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Theology of Missions

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Decision Making For Missions Involvement

A Biblical, Rational Process For Considering Family Issues

Introduction

On June 13, 1793 William Carey packed up his family and sailed to India as a missionary to the heathens of that land. In his lifetime in India, he was incredibly productive in many areas, from botany to Bible translation. And today he is known as the “Father of Modern Missions (George, xvii).” But in the process of this great and eternally significant work, his first wife, Dorothy, went insane. This raises the question should Carey have “passed the baton” onto someone else and taken his wife home to England?

Carey’s situation illustrates a conflict that many missionaries must resolve. From a biblical perspective, there is an undeniable responsibility to one’s family (1 Tim 5:8). And in particular, there is what should be an unbreakable bond in marriage (Gen 2:24). But we are also supposed to put God first in our lives (Luke 14:26). And in fact our purpose for living is to bring glory to God. “All of us are saved for a reason: so that we might glorify God for His mercy (Sjogren, 15).”

This conflict can be very difficult to resolve. One may feel as if he must choose between God and his family. This article provides an integrated hermeneutic of the verses referenced above and provides a framework for decision-making regarding

missions involvement. The goal is to provide a biblical, wisdom based, and guilt free process for resolving the God Family Conflict (GFC). In particular, the decisions to “go” and to “go home” are discussed.

What Does It Mean To Put God First

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26,NIV).”

We are commanded to “put God first”. So it is appropriate to address this issue and the text of Luke 14:16 first. And the first question about this passage is obviously what did Jesus mean by “hate”? God never contradicts Himself and even said, “love your enemies (Luke 6:27).” Furthermore the fifth commandment is to “honor your father and mother (Exodus 20:12).” So “hate” can’t have a literal meaning in this context. “Instead the word ‘hate’ is Semitic hyperbole—an obvious exaggeration to make a point (see Genesis 29:30-33; Proverbs 13:24) (Barton, 362).”

The point that Jesus makes is to “put God first (Barton, 361).” This begs the question, “what does it meant to put God first?” In the first century, if a Jew were to convert to Christianity, he may be alienated from his family (Barton, 362). “‘Hate’ is used figuratively and suggests a priority of relationship. Jesus is first (Bock, Luke 14).” So to “put God first” means that if choosing between Christ and any other religion (or no religion at all) means choosing between Christ and family conflict or even alienation, one must choose Christ (Jamieson, 37).

Put another way, the issue is loyalty. “One’s loyalty to Jesus must come before his loyalty to his family or even to life itself. Indeed, those who did follow Jesus against the family’s desires were probably thought of as hating their family (Walvoord, 243).”

The implication of this loyalty to the theology of missions is “availability.” “There might be many valid reasons for not becoming a missionary, but unwillingness is not one of them (Luke 9:59-62) (Friesen, 331).”

It is important to note that this availability and loyalty is to Jesus Himself, not necessarily to any particular ministry.

Unity In Marriage

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

In general, single people only need to consider themselves when making decisions. A single can just “go”. But a married couple has become “united” and “one flesh.” They must “go together.” However they remain two individuals with potentially different temperaments and with separate wills.

“It's horrible to have strife in a marriage. It makes us miserable. It affects every area of our lives. And it's probably the closest thing to hell we'll ever know on earth. If it goes on long enough, it can destroy everything. Jesus said, ‘Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand’ (Matthew 12:25). Those are frightening predictions. But prayer is the key by which unity in the marriage relationship can be maintained (Omartian, Be Of One Mind).”

“Several years ago, someone noticed that two Clydesdale horses could each pull 900 Lbs. by themselves. It was a logical assumption to suppose that together they could pull 1800 Lbs. When they were yoked together, however, to everyone's surprise they

were able to pull 2700 Lbs.! It was as if there was an invisible horse pulling with them. That is the power of unity!

“The same principle is true of marriage. When two people join all their strengths, abilities, gifts and talents together and become one, they not only double but they can triple their effectiveness! The man and the woman must ‘cleave’ to one-another (Principles for Lasting Love!).

Family Responsibility

If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8).

The “duty of love” is obvious. It’s even obvious to unbelievers. So for a Christian to not meet this obligation is “a plain proof of want of love, and therefore of want of faith. ‘Faith does not set aside natural duties, but strengthens them (Jamieson, 415).”

Provide “(*pronoie*) means to think ahead, to provide by seeing needs in advance (Walvoord, 742).” Maslow has suggested a “hierarchy of needs”. The first three levels of his hierarchy are: “1) Physiological: hunger, thirst, bodily comforts, etc.; 2) Safety/security: out of danger; 3) Belonginess and Love: affiliate with others, be accepted (Huitt).” While his overall theory is humanistic, most Evangelicals would probably agree that the needs in the first three levels at least exist. So to provide is to meet the needs of the whole person, at least to some extent. And those needs should be planned for and monitored. However, comforts and conveniences are not needs. Only true needs should be considered in decision-making regarding missions involvement (Mitchell).

Finally, we should not waste resources on those who are not really in need (Wiersbe, 1 Tim 5:3-10). And we should not *unnecessarily* assume responsibility for family members. For example, healthy, adult children should be made responsible for themselves. And aging parents should not be the sole responsibility of any one child.

Overview Of Decision Making

In *Decision Making And The Will Of God*, Gary Friesen explains that the “traditional view” of the will of God includes three areas: God’s “sovereign will”, His “moral will”, and the “individual will” He has for each person. God’s sovereign will is “His secret plan to determine everything that happens in the universe (151).”

His moral will “consists of the revealed commands in the Bible that teach how men ought to believe and live (Friesen, 151).” It is in a word, *The Word*.

Now comes the hard part, the “individual will” of God. The idea here is that God has an ideal plan for each individual. And it’s up to us to discover that will. “If you visualize an archer’s target, the outer circle would represent the moral will of God, the bull’s-eye would be the very center of his will . . . (Friesen, 36)”. What if we miss the target?

Thankfully, we really *cannot* miss! “[T]he Bible reveals nothing of the of an ‘individual will’ governing each decision. Rather, the teaching of Scripture may be summarized by these basic principles:

1. In those areas specifically addressed by the Bible, the revealed commands of God (His moral will) are to be obeyed.

2. In those areas where the Bible gives no command or principle (nonmoral decisions), the believer is free and responsible to choose his own course of action. Any decision made within the moral will of God is acceptable to God.
3. In nonmoral decisions, the objective of the Christian is to make wise decisions on the basis of spiritual expediency.
4. In all decisions, the believer should humbly submit, in advance, to the outworking of God's sovereign will as it touches each decision (Friesen, 151-152),”

Friesen calls this the “way of wisdom (152).”

Deciding To “Go!”

The Call Of God

Perhaps the first question we have about missions involvement is if we have been “called.” Taylor lists four “paths” down which God leads people into missions. Path 1 is “some kind of personalized call, vision, powerful encounter, or voice from the Lord (Hoke and Taylor, 36).”

Path 2 is “more a matter of obedience to God”, such as a wife following her husband to the mission field (Hoke and Taylor, 36).

Path 3 is “a serious evaluation of prime factors: deep commitment and obedience to Christ, plus a personal assessment of interests, gifts, experience, and dreams, combined with a heart of compassion for the lost and the poor, and an opportunity to make a difference in the world (Hoke and Taylor, 36).”

Path 4 is “a radical obedience to Christ . . .and [seeing a] great need . . .[that] would constitute a strategic investment of [one’s] life and gifts (Hoke and Taylor, 36).”

Barnabas and Saul were on Path 1. “And their call came through supernatural means—either the voice of God, or the voice of a prophet (Acts 13:1-2).” But Barnabas and Saul “were to be the *first missionaries*.” The subsequent missionaries, John Mark and Timothy, were selected because of their qualifications. “There is a remarkable absence of any reference to the call of God beyond Acts 16 (Friesen, 324-326).”

So Path1 probably isn’t available to most believers today. Now following the other paths may “amount to a call (Mitchell).” But starting down a path towards missions doesn’t necessarily mean that we will go all the way there and never come back.

The “decision of whether or not to become a missionary in a foreign country, is an extraordinarily complex and complicated matter (Hsieh, 222).” In this article we look specifically at family issues in this decision.

Overview Of The Issues

A misunderstanding of Luke 14:26 and “[a]n extreme application of this verse led to ‘sacrificing the family on the alter of the ministry’...” Times have changed and now there is a tendency to go too far the other direction into “what Ray Chester has called ‘family idolatry’ (qtd. Wrobbel, 372).” The first point we want to make is that we should carefully consider family issues, and not go to either the extreme of abdication of our family responsibility or the to the extreme of idolatry.

The second point is that family issues that impact missions, are not unique to missions (Mitchell). Christians generally elevate the role of the a missionary career “to be the ‘highest calling’ in life . . . (qtd. Hsieh, 222).” But this creates a false dichotomy

between “secular and sacred [vocations] (Hoke and Taylor, 36).” And the reality is that many if not most of the issues missionaries face, are the same issues any family must deal with when it comes to change. Consider a job change that involves a transfer to another city or even to another country, for example (Mitchell).

Finally, we want to evaluate these issues in the “way of wisdom (Friesen, 152).” Mitchell puts this in terms of a very useful question, “Where am I yoked and where am I free?”

This article addresses just one major issue, the role of the wife in the decision to “go.” There are probably many other issues. A couple of the other top issues are certainly the impact on children and the impact on grandparents.

Role Of The Wife

When the husband believes he has been “called to missions”, the wife has several options: she can go enthusiastically, she can go “out of obedience”, she can go reluctantly, or she can flat out refuse to go. Each of these scenarios should be considered in terms of the unity required of a husband and wife by Gen 2:24.

If the wife is totally supportive of the decision or at least believes that the “husband is the head of house” and it is simply her duty to follow him, then there is clear unity in the decision and the husband is *free to* take the next step toward missions.

The other scenarios are where the GFC can occur. And a proper understanding of Ephesians 5:22-25 is crucial in resolving the conflict.

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives,

just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, (Ephesians 5:22-23).

“Paul's inspired counsel to members of Christian households in the region of Ephesus contains several key words, words not only written in a foreign language but also unfamiliar in their meaning. The correct interpretation of this passage rests heavily on the contextual meaning of three words: ‘subject’ (*hupotasso*), ‘head’ (*kephale*), and ‘love’ (*agapao*) (Trull, *Some Foreign Words*).”

The concept of submission itself can cause conflict, if taken out of context. In verse 22, the word “submit” or “subject (NASB)” expresses, “the concept of *voluntary* (emphasis mine), mutual submission . . . (a participial form of *hupotasso*) (Trull, *Some Foreign Words*).”

The next word, “head”, means “source”, not “chief” or “boss.” “In Eph. 5:23 ‘head’ is used in a head-body metaphor to show the unity of husband and wife and of Christ and the church, a common Pauline analogy. Further, where ‘head’ is used metaphorically to represent Christ's relation to the church, it never means authority but always emphasizes Christ's servant roles as Savior, provider, and fountainhead of life (Trull, *Some Foreign Words*).”

The third word, love (*agapao*) is the sacrificial kind of love Christ showed for us on the cross. “He gave up his own best interest and experienced the agony of Gethsemane, the agony of mistreatment at the time of his trial, and the agony of the cross. This is to be the standard by which a man judges his love for his wife (qtd. Trull, *Some Foreign Words*).”

We can now see that the Ephesians passage supports the concept of unity in Genesis 2:24. So if a wife would only go “kicking and screaming” or refuses to go at all,

that is, she will not (or perhaps can not) submit “voluntarily”, the “way of wisdom (Friesen, 152)” would seem to be to “stay home.” A husband is most certainly *yoked* to his wife.

Deciding To “Go Home”

If deciding to “go” is difficult, deciding to “go home” may be even more difficult. But one thing is certain. We will all “go home.” Some will go home to our native countries first while others will go strait from the field to glory. The first issue in deciding to “go home” is even relevant to those who will die on the field. The issue is succession planning.

Succession planning has long been a part of keeping any business an “ongoing concern.” The loss of a key individual from any organization can have severe consequences. So it’s important that there be a plan in place to fill the gap when a missionary leaves, for whatever reason.

The simplest and probably best form of succession planning is to have a team of missionaries working together. Then if one person has to leave there are others there who are already familiar with the culture and have relationships with the nationals.

There are probably situations where this ideal isn’t possible. But it should be a high priority to have some plan. If we have to leave, we should “pass the baton’ not abandon our spiritual children.

Assuming we now have contingency plans in place, we can look at some specific issues that may cause us to leave. First, the potential impact on children may be a consideration in going to the field in the first place. Once on the field, we must provide for our children, for their whole beings. For example, MKs may experience emotional,

physical or sexual abuse. “Sometimes simply moving locally can take care of a problem. [But] you may need to return your child to his home culture or you may need to minister in a completely different culture . . . You may be called to the field, but you are certainly called to raise your children well . . . If a missionary knows his child is being damaged, it is not right to continue without making changes (Sidebotham,301-303).”

The last issue to look at is political unrest. “We as missionaries are to be Spirit led pragmatists . . . It is not proper to court death in our ministry. On the other hand, neither is it right to so value our lives that every new advance is negated by an overemphasis on risk potential (Parshall, 164).”

“[N]o pressure, direct or indirect, is to be placed on missionaries who decide a withdrawal is mandated.” But they probably shouldn’t be pressured to leave either. “[E]mbassies [may] advise evacuation, but seldom if ever do they demand withdrawal.” It must be an individual decision (Parshall, 164-166).

So the “way of wisdom (Friesen, 152)” would seem to be to stay as long as possible. Stay as long as there is unity in the marriage. Stay as long as the family is provided for. But don’t “sacrifice the family on the alter of the mission.”

Conclusion

A great deal of the tension in the God Family Conflict is resolved by understanding that to “put God first” means that one can not deny the faith for the sake of family. It does not mean that family issues are irrelevant.

The general principle of missions involvement is to prayerfully “count the cost (Luke 14:28)” and follow the “way of wisdom (Friesen, 152).”

William Carey probably should not have gone to India in the first place. His first wife, Dorothy, refused to go. William was going to leave without her. She only agreed to go after being scared into going by another missionary (George, 85).

When it became obvious that Dorothy was literally going insane in that environment, William should have made some kind of change. The reality is the trip back to England would have taken five months and she probably wouldn't have survived the journey (Mitchell). But modern day Careys have no such problem or excuse.

That William Carey is the "Father Of Modern Missions" means that there is much of his life to be modeled. But his decision-making was short sighted. Us modern day Careys must consider family issues in our decisions and be careful not to think ourselves indispensable.

But at the same time, we must not worship our families. This is a difficult balance that the husband and wife must work through together, in unity.

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