they will not lose focus on what is important. This may require some adjustment to goals that are not the highest priority, but if the top priorities are always kept in mind then any



sacrifices made will be for the benefit of what is most important.

After a divorce, stay focused and avoid self-destructing behavior. In a relationship, it can be quite common to use money as a weapon. However, one of the biggest mistakes is, "...when one of the spouses goes off the deep end regarding spending money in a mad scramble to gain an upper hand. Whether sabotaging of the finances is intentional or not, ignoring bills because you assume the other spouse is taking care of everything is problematic" (Wibberley, 2015). The death of a spouse is different than a divorce which arises from a diverse emotional place - anger. And that can be just as destructive as dealing with grief.

After losing a spouse, a reorganization must take place. A marriage is the combining of two lives into one, and this union inevitably leads to a splitting of the workload where each spouse has various roles and responsibilities. When this union is broken up through death or divorce, the remaining individual must now take on all the tasks for which their former spouse was responsible. Having all these new responsibilities may seem overwhelming to some and a natural tendency is to upend everything and start from scratch. One financial adviser with 20 years of practice suggests, "The best single piece of advice that I was able to provide to a person who has lost her spouse is, 'Don't make any major decisions for at least one year.' If possible, try to defer decisions like moving across the country to be closer to friends or family, buying a new home or moving in with a new companion" (King & Hedges, 2017).

## **Tips to Reorganizing Finances**

1. Start by assembling and organizing your financial documents, bank and investment statements, previously filed tax returns, and make sure all taxes have been paid and are current. Once you have gathered all documents, review your cash flow, and make sure all your bills are paid.
2. If divorce is looming, recognize assets, their worth and whether they are owned together or separately. Research employee benefits you and your spouse are eligible for, as well as life, health, and disability insurance policies that both own by virtue of employers. Resolve whether beneficiaries need to be changed on life insurance policies, investments, wills, etc. Ascertain whether the house will be transferred to either spouse as part of the settlement. List income and expenditures that you will have once you are divorced.
3. From the three major credit reporting agencies, obtain a copy of your credit reports. Evaluate your liabilities as well as those of your spouse. Register with a credit-monitoring service.
4. In the loss of a spouse, locate insurance policies and communicate with each company; notify them of your spouse's passing and gather information about death benefits. Upon receiving a life insurance benefit, place it aside, or deposit it until you are in a better position to determine what you wish to do with it.

5. Hold off on buying or selling investments you do not understand. Once you understand your situation, pursue financial advice from a Christian financial adviser, CPA and/or an estate attorney. Also seek a divorce professional in the case of divorce.

### **Taking Responsibility for Your Future**

Blending families and finances after a death or divorce typically takes a considerable amount of effort and communication, even more so than a first marriage. “Over 50% of U.S. families are remarried or recoupled after a divorce and at least 13% of all parents in the U.S. are also stepparents, according to the most recent Census Bureau data” (King & Hedges, 2017). It is projected that the blended family, where a couple remarries and brings with them children from a previous marriage, will surpass the traditional family, in which all the children of the household have the same mother and father, and become the predominant family structure in the United States in the near future. This blending can be challenging because of residual obligations to the previous marriage while operating in the new union. Consider the following example, “Before marrying my husband, who has two children from a first marriage, I knew approximately how much he was paying in alimony. But when I saw his monthly payments, which equaled my monthly salary, getting taken out of our newly established joint checking account each month, it gave me pause to say the least. It may have illustrated how much he was paying or how little I was making at the time, but watching my entire hard-earned salary go to my husband’s ex-wife

upset me more than I expected” (King & Hedges, 2017).

Be transparent and let your spouse know your current financial commitments. Be aware of alimony, child support (will you be receiving or paying?), college tuition payments, existing financial obligations and what is owed individually so there will not be any surprises. Discuss whether insurance will cover children and stepchildren. Disclose if the divorce agreement obligates you to pay for college tuition if your children are in elementary school now. What about when the children or stepchildren reach a certain age? Will there be financial obligations that are not apparent now but may be required later? Make sure all these issues are discussed in advance.

Divorce rates for second marriages are higher than for first marriages and a good way for blended families to increase their odds of staying together is to start by having a clear understanding of all assets on both sides. Protect what you have by opening up to your spouse and telling them everything. We will go into greater detail about how this can be done through a “Togetherness Agreement”.

If you are out of debt, thank the Lord. However, if you are in debt as is the case with most people, the following outline will help you to begin a debt elimination process that will help bring financial independence to you and your family. It is a straightforward approach. The foundation and entrance to debt-free living is a relationship and commitment to God. “If you love me...” (John 14:15), be faithful with His holy tithe and offerings to access His wisdom and blessing (Prov. 3; Deut. 28; Mal. 3; Matt. 6, 25). No one would honestly expect God’s

blessing while robbing Him. He is eager to bless those who love and obey Him.

Begin with a freeze on all new debt. Cease opening new accounts, curtail short-term credit fixes (credit cards, personal loans, cash advances, second mortgages) to solve what may appear to be an emergency. As well-known financial expert and radio host Dave Ramsey encourages you to immediately save a \$1,000-dollar emergency fund while you execute a debt reduction plan. Stabilize. Do not borrow any more money and you won't get further into debt.

Make an agreement with God to pay off your debts as quickly as possible. Set a target date for being debt-free. When the Lord blesses you economically, use the funds to decrease debt. Most people receive unexpected funds and simply spend them. Plan to not make new purchases with extra money. This is probably the most critical part in the process. When an agreement is made with Jesus, you will know what to do with the extra cash. Add it to your debt-reduction strategy.

Organize your debts from the largest to the smallest in descending order, (a.k.a Debt Snowballing: <https://www.daveramsey.com/blog/get-out-of-debt-with-the-debt-snowball-plan>) Continue until the last debt is paid off. If you have a mortgage, you can begin to make extra payments on the principal, reducing your interest over time. You may also begin to increase your emergency fund up to three to six months of expenses before looking into adding to your investment portfolio.

Do not try to do this all on your own; reach out to Christian advisers for help. Becoming a widow or going through a divorce necessitates examining your whole

economic life, an intimidating chore even in the best of conditions. For both the short and long term, financial planning is crucial. Get an objective assessment of your finances from someone who can calculate your financial situation and offer direction and suggestions. Your adviser should be qualified in working with widows or divorcees. Ask how many clients they have previously worked with in your situation.

The more informed you are, the better equipped and empowered you will be to take responsibility for your financial future. An adviser can aid in expanding your financial understanding and empower you to make informed choices that are best for you and your family. The best way to find answers to questions like what qualifications each planner has and how each planner earns money is to interview several financial advisers. Do your due diligence. Get references and review them carefully.

### **Strategically Plan to Maintain Christian Education**

When your life has been turned upside down and you are struggling to make ends meet, it makes sense to eliminate any expenses that are not a necessity. If your kids are enrolled in an Adventist K-12 School, you may ask yourself if you should continue paying the tuition when your kids can go to public schools for free. If you have placed your children's spiritual and educational needs as a priority then keeping them in an Adventist School is a necessity, and it would be a mistake to pull them out.

Study after study has shown the benefits of an Adventist education. If you are most concerned about their spiritual needs, then according to the General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics and Research

(2020), *The Role of Seventh-day Adventist Education in Youth Retention*, 96 percent of children who attend 11 or more years of Adventist education are baptized, and 90 percent attend church on a regular basis. If you are concerned about your kids' academic development, according to the CognitiveGenesis study (2020), a four-year study of 30,000 students enrolled in Seventh-day Adventist schools across North America, students in Adventist schools achieve an average of half a grade above predicted ability in all subjects. And over 85 percent of graduates from Adventist high schools attend college with 80 percent of them completing college degrees. This is compared to 66 percent and 14 percent respectively of public high school students.

If finances are making it difficult to keep your kids in an Adventist school do not give up hope as there are resources available to help defray costs of a Christian education. A good place to start is to contact the Adventist school itself. They will be familiar with most of the resources available, or at the very least can tell you who to contact. Another great resource is your local church as they may be able to provide scholarships to those who are in financial need or seek donors who are willing to help defray tuition costs. Many conferences also have programs such as a Three-Way Plan, where you can apply for financial aid for your child. You may need to share your financial information in order to apply for help, but your information is kept confidential. Each conference is different so give them a call and see if they can help.

The bottom line here is that statistically your kids' spiritual and educational needs are better provided for in an Adventist

school and resources are available to keep them enrolled.

### **Merging Blended Families**

"Therefore, shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." (Gen. 2:24, ASV). Merging two lives into one can be difficult when both parties are just starting out in life and are not bringing much in the way of assets. As previously mentioned, when two come together later in life bringing with them their children, their homes, their bank accounts, their debts, and everything else they own, it can get exponentially more complicated. There are many emotional and financial realities that need to be dealt with in order to successfully turn two into one, and we will cover some ways of addressing these realities.

"The Smart Stepfamily Guide to Financial Planning" takes the concept of a prenuptial agreement (an agreement that assumes failure) and turns the concept on its head in the form of a togetherness agreement (TA), an agreement that commits each other to making their marriage work. A TA is a "strategy that brings clarity to some of the most emotionally charged issues for couples while reaffirming their commitment to the permanency of their marriage" (Deal, Pettys, & Edwards, 2019). It is a detailed financial vision for a couple's future that is mutually agreed upon and facilitates togetherness. A TA can be created at any time but ideally is done at the beginning of or before attempting to blend two families together.

As previously discussed, it requires a full disclosure of everyone's assets, debts, dreams, and obligations. Everything

must be laid out so both parties can see what they are working with and potential challenges they need to overcome to secure the permanency of their marriage. It is important that both be involved, and that each agree how they will meet and facilitate their needs. Tough issues should be dealt with in the TA such as:

- If young children are being brought to the marriage what will each parent's responsibilities be?
- Will retirement accounts and life savings be shared or kept separate?
- If one person owns a business, how will that be handled?
- If one person is expecting a sizable inheritance how will that factor into the cohesion of the family?
- If one person brings debt to the union, how will that burden be shared?

By using a TA many potential problems are discussed openly before emotions take over and possibly derail the conversation. The TA helps create a firm foundation of trust, transparency, and commitment that will ensure successful blending of two families. How you blend your relationships in a stepfamily will directly impact how you merge your finances, and your finances are a major component to creating a new sense of togetherness.

### **Three ways in which a blended family can merge their finances**

1. **The One Pot Approach** - This approach combines all the assets of the marriage. All bank accounts, assets, savings, household expenses, and debts are handled mutually by both spouses.

2. **The Two Pot Approach** - Couples keep everything separate.

3. **Three Pot Approach** - Each spouse has their own accounts and assets while adding a third pot in which both are mutually responsible. For example, each person may keep retirement savings and some assets in their name only while owning a house together and having a joint checking account to which they each contribute for household expenses.

Each system has its own pros and cons, and it will be up to each couple to determine what is best for them. It is possible that as the blended family grows and matures it may change its approach over time.

Blending finances is not an easy process, and often emotional issues will creep up and reveal themselves through financial means. "Financial conflicts are often just a symptom of much deeper blended family dynamics and relationships" (Deal, Pettys, & Edwards, 2019). For example, if one person has a fear of abandonment, they may see the other spouse's desire to keep some assets separate as an indication of not being fully committed to the marriage, which then leads to fights and arguments over having the asset put into both names. When these emotional issues come up, it is crucial the couple be patient with one another and to articulate what is truly bothering them. This will require a lot of patience and grace to work through, but by working through their fears they will continue to grow the marriage stronger. Once they have addressed the emotional challenges, they can then decide how to handle the ongoing blending of their finances.

## Revising Estate Plans after Second Marriage

The final financial pitfall to building a new home with a blended family can surely lead to hurt feelings and damaged relationships if left unattended, yet many people do nothing to plan for this event that will sadly happen to all of us. We are talking now about preparing for death, which even in the simplest of family situations is a difficult task. When taking into consideration the added complexity of blended families, planning one's estate can be full of minefields, and certainly should not be left to living family members to guess how the decedent wanted their assets to be divided.

A good first step is to determine who will get your assets and, if you have any minor children, who will be their guardian. The values assessment previously discussed will help guide you in this process as the values that govern how you choose to live your life should also govern what you leave behind after your death. Some questions to consider in who will receive your assets are:

- a. How do you want to provide for your spouse?
- b. Should any assets be given directly to your children?
- c. Are there any stepchildren you want to support?
- d. Do you want to give anything to your former spouse?

Finding the right balance to these and other questions can be a challenge. To take care of the needs of your blended family there are four options to consider:

1. **Give all or nothing.** You could leave everything to your spouse, or you could leave everything to your

kids, but this could result in anger and bitterness among the various parties.

2. **Split up everything.** You could give some to your spouse and some to your children. By looking at your assets you could determine what makes the most sense to give to whom, and by explaining your reasoning ahead of time it may help your loved ones to accept your decision more easily.
3. **Give some now and some later.** Through a trust you could give assets to your spouse to be used for the rest of their life, such as real estate or a retirement account. Upon their death the asset could then be transferred to your children.
4. **You can grow the estate.** Through life insurance you could increase the size of the estate to better provide for everyone's needs, and with the relatively inexpensive premiums of a term life insurance policy it can be affordable.

Keep in mind your estate plan should answer the question of who will receive your possessions if you were to die today. As time goes by you will need to update your plan to reflect your blended family's changing needs.

Once you have determined who will receive your assets, a major step in avoiding inherent pitfalls in estate planning for blended families is to ensure all the legal documents are up to date. When starting a new family, it is crucial to update your will, powers of attorney, medical powers of attorney, trust and life insurance and retirement account beneficiaries. These



documents will not update themselves, and if you should pass away before beneficiary changes are made, your assets will go to the beneficiaries originally listed, which may be your former spouse. Some states automatically void a former spouse as a beneficiary, but this is an exception rather than the norm, and to avoid any major mistakes you will want to update your beneficiaries.

One common misconception is that a will or trust will always dictate who is to receive assets at the time of death. While this is often the case, it is not a foregone conclusion. How assets are owned play a major role in how they are passed on. Real estate is a great example of this. If the property is deeded as joint tenancy with right of survivorship, a common form of ownership for married couples, the surviving spouse will receive full ownership of the property. If property is titled jointly with rights of survivorship and the decedent intended to bequeath the property to their children from a previous marriage as indicated by their will it will go directly to the surviving spouse and will bypass the probate process. Bank accounts are also commonly passed without going through probate, either by having more than one owner on the account or by listing a Pay on Death Beneficiary (POD) who will receive the account when all the owners die.

As previously discussed, many blended families will create new bank accounts in the name of both spouses. When one spouse dies the other will have full control of all the money left in the account. If part of this money was to be given to someone else, such as children from a previous marriage, then it will be up to the surviving spouse to follow the decedent's wishes, or they may

choose to ignore them. If your intention is to ensure someone else will get the money, it may be wise to set up a separate account and either list a POD or have the account distributed through your will.

One other key piece to your estate plan is determining who will serve as your personal representative (PR) or trustee to ensure your wishes are carried out. The person needs to be trusted to follow the instructions laid out in your plan, regardless of their own personal feelings or desires. They must be able to manage relationships, as they will most likely have to interact with a surviving spouse, children and/or stepchildren, as well as other family members who may not all get along. Your PR should also be able to handle legal and financial issues. However, if they are lacking in this area but fit the first two criteria, do not disregard them as they could get professional help from lawyers and tax accountants to help fulfill their duties.

## **Conclusion**

Blending families takes time, and each family will need to determine what works best for them to avoid pitfalls along their journey. Like all families the actions taken today will need to evolve to meet the ever-changing needs of the individuals in the family. We have covered some basic principles in this article that should help individuals overcome the unique challenges of merging two families into one. The following is a recap of the principles discussed; may they be helpful in blazing a pathway forward that results in a cohesive family that is committed to staying together no matter what troubles come their way.



### **Seven principles to consider when blending families and avoiding financial pitfalls**

- Commit to be a family together.
- Have financial discussions before getting married, and regularly thereafter.
- Plan a budget and strictly follow it.
- Consolidate bank accounts using either the one, two, or three pot system.
- When finances reveal underlying issues, discuss them and understand everyone's concerns.
- Eliminate debt.
- Review and update your estate plans
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## BEFORE I DO NUMBER TWO: PREPARING FOR THE TRANSITION

*Death of a spouse and divorce are probably the most traumatic events a person can experience. Grief and divorce recovery are important to prepare the individual to enter a new relationship. The goal of this article is to explore some of the social, emotional and spiritual challenges confronting the recently divorced or bereaved, which when successfully resolved form the basis of a healthy new marriage. This theoretical paper outlines major developmental areas derived from Erikson's theory where healing must take place for the individual to be ready to enter a second marriage and raises awareness of the roles of both the individual and the local church in facilitating healing.*

### **Before I Do Number Two: Preparing for the Transition**

Death of a spouse is arguably one of the most traumatic experiences a person can experience. Divorce is up there too. According to Amato (2000), divorce is the most traumatic stressor due to its short- and long-term consequences for all concerned. It stands to reason, then, that an individual experiencing either, would not be expected to bounce back quickly. Nevertheless grief recovery is important to prepare the individual to enter a new relationship. The goal of this article is to explore some of the social, emotional and spiritual challenges confronting the recently divorced, which when successfully resolved form the basis of a healthy new marriage. This theoretical paper outlines major developmental areas where healing must take place for the individual to be ready to enter a second marriage, raising awareness of the roles of

both the individual and the local church in facilitating healing.

The divorce rate for second marriages remains higher than that for first marriages. There are a number of factors affecting this, but unresolved grief may be one factor that is often overlooked. Divorce in particular has been associated with increased rates of depression, decreased physical health, and even a 23% higher mortality rate (Amato, 2010; Malgaroli, Galatzer-Levy & Bonanno, 2017; Sbarra, 2015).

Individuals, especially women, tend to have a substantial drop in their standard of living following a divorce. Coupled with that, there is the stress of having to change residence, or of losing regular contact with children. Some may lose their jobs or homes, others their mutual friends, and still others may be forced into the paid labor force after a long absence as a stay at home parent. Often, there are many significant

changes in a new divorcee's life, each a major source of stress.

After both a divorce and widowhood, men tend to remarry before women. In general in the United States, 40% of new marriages represent a remarriage of one or both spouses (Lewis, & Kreider, 2015; as cited in Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Not only do most couples not participate in premarital counseling before a second marriage, but most do not participate in grief counseling to heal from the emotional trauma of losing a loved one, whether by death or divorce (See Higginbotham, Miller, & Niehuis, 2009; Prato, 2015). But the foundation of a healthy blended family is the emotional healing from the previous relationship.

Smart (1977) developed a conceptual framework comparing the recovery process from divorce to the psychosocial development process outlined by Erik Erikson (1963). There are some parallels worth noting in the healing process, which also appears to occur in developmental stages, though not necessarily in the same order. Children of divorce face similar tasks of healing that adults do; however, their feelings and attitudes will tend to differ from those of adults, leading to a different process (Fisher, 1992, p. 89). However, helping children heal from death or divorce and strengthening the parent-child relationship in their wake are part of the adult process of healing also (Zimmerman, 2016).

Given the overlap in the processes of healing from divorce and widowhood, this paper will deal primarily with stages of healing from divorce for adults. The initial stages of Erikson's theory correspond to different developmental stages of children. I will briefly summarize the stages as they

pertain to children's normal development and then discuss the parallels in the process of healing from divorce as originally formulated by Smart (1977).

## **Overview of Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development**

What follows is an overview of Erikson's stages of psychosocial development as summarized in Boyd and Bee (2014). The first stage of Erikson's theory is trust versus mistrust. When babies are consistently and lovingly cared for, they learn to trust that they will receive what they need to develop to their full potential and this leads to a sense of security that their future needs will be met rather than a feeling of mistrust. Next, as children learn to walk, potty train, and dress themselves, they develop a sense of their separateness and independence from caregivers, leading to feelings of autonomy and confidence in approaching their environments as opposed to shame and doubt.

Similarly, by preschool age, children will tend to freely explore their world, learning as much as they can about how everything functions, leading to a sense of their own initiative versus guilt. When they reach school age, the challenge is to master as much knowledge and as many skills as they can and to find an area in which they can excel, whether it be in academics, or sports, or arts. Children successfully negotiating this stage will develop industry versus inferiority.

By adolescence, the developmental task becomes developing a unique identity and life purpose based on strengths, talents, likes and dislikes instead of role confusion. With young adulthood comes the challenge

of forming intimate relationships versus being isolated.

Children who do not successfully complete a developmental task will become “stuck” at that stage, unable to mature socially and emotionally in healthy ways.

Erikson stated: “It’s very important to see that even if one has solved one’s identity crisis, later changes in the life can precipitate a renewal of the crisis.” (Films Media Group, 1964). However, a renegotiation of earlier developmental tasks as proposed by Erikson, is not the same as regression (Freud, 1920) in Freud’s theory, which involves a return to childish behavior. The renewal of earlier developmental crises as a result of trauma involves internal distress resulting in adult behavior that is cautious and self-protective.

If individuals were stuck in a particular childhood phase of development, to that extent they will remain stuck unless they resolve the developmental challenges they faced earlier. This occurs more often in situations where individuals may have had childhood trauma, and/or developed an addiction. Unless there is healing and recovery from early blocks to development, successful resolution of any later stages of development will be thwarted.

Now let’s explore Erikson’s stages as applied to an adult recovering from a broken or ended relationship. These stages provide a useful model for understanding the emotional and social crises that a divorced or widowed individual experiences, giving clues for how these crises can be successfully resolved such that the individual is prepared to enter a new relationship.

Although individuals will experience the developmental crises discussed sometimes sequentially, sometimes all at

once, the case scenarios and accompanying discussion questions have been simplified to focus on only one developmental stage. Readers can feel free to explore in each case how each of the stages might manifest for the individuals in question. Case examples given illustrate how these crises may be expressed and they involve composite profiles of real couples using false names. Any resemblance to individuals the reader may know is coincidental and reflects how common these scenarios are.

### **Trust versus Mistrust**

An individual who has recently been divorced, will have a difficult time trusting again. In a divorce situation, the individual may have hurt and been hurt very deeply. The most basic challenge here is for the individual to trust that their needs will still be met by others, especially God. This developmental stage is often the first and most deeply compromised and the last to be fully restored. It gets to the heart of what it means to live in healthy, intimate relationship with others. Once that trust is shattered, it may take years to restore. At this stage, individuals may exhibit anger or indifference toward God and/or the Church, or they may withdraw. At this juncture, close friendships and/or counseling can be helpful for individuals as an anchor from which to begin to trust again and to facilitate the inner work of healing by processing intense emotions.

The Church can play a major role in providing support for divorced individuals to facilitate healing and restore trust. The support given may be financial, to buffer the effects of job/income loss, social, to buffer the effects of lost friendships, and spiritual, to buffer the effects of disillusionment

with God and with the Church. Given that Adventist and many other evangelical churches promote marriage as a fulfillment of one of God's purposes in creating humankind, a marriage dissolution often leads to anger at God for not keeping the marriage together, coupled with guilt and/or shame that the marriage has ended. These are natural and usually temporary reactions and when these feelings are validated by the Church, tend to dissipate over time. However, if the individuals in question are given the impression that it is not Christian to experience the full range of feelings involved, it will be more difficult for them to successfully resolve this new developmental crisis.

The most important thing the local church can do to promote healing is to provide a safe and secure environment for the individual to process feelings. The local church can also assist individuals in religious coping, which can be positive or negative (Simonič & Klobučar, 2017) by providing them with spiritual resources. Often, church members don't want to say the wrong thing so they withdraw and allow the person space to process what is going on. In addition, if the divorce was not biblically based, some church members will withdraw to avoid sounding judgmental. However, the local church needs to facilitate healing by not withdrawing and being responsive to both individuals' physical, emotional, social, financial and spiritual needs to the extent possible. It is important to avoid taking sides, ministering to both, while confronting and disciplining open sin that may be a factor in the divorce. In addition, the local church can facilitate divorce recovery and/or bereavement groups, effective in allowing fellow divorcees and

widows/widowers to process changes in their lives in a safe environment (Quinney & Fouts, 2003). Social support is helpful to facilitate a recovery of well-being after a divorce (Kołodziej-Zaleska & Przybyła-Basista, 2016), and may be the most important ingredient in the success of these groups.

### **Case Example**

When Natalie's husband divorced her, he married the woman he'd had the affair with and they continued attending the same church he and Natalie had attended. Natalie couldn't understand why there seemed to be no negative repercussions from the church when it was clear he had committed adultery. She and her two adolescent sons stopped attending church. Natalie's trust in her ex-husband and in her local church was shattered.

What will be the likely effect on her relationship with God? What can the local church do to regain her trust?

### **Autonomy versus Shame/Doubt**

Challenges to this stage of development correspond to situations where the individual does not have assistance from their partner and this often leads to fears of not being able to make it alone. This leads to obsession with doing things by themselves, not accepting help when offered, or alternatively it may lead to excessive dependence on others. This stage of development also involves shame about the ending of the relationship, particularly where the individual believes that the divorce was not based on Biblical grounds, and embarrassment that he/she couldn't sustain the relationship.

In a study by Krumrei, Mahoney and Pargament (2009, 2011), divorced Christians who viewed marriage as sacred,

experienced an added burden of shame not experienced by unbelievers. They felt they had “let God down” so to speak, and experienced deeper depression than divorcees who did not view marriage as holy. Their recovery often depended on utilizing religious coping resources to restore their connection with God and resolve the shame. So these individuals will lack confidence and try to overcompensate by resisting help or alternatively they may become excessively dependent, seemingly unable to make decisions or function independently.

The task here is to re-establish independence while allowing appropriate support from others. Individuals who are struggling with shame and self-doubt need to recognize when help is needed and be willing to ask for help without guilt, while learning to manage new responsibilities. They will also need to come to terms with their feelings of shame and reach out to God for healing and forgiveness, wrestling as did Jacob with the angel.

The local church can assist by offering specific help without being asked. In addition, it is critically important for church members to provide a listening ear without judgment, and to provide help when needed without being overbearing.

### **Case Example**

After the car accident that took Alanzo’s life, Madelin felt at a loss. Alanzo had managed the financial affairs of the home. She had three school-aged children and had never held a full-time position. What spiritual resources will help Madelin regain confidence as she tries to financially support her family? In what ways can the local church be supportive?

### **Initiative versus Guilt**

The challenge of initiative versus guilt is that in the face of trauma, interests narrow as a way of conserving energy to cope with the multiple unavoidable changes. Individuals will often have difficulty trying new things, going new places, and engaging in activities alone. Although this is appropriate in the initial phases of healing after a relationship ends, it is not a viable option long-term, particularly as a divorce or death will necessitate changes in the daily life. These changes will be resisted but will ultimately contribute to growth.

To successfully resolve this challenge, individuals need to take time to regroup but then to be willing to branch out into new areas, or to resume previous past-times or skills they may have neglected during the relationship. In this stage also, individuals may attempt to begin dating again (Smart, 1977).

The local church can be supportive in allowing individuals to scale back current involvement while staying connected to their church family or to try out new ministries. Church socials and other programs allow for individuals to meet new people or to foster new interests.

### **Case Example**

When Michaela divorced Jonas, he was in shock. He knew they had some problems and seemed to be constantly arguing, but it just seemed to him to be the typical conflicts in a marriage. Michaela stayed in the home, so Jonas had to find a place to live. He couldn’t bring himself to mention the divorce to their mutual friends and stopped attending church, not wanting to run into his ex-wife. How might a struggle between initiative versus guilt reveal itself in



Jonas' life? What might this struggle look like on a spiritual level?

#### Industry versus Inferiority

Some individuals lost jobs or gave up careers for their relationship and when the relationship ends they need to start over, sometimes in a new career or position; in some cases re-entering the work force, or entering the work force for the first time. Sometimes confidence is lacking because of all the changes. Sometimes they may over-work as a distraction, or they may exhibit low motivation for work in general.

Individuals will need to find healthy outlets for their stress and engage in activities they know well that they may have neglected. It is important during this stage that individuals try to be emotionally available for their children, and to try to identify any areas of personal growth that will contribute to a healthier relationship with themselves and with others. Without assigning blame, it is important to explore what lessons can be learned from the previous relationship that will foster healthier relationships moving forward.

To assist individuals in this stage, local churches can affirm efforts to help with ministries; however, they need to be careful not to over-burden individuals with so many activities that they have little time for reflection, self-nurture, and spiritual growth. Spiritually, during this stage the relationship with God tends to emphasize doing, accomplishing and performing, rather than simply being. The way to successfully resolve this challenge would be to find time to simply be with God and not to be so busy or driven that one's relationship with God suffers.

#### Case Example

When Keshia and Jamal split up, Keshia moved back home with her parents across the country resulting in Jamal seeing his children much less. Feeling the pressures of child support payments, he threw himself into his work, resulting in a big promotion. A short time later, however, Jamal sustained a massive heart attack and was unable to pick up his children for summer vacation as planned. Despite his promotion at work, one could argue that Jamal has not successfully resolved this stage: how so? How would successful resolution look?

#### Identity versus Role Confusion

While all of the stages of development after adulthood have to do with forging a new identity as a single individual, in this stage it is in the foreground. Grief and loss precipitate identity crises (Papa & Lancaster, 2016). In the case of spousal death or divorce, individuals are consciously wondering, "If I am not someone's spouse, who am I?" The sense of self needs to be renegotiated as a single. This task may be more challenging for women because a woman's identity typically changes more concretely or visibly upon marriage. For example, women are more likely to assume the husband's surname than vice versa. In many cultures, the woman is expected to exhibit visible signs of marriage (e.g. wedding band, clothing differences) more so than the man. Their identity as someone's spouse needs to be altered, particularly if they have been married for most of their adult lives, and it will be difficult for them to envision themselves as single. Their identity as parents will also shift to viewing themselves as single parents. Depending on one's culture, there may be a stigma associated with being single at a certain age,



being divorced, or being a single parent, even within the church (Konstam, Karwin, Curran, Lyons, & Celen-Demirtas, 2016). In some cultures, it may even be life-threatening.

Although these stages are sequential in children, they are not necessarily sequential in adults, so all of these challenges will be occurring more or less at the same time, and individuals need to grapple with these tasks on multiple levels and not one at a time, as in childhood. The person who has successfully negotiated this stage, will forge a new identity as a single, by allowing themselves to grieve the lost part of self and the lost relationship. Grief occurs on multiple levels. As individuals allow themselves to grieve what they have lost, taking as much time as they need to do so in a healthy way, to that extent they will successfully forge a new identity. Central here will be their reliance on their identity in Christ as a child of God, as saved individuals who are enough just as they are, whether or not they are in a romantic relationship.

In addition, individuals who successfully resolve this stage will become more self-aware, getting to know on a deeper level their strengths, weaknesses, likes, dislikes, desires, goals, dreams, some of which they may have lost touch with over the years, and some of which they may have never known before (White & Berghuis, 2016).

### **Case Example**

Carla wears her wedding band ten years after the death of her husband. How does the wedding ring contribute to a continued identity as a married woman rather than as a single woman? How might the church affirm the value of each individual's uniqueness such that they can feel comfortable claiming a new identity in Christ as a single?

### **Intimacy versus Isolation**

In this stage, individuals will have difficulty allowing another person to get close. Sometimes they don't want to be in a relationship at all, and avoid this many years later. Successful resolution of this stage requires an openness and willingness, according to the Lord's will, to enter a new relationship, or to be vulnerable, or to share intimately with another person. Although there may not be another individual for them, and even if they have made a commitment not to remarry, this openness translates into a certain level of ease around potential partners, rather than shutting them out. It also means they will be more open to new friendships and more nurturing of mature friendships. It involves being willing to share personal details in friendships rather than maintaining superficial small talk. Another helpful task is listening to others, being emotionally present for children, or for friends. Relationships are mutual. Being willing to step out of one's comfort zone to minister to others in need is a positive way that this stage can be successfully resolved.

It is important for individuals in this stage to spend time getting to know God more intimately, having regular devotional time, nurturing their relationships with their children and assisting their children in their healing from the ended relationship.

How might the local church assist individuals in achieving intimacy versus isolation? The local church can provide intergenerational social activities that are not based on marital status per se but allow for fellowship of members of all ages.

### **Case Example**

Kyle remarried one year after his divorce from Lori. Though they share many interests and have formed a new blended family including their children from previous

marriages, his new wife Karen recently told him she feels she is married to “a stranger”.

How might a lack of intimacy show up in Kyle’s relationship with God? What can Kyle do to move toward greater intimacy with his wife and with God?

A rift in a human relationship tends to produce a rift in one’s relationship with God. As one heals from a broken or ended relationship, one will also need to heal from unresolved feelings of grief, blame or anger toward God. It may be anger toward self in letting God down, by not maintaining the relationship, or it may be feeling let down by God, that He did not keep the relationship together. In both cases, however, the individuals need to express those feelings to God, and be honest about how the ended relationship has compromised their relationship with God. With intention, individuals can regroup and resume their feelings of closeness with God.

Typically, it is considered healthy to wait up to three years before entering a new romantic relationship. All of these tasks can be resolved in the meantime, until one is no longer experiencing pain from the previous relationship. Scars are upon their emotional wounds and they have been able to forgive perceived offenses by their former significant others.

Erikson proposed two other stages: generativity versus stagnation and integrity versus despair. These stages are typically encountered in middle to late adulthood. Those stages have been omitted from this discussion because the first six stages are most critical for forming healthy new romantic relationships and also, some individuals may not have reached the age for those developmental milestones yet.

Many questions may arise as a result of observing individuals going through these stages. Individuals in a helping role can look at these stages and determine some of the challenges others may be facing. Compassion is critical here. The key is providing a safe, supportive environment so healing from the trauma of a broken or ended relationship may occur naturally.

### **Food for Thought**

How can you best assist someone you may know who is going through this healing process? What are some of the differences in the process of healing between the widowed and the divorced? What might be different in the ways the local church reaches out to these individuals?

### **Summary**

Divorce and widowhood are traumas that tend to reverse our social and emotional development and these have to be renegotiated by the individual, hopefully with assistance from friends, counselors, the local church, and the Lord. Sometimes, the ways the individual tries to cope involve a renegotiation of earlier stages of development, and is a normal aspect of grieving. However, healing is the process of returning to the prior state of functioning and superseding it by completing these developmental tasks again. If healing doesn’t happen, the next romantic relationship will be compromised and set up for failure. The divorce rate for second marriages is higher than that for first marriages. Part of the reason for that is because individuals have not taken the time to heal from the previous relationship and will have a tendency to repeat any mistakes made in the previous relationship. Healing requires grieving appropriately the loss of

the first relationship, learning the positive life lessons that relationship was meant to teach, renegotiating the developmental tasks and emerging a healthier person than before, better equipped for a healthy relationship. Until these stages of healing are complete, the individual will be ill-equipped to enter a new healthy relationship. The timetable varies from person to person and should not be rushed. One should give oneself as much time as needed to complete the process.

The process of healing may take slightly less time for the person who initiated the divorce; however, it is disastrous to think no time for healing is required. Often, the person who initiates a divorce feels at liberty to enter a new relationship immediately, without having healed sufficiently from the previous relationship. It is true that some of the grieving occurs before the relationship officially ends; however, the real work of healing cannot begin until there is closure. To be sure, the Lord sustains the individual throughout the process, but we have a part to play in our own healing, both individually

and corporately. Jesus came to give us life more abundantly. We understand that it is difficult to be healthy while ignoring the laws of health; so it is difficult to be emotionally healthy while ignoring the laws of emotional healing.

The healing process is a natural one, unless something happens to block it. Although support can be provided, churches are not responsible for what is primarily an individual work of healing. Following a trauma such as divorce or widowhood some turn away from God, but most eventually turn toward Him for help and healing (Gostečnik, Slavič, Lukek & Cvetek, 2014). Churches can support healing. *Sacred Divorce* (Jenkins, 2014) is a helpful book in envisioning how the local church can be instrumental in the healing process. As we look upon others with Christ's compassionate eyes we become part of a Church that is faithful to her Lord and reflects His image in healing the broken-hearted and binding up their wounds (Psalms 147:3, KJV). .

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## BLENDING FAMILIES: WHAT COUPLES SHOULD KNOW AND CONSIDER

*A blended family is a complex family arrangement that multiplies the challenges and demands typical of non-blended family systems. The coming together of two established family systems may be a very viable and fulfilling experience for many and enable health and wellbeing often obtained in families. However, this family arrangement has the potential to shatter cherished ideals, familiar models of family interaction, spawn loyalty issues, and create frustration for many who are beginning or maintaining such unions. These families are at greater risk for failure and/or disruption. As such, it is necessary to understand and appreciate the unique challenges of this family type so as to have a healthy adjustment in that family context. A sober view of the challenges associated with the multiple sub-systems interacting together is likely to foster the virtues needed for them to flourish as one family system. This paper addresses the research literature on blended families, examines the characteristic features, and offers implications for navigating this arrangement. For those who are entering or for those who now live in a blended family context, the paper highlights the major touch points that may be useful to family members and to those who work with them such as therapists, family life educators, family ministries personnel, pastors, and others who come alongside them on the journey toward healthy relationship adjustment.*

Before a couple get married, they should ensure that they are in love with each other, but they must be certain about knowing that love is not enough to marry on. Even without the added burdens of incompatibility, significant debt, a rush into the relationship because of pregnancy, or the instrumental need to secure lawful immigration standing, or other such factors, there are realities that can be very taxing on a marriage, and it is essential for those who are pursuing marriage to ensure that they are fully cognizant of the demands and responsibilities, challenges, and pitfalls that lurk on their pathway to satisfaction and gratification in marriage. One such possible

factor is starting a marriage as a blended family (Saint-Jacques et al., 2016).

There is no attempt in this paper to decry or denounce the start or the viability of a blended family relationship; far from it. As will be discussed, a blended family may be a very wonderful and fulfilling experience for many persons (Kelly, 1995). This experience, like the more traditional relationship, may add luster to a couple's life and experience (Michaels, 2006). Such a family may be a much better option than other family arrangements for the well-being of children and the rest of the family members. However, an honest look at and thoughtful reflection on the possibilities



or consequences for such a relationship are necessary if a couple will be prepared for or be able to manage such a complex family relationship. This article addresses the challenges and difficulties of blended families. It endeavors to underscore the reality that before the execution of such a relationship, wisdom suggests that the couple should be well informed so as to have the best fighting chance of a satisfying relationship. Some of the existing research on the subject will be reviewed for this paper and some best practice suggestions will be proffered.

What specifically is a blended family? A blended family is often defined as a family arrangement in which at least one of the parents brings to the union one child or more that is not the biological child or children of the new partner, or in which there are step-siblings or half-siblings brought to the new union of two persons in a marriage or consensual union (Nixon & Hadfield, 2016). A blended family is thought to be different from a traditional family arrangement. The latter consists of a couple with their own biological child or children. As this latter arrangement is considered traditional or typical, there is a long history of this family form, a lot of role models for negotiating this form, and is the expectation of most. There is the common belief that this traditional form is a simpler form of family relationship, and the blended family form is more challenging for obvious reasons (Brey & Berger, 1993), some of which would be discussed, at least briefly.

For many years, the scholarship on marital satisfaction and stability has been the subject of great attention (Daiton, 2019; DeLongis, A., & Zwicker, 2017; Ehrenberg et al., 2012; Mirecki, Chou,

Elliott, & Schneider, 2013; Repond et al., 2018; Sweeny, 2010). The trends are obviously pointing to the reality that marriage has been challenged with regard to satisfaction and stability over the years. For many years, it has been argued that about 1 in 2 marriages end in divorce (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014; Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Kreider & Fields, 2002; Papernow, 2015; Parker, 2011). Estimates indicate that the rate of remarriages for one or both partners is about 40% and 30% respectively (Kreider & Ellis, 2011; Lewis, & Kreider, 2015; Livingston, 2014; Lucier-Geer et al., 2012; Payne, 2015; Teachman & Tedow, 2008) with a minimal decline in recent divorce (Hemez, 2017, Papernow, 2013). Further, the divorce rate is even higher for remarriages than first marriages (Ivanova, 2016; Lewis & Kreider, 2015; Mirecki et al., 2013). These figures suggest that in highly advanced technological societies, marriage has been hit and so we have some grim statistics that point to a post-marriage society (Blankenhorn, 1996).

This topic at hand is all the more important because of the overall increase in remarriages to date. In fact, studies indicate that the 40% reported for second or higher order marriages for one of both partners, show a shift towards post-divorce remarriages within the last few decades (Lewis & Kreider, 2015; Lavingston, 2014) and the creation of a new era of nuclear family forms including the blended or stepfamily structure (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Notably, the blended family unit has gained substantial attention given its unique and complex challenges (Bryant et al., 2016; Kumar, 2017; Petren et al., 2018; Saint-Jacques et al., 2016; Repond et al., 2018; Stephenson & Delongis, 2018). Reports

indicate that children from blended homes are much more likely to experience poorer well-being due to relational and parental issues than children from traditional households (Lucier-Geer et al., 2012). However, fewer studies have reported that children and adults from blended structures can indeed form intact cohesive units over time (Baxter et al., 1999; Johnson, 2016). A true appraisal of these relationships leaves us with no absolutes, and point to the need to look at the important factors that lead to better outcomes for intimate partners in these family arrangements as well as the adjustment outcomes for their children.

What is also true, however, is that a marriage in the context of a blended family structure has a reduced chance of stability over time than a marriage with a traditional family arrangement (Bumpass & Raley, 2007). It may be argued then, that blended families come with a number of stress factors that result in poor relationship outcomes for many (Stephenson & Delongis, 2018). So, a family arrangement that is selected as the next best chance to get intimate relationship right, succumbs to the stressors that mark these unions (Brimhall, 2020). Some plausible alternative explanations for this reality include the hostile territory that the blended family may degenerate into as people try to negotiate this new territory, the cynicism that have been shaped by past hurt and failure, the seeming insolvency of managing loyalty issues (Papernow, 2008) in the new relationship especially on account of parenting roles with children (Jensen, 2017; ), and the manifestation of the tendency to run away from relationships when there are problems (Ehrenberg et al., 2012; Saint-Jacques, et al., 2017). These

situations are real and leave a serious mark on many blended families.

### **Marital satisfaction**

As it is true that marital stability and marital satisfaction are different experiences, it is necessary to explore the literature on marital satisfaction comparing traditional family arrangements with blended family arrangements. According to Kim (2010), a reasonable conclusion in the literature is that role ambiguity is a significant determinant in the level of marital satisfaction in early remarriages. Also, findings show, as time elapsed marital satisfaction decreased in step couple relationships (Repond et al, 2018). In addition, remarried couples with children from previous marriages were more likely to report poor co-parenting communication (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011), role confusion regarding parenting responsibilities (Zelevnikow & Zelevnikow, 2015), and relationship conflict leading to failed marriages (Balachandran & Jean Yeung, 2010). Alternatively, positive results were reported for couples who were consistent in their communication and had shared agreement on the rights and responsibilities of members within the family subsystems (Kim, 2010).

If marital satisfaction in blended family arrangements falls below the levels experienced in traditional family arrangements, then it is important to assess the reasons for same. The explanation may create pause and thinking people aspiring to this arrangement need to consider more carefully the challenges associated with adjustment in these relationships. The halo effect that predisposes people to assess new relationships in a sometimes-over-positive light may blind people to the real

challenges in blended family unions and so leave them ill-prepared or conditioned for dealing with the challenges (Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Murray et al., 1996). It is crucial for those who are consciously and deliberately pursuing these relationships to do so in the full awareness of the demands and challenges that are typical for those in these unions.

But, this blended family form is more common today and there is a bid to take it out of the realm of incomplete institutionalization (Pryor, 2008). This leads to stigmatization, and, as we might know, negative stigmatization can lead to negative appraisal and discouragement among persons in these blended family arrangements.

The fact that blended families are becoming more common will create more role models for their functioning and this trend will likely help to destigmatize this family form. Thus, these families would be threatened less by the weight of self-fulfilling prophecy that leads to their demise. It is important to note that blended families are families indeed and are, for many, a haven for the physical and emotional flourishing of the family members in such arrangement (Braithwaite et al, 2001; Michaels, 2006). These families may be often a source of intimate relationship, economic cooperation, reproduction and socialization, and the assignment of social roles and status (Braithwaite et al, 2001; Cohen & Strong, 2021; Michaels, 2006; Strong, DeVault, & Sayad, 1997) as do families that are configured differently.

### **Early Adjustments**

Another unique feature of blended families has to do with the early adjustment

period and the carry-over of that feature into the years following the formation of the marriage (Gold et al., 1993). Traditional families usually begin with the marriage of two persons who establish a new family after some period of time, though that time varies considerably. That period of time is often associated with private time, alone time, and time to get to know each other and build some fun memories at the onset of the marriage, usually before the distractions of later demands including parenting roles (Papernow, 2017). This time is often marked by the honeymoon (Papernow, 1984) and is extended for a period of months or years for many. While little is said of this period, anecdotal evidence exists for the salience of that early adjustment period on long term satisfaction and stability of marriage (Mirecki et al., 2013).

For blended families, there appears to be a different experience as these families, though new, start with a ready-made system and with immediate demands and responsibilities that can leave a couple with little time to gain composure in the new marriage experience (Papernow, 2018). For these families, there is the possibility of starting the new relationship in a significant child-focused way. This start can challenge well-intentioned couples and give the sense of suffocation in the new relationship. It is easy to see how this experience can bring consternation, dismay, and discouragement. Not only is there that unique experience, but it is often attended to with offspring that are themselves responding, sometimes negatively, to the new marriage experience of their parent/s (Braithwaite et al., 2001). The adjustment of children is likely to absorb a lot of time and attention on the part of biological children, and for the

other children, and their parents, both in and out of the home. All of these factors can impact the early marital adjustment of the couple involved.

So, from day-one, blended families often start with complex interactions (Dainton, 2019). For example, husbands and wives are not just partners who would nurture and love each other, but their time and energy have to be shared with the other family members who may be adjusting emotionally by making alliances or demanding alliances based on blood relations, rejecting non-blood ties, and on and on. Because these experiences for the newly formed families represent some change from the norm, loyalty issues, boundary challenges, fears, and anxieties sometimes create great difficulty for the new parents and for their children (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Dainton, 2019) and can destabilize them even in the early days of their formation.

Therefore, the couple in the blended family arrangement is afforded little time to have a honeymoon devoid of major challenges and pitfalls (Gold et al., 1993). As such, the reduced time to focus on each other and to enjoy the moments of closeness before many other issues with children surface, is likely to put significant stress (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011) on the couple that can take much of the wind out of their sail and disturb their equilibrium (Papernow, 2017). Remarried couples may lack time alone for couple intimacy since stepparenting may require additional bonding time with non-biological children (Gold et al., 1993). This complexity, may be detrimental to the early adjustment period in remarriages compared to first marriages (Ehrenberg et al., 2012). The couple relationship may not be prioritized

due to the pre-established family context, which may be formed through previous unions and may erode partner relationship quality causing marital instability and divorce (Ehrenberg et al., 2012).

Consequently, couple relationship issues may arise from challenges that affect stepparenting roles (Bryant et al., 2016). These challenges may determine how well stepparents manage their parental obligations (Saint-Jacques et al., 2016), experience marital quality (Bryant et al., 2016) and achieve couple intimacy (Gold et al., 1993). Thus, anecdotal evidence suggests that a healthy marriage adjustment is aided by some quality time for the couple to adjust to and enjoy each other so as to lay a foundation and benchmark for enjoyment and intimate connection at the onset of the relationship (Bryant et al., 2016). These experiences become in-built memory banks that mark the possibilities for the future times, even when later challenges are met. Therefore, the inability to have these early experiences (Ehrenberg et al., 2012) can erode some of the hopes that couples may have as their benchmark and so can hamper the couple's chances for healthy aspirations, positive adjustment, and future success (Bryant et al., 2016).

For the reasons noted above, a couple entering a blended family arrangement need to have clarity as to the trajectory of their early marriage adjustment (Jensen et al., 2014). If they have the traditional worldview in mind, they are likely to be sadly disappointed, as that would not be the case. If they have children in-resident, the worldview would be way off and would be the set up for dissatisfaction in marriage (Jensen et al., 2014). Adequate consideration must be given to how the early marriage

experience would be managed, even while in the throes of parental responsibilities (Ehrenberg et al., 2012). Further, dealing with children, blood-children and step-children (Adler-Baeder, Robertson, & Schramm, 2010; Falke & Larson, 2007), and dealing with them together in the same residence, managing child-discipline issues, expectations, and building alliances with children are advanced level graduate courses, so to speak, that have to be mastered for any reasonable sense of calm in a new marriage in the blended family context. These realities cannot be over-emphasized. Pre-marriage education cannot be taken lightly here (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Michaels, 2006). As is often the case, those with previous marriage experience may think that they need less pre-marriage education. Well, such couples may need this preparation even more.

### **Complex inter-relationships**

Here is another challenge that a prospective couple should consider before starting a blended family. Blended family consists of complex inter-relationships between various members (Kumar, 2017), which can affect their viability (Petren et al., 2019). These challenges are often counterintuitive to the experience of love and positive sentiments that are the backbone of what is expected in such relationships, and, most certainly in the early days of their formation.

The word love is often equated with marriage and family living. Love is often a dominant emotion in these relationships. But, for many, love, an emotion, is a good feeling when there is peace and calm in a relationship or interaction. Negotiating a blended family consist of complex

relationship subsystems with a lot of moving parts and these subsystems create a heavy tax on the functioning of the whole. The work of Ahrons and Rodgers (1987) showed that very clearly. They intimated that bi-nuclear families have 5 subsystems. These are 1. Former spouse subsystem; 2. Remarried couple subsystems; 3. Parent-child subsystems; 4. Sibling subsystems with step-siblings and half-siblings, and 5. Mother/stepmother-father/stepfather subsystems.

To simplify the content of the previous paragraph, it may be easy to see that if a woman, for example, comes into a new relationship with three minor children, she is likely to have a strong bond with them, will try to minimize the difficulties they may have in a new relationship, will like to keep some things the same as obtained in the previous relationship, such as the manner and mode of discipline, have a lesser bond with her new step children, will have to negotiate conflict between her children and her new step children, allocate resources among them, deal with her new husband's way of disciplining her children and his, and on and on. Further, this wife may have to manage her feelings about the interaction between her new husband and his former partner (Ehrenberg et al., 2012), the treasuring of family photos, family furniture, in addition to many other issues. While these may seem simple, in the reality of family living, these situations may play a significant role in the relationship adjustment and can suffocate a new relationship (Miran-Khan, 2017), even in the early days of its formation.

In a blended family, blood ties may be stronger than affinal ties. As such, as a new marriage has been enacted, the blood ties



can challenge the meaning and connection in the new marriage and leave family members with a lot of disappointment about the intensity of the new conjugal ties. This reality is difficult to grasp, but can rob a new relationship of the positive sentiments and viability, degrade the level of positive sentiments, and lead to erosion of the marital and family landscape.

Experiencing and negotiating these blended family relationship networks are, no doubt, more difficult than understanding them. Previous histories, adjustment to new relationship, loyalty issues, resource allocation, resistance to change, conflict, and other issues are all imbedded in these interactions and headache may be a more likely outcome on the spectrum of response to these complex subsystems for those who are involved (Anderson & Green, 2013; Michaels, 2006; Saint-Jacques et al., 2016). Co-parenting challenges may be real and chronic issues for these families and so are layered thick with complexity (Cohen & Strong, 2021).

### **Fantasy and expectation of having a perfect relationship**

It is easy to believe that most people who want to have a marriage or family relationship wish to have a happy one, one that provides joy and fulfillment in their lives, that is less stressful, and certainly life-enhancing. This desire pushes some people not only to have that, but to believe that they will have it because they wish it. So, somewhere between the halo effect and the honeymoon effect, people make a lot of positive assumptions about their relationship in the early days, and even after executing the relationship, make assumptions about how rich and positive

their relationship is and will continue to be. The prevailing assumption of parents is that this new family will experience a quick and smooth transition into family solidarity, unit cohesiveness, and love (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Sweeney, 2010). These fantasies can be taken too far and can impact not only people's expectations, but their level of satisfaction in their relationship.

More specifically, it has been shown that premarital fantasies have some bearing on the relationship outcomes (Braithwaite et al., 2001). Further, overly positive premarital fantasies are associated with poor relationship outcomes inclusive of relationship disruption (Orbuch, Veroff, & Holmburg, 1993). Therefore, when couples have unrealistic expectations, they are more likely to be disappointed and discourage thereafter.

Many couples who establish or are pursuing a blended family arrangement have highest expectations and positive sentiments about how they will manage their relationships with their new partner and with their partner's child or children and how their partner will manage their relationship with them and with their children (Kumar, 2017). Further, many go into the relationship fully confident that because they are so loving and kind, those in the new relationship mix will just accept them and love them, and that the problems that other blended families have will never be their experience. They hope to manage better, and, thus be spared the challenges faced by typical blended families. But, it does not take long to realize that many awesome and loving people now find themselves in what feels like enemy territory and that loyalty and boundary alignment

issues conflux in distressing ways in blended families (Repond et al., 2019).

The parenting realm in blended families may be especially challenging (Saint-Jacques et al., 2016; Papernow, 2017). Like the proverbial turning on a dime, children are thrown into a new relationship context in which roles and status suddenly changed (Repond et al., 2018; Schrodts & Braithwaite, 2011). Suddenly their parent's partner is now their mother or father even when they have one already, now has expectations to render respect and deference by the use of a name ascribed to mother or father, now is expected to love someone who just took dad away from their mother or mother away from their dad, and anger and resentment are not far-fetched experiences that surface in such contexts. These issues are often highlighted when it comes to administering discipline to children. The parent's sense of responsibility for children's behavior may lead to inflexible behavior toward their step-children, which, in turn, may lead them to forget that their first parenting tasking is building alliances with their step-children. When that task is missed, the relationship problems become much more difficult and can lead to a slippery downward slope.

Building alliances with children by step-parents take time. These parents often have to learn to back off from trying too hard to form early attachments with these children. They must also understand that they need not take the parenting role too seriously and that discipline may best be left to the biological child with whom they are more likely to have a history and an alliance (Jensen, 2017; Saint-Jacques et al., 2016).

Here is the good news! The good news is that your experience is likely to be like most of the people who went that way before you.

There are likely to be some very positive and rewarding times with those who execute such a family arrangement. Therefore, any such person can rest content that their family is not very far off in relation to most others. But, there is the sense in which this is not so great news. For certain, reality will hit and a person's love and care, in that new home situation is very likely to still be misunderstood and misinterpreted in ways that make relationships difficult.

Children in a blended family are not just dealing with loving someone who is new. They are dealing with many in the same family who now have new relationships. Even so, they are dealing with their affection and loyalty to others who may be physically absent but psychologically present (Boss, 2017). The power of this boundary ambiguity is often misunderstood or underestimated. Therefore, to see another person as mother is a threat to their cherished image of the mother they know and may love and so they are not only dealing with new attachment relationships, but new detachment relationships as well. As such, there can be a lot of suspicion about the roles and the motives of this new parent, which can create some maladaptive responses to well-intentioned behaviors on the part of the parents and vice versa.

### **Moving on too fast**

There is another factor that appears to loom large in blended families that stalls the smooth adjustment and makes negotiating these families difficult from the start. I will refer to this challenge as the "you moved on too fast" issue. How family members deal with grief and loss issues and the rituals associated with exiting old relationships and re-entering new ones do not follow



a set pattern usually (Braithwaite et al., 2001). While there may not be set patterns, rituals, or expectations as to the length of time a person should take to grieve the loss of an old relationship, people tend to have implicit expectations that often show up at the time when a person is moving on and is entering a new relationship (Braithwaite et al., 2001).

No doubt, we all have family stories that include conversations about a person who moved seamlessly into a new relationship or got remarried not long after a divorce or decided to get married not long after their former partner passed away. Before long, very negative feelings of distrust, betrayal, suspicion, and anger well up in the persons closest to them and these feelings create very difficult relationship problems, sometimes for a very long time. Often, these feelings are related to how people process grief and loss (Braithwaite et al., 2001). For many people, holding on to the past gives a measure of safety and comfort. Any attempt to move on carries the idea that a person is putting away the memory of and love for another and these experiences can lead to great disappointment on the part of other family members. For example, a father or mother may see and feel the need for companionship and support, and hence, pursue a new relationship, but the children may be missing their other parent and feel like a new person in the mix is destroying the memory of the parent and so create feelings of betrayal. Their fantasy may not allow them to accept this reality and the revolt can lead to a lot of anger and rage that will challenge any healthy adjustment in that new family system (Braithwaite et al., 2001). Whenever a blended family is entered into under the circumstances

mentioned above, a low level of cooperation and support from the children and other members in the family is more possible and the chances of poor relationship adjustment are higher (Braithwaite et al., 2001). And, as is obvious by now, when these problems are in the mix, marital satisfaction and stability are often threatened and the relationships are at risk (DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017; Mirecki, Chou, Elliott, & Schneider, 2013).

As was proposed in the beginning of this paper, so shall it be in the ending. The scholarly literature and the anecdotal literature and wisdom on the blended family arrangement are hardly mixed. These families make a very complex environment and few there be that escape the full challenge of these environments.

In concluding this paper, I offer a brief summary of the important learning with an eye on the practical applications assumed in the foregoing section. How do all of this relate to a new couple or to a couple who is only now thinking about getting into a union that is a blended family arrangement? Consider the three points that follow.

- 1. Fear, anxiety, and defeatism would be detrimental to a relationship.** Specifically, if a couple is planning to execute a blended family form, but can only see the negatives and is consumed with the possibility of its failure, then, it may be a good idea to pause or desist. The fears may not be ill-founded, though, they can be. But, is true that fear can create a lot of constriction in a way a person thinks and behaves and can often create a situation when a person gets what they most want to run away from. The fear of failure

may lead one or both persons to become so obsessed with failure that they overcompensate and create a whole of challenges for themselves. For example, over-reacting to a disagreement for fear that disagreement may lead to relationship disruption may lead to more disagreement, which would exacerbate the problem. Therefore, if one or both of these persons in that relationship has/have significant anxieties about the relationship, it would be better to seek relationship counseling before starting the blender. This therapeutic encounter may help to uncover the sources of anxiety and fear that may be blocking freedom and creativity in this relationship. After these issues are addressed, then a person will be able to have a better chance at managing these aspects of their lives and will be on course to a more fulfilling relationship.

I have observed that many persons who have a history of past marriage have the view that they do not need pre-marriage counseling as much because they think that they have passed that way before; “been there, done that,” they say. The counter-intuitive argument makes more sense. The history of previous relationships can leave a mark on a person and make them more prone to a repetition compulsion. It is still necessary, even more necessary, to seek out real psychological and relational support before transacting such a family (Bonach, 2005).

2. Another thing that is necessary for a couple to consider before starting a blended family is the need to **have realistic expectations about their relationship going forward.** By this, it is meant that they must understand they are entering the relationship with established networks and these networks make the couple relationship more challenging. From the onset of their relationship, they would face the distractions of other subsystems that can add to frustration and disappointments (Dupius, 2010). From the onset, they will have less dedicated time for each other. They will face loyalty issues, and even rejection and cynicism from children with whom they are hoping to have positive relationships. And, truth be told, the quality of their couple relationship would be significantly influenced by their relationship with the other members and subsystems of the larger system that they are or will be a part of.

The failure to have realistic expectations in a blended family context can lead to abject discouragement and disappointment in that family system. Therefore, pre-marriage preparation for such couples have to be focused and deliberate around the issue of relationships management (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Michaels, 2006)). People who have difficulty relating to others, who are sensitive in relationship experiences, who are easily discouraged, idealistic, and avoidant may be truly troubled

in such arrangements. As such, a therapist or educator needs to keep these experiences before the couple so that they can temper their expectations consistent with reality.

3. It would appear that one of the most significant qualities necessary for someone who will have a good blended family relationship is **flexibility**. A new couple would normally spend a lot of time together doing fun things, going places, and having the freedom of not having to care for children and the distractions that they can bring to a new union. A new couple do not usually have to work through parenting issues, discipline challenges, and loyalty issues with children in the mix. That would hardly be the case for a couple in a new blended family situation. As such, if they can set aside some long cherished ideals and understand the full impact of this reality, they can have a good chance at success.

So, many of the available books and the real-life stories of people around us appear to prescribe a different model of marriage and family living. As such, a couple in this arrangement would need to adjust their thinking, attitude, and behaviors regarding this family form. As such, they would need heavy doses of flexibility if they would weather the experiences of this family form. For example, which parent disciplines the children. A stepparent may not get to do that with impunity. This may create a whole lot of problems for the

step-parent, for the child, and for the biological parent. With everyone in that mix, having a different view of the disciplinary action needed, there are likely to be problems in that complex relationship context. Those who are prone to idealism and are more rigid would have some long struggles that may be very difficult to manage. While all marriages have struggles, those who work through struggles are usually more committed to doing so through thick and thin. Therefore, commitment is one of the focused values in preparation for enacting or managing this family form.

This paper began with the punchline that love is not enough to marry on. A marriage takes more than love or positive emotions and sentiments to work well. It is intricate, demanding, and challenging and demands enduring qualities, and emotional maturity in large quantities. It is a life-long commitment to a person, and may involve a family with other expected ties. As such, it necessary to have a deep sense of the demands and responsibilities and a willingness to live life in that context with positive affect, joyful delight, and happy expectancy if the relationship would be stable and satisfying. Even so, that has the experience for both of them who have, or, for any two who are hoping to unite their lives for that great cause. This experience has worked for many and it can work for any if the factors align in their favor. Further, for those who

believe in the presence and power of God to furnish resources needed for this quest, which are not endemic to humans, but available for them on life's journey, they have support that can change the order of things. Even secular researchers have shown better outcomes for many who find support in religion, and belief in God (Williams & Levin, 1994).

Regarding blended families, it is not a hopeless undertaking. It has worked for many, and will continue to work. It is challenging. It demands understanding, patience, and commitment. It demands hard work. It demands all the resources that are available to humans, and these resources may be internal, external, and given by God who does all things well.

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