

DAVID J. LUDWIG

## Family: The New Mission Field

### Dramatic Changes to Family Life

HOME LIFE has changed. It has always been less than perfect with bad moods swirling and resentment building amidst the constant backdrop of “not fair.” But now the rules seemed to have changed. Concern for individual rights has overtaken concern for the good of the family and community. In the noble attempt to free the individual from societal constrictions and to stop prejudicial, intolerant behavior, the culture has created a powerful, negative impact on the stability of the family unit.

The statistics are somewhat alarming and cannot be ignored. The Institute for American Values in its 2011 study, *The State of Our Unions*, reports the following data. Americans have become less likely to marry. From 1970 to 2010, the annual number of marriages per 1,000 unmarried adult women has declined more than 50 percent. The divorce rate in the United States today is nearly twice that of 1960. Most younger Americans now spend some time living together outside of marriage, with unmarried cohabitation commonly preceding marriage. Among women in the 25 to 44 age range, 75 percent of high school dropouts have cohabited compared to 50 percent of college graduates. More than 60 percent of high school seniors agree with the statement that it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before marriage in order to find out whether they really get

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along. The percentage of children who grow up in fragile, typically fatherless, families has grown enormously over the past five decades. While in 1960 only nine percent of all children lived in single-parent families, by 2010 the percentage had risen to 25 percent. Since 1960, the percentage of babies born to unwed mothers has increased more than sevenfold. More than four in ten births in 2009 were out-of-wedlock.

### Shift from “WE” to “ME” in Cultural Logic

WHAT HAS REALLY HAPPENED is the breakdown of the “WE” of the family unit. Commitment to an intact family unit has become less important than the “ME” of personal fulfillment and happiness. Here are just a few examples:

- A. Family organized around the “ME” of the child
  1. Parents feel the need to give their child every possible advantage and will take precious family time to drive the child to a staggering number of lessons and events.
  2. Every young child gets a ribbon in competition so that the precious self-esteem does not get damaged.
  3. If a teacher disciplines the child, the parents tend to defend their child.
- B. Each member of the family has his/her own schedule that is more important than family time, and often family members will be watching their own TV, be on Facebook, or playing a video-game in separate areas of the house when the family is together.
- C. If a person is not happy or fulfilled in the marriage, breaking the marriage and finding happiness elsewhere is becoming a cultural norm. In recognition of the vulnerability of the marriage vows, there has been a substantial rise in living together—keeping the option open to dissolve the union with less drama.

Behind the breakdown of the family is a fairly dramatic shift in cultural logic. The power of scientific advance brought a definite shift

in epistemology that devalued wisdom passed on from the previous generation and placed much more value on scientific research for understanding reality. In this process, revelation has almost completely been devalued as a source of truth. This allowed for an alternative explanation of the origin of life, going from being “God-breathed” to “naturally selected.” The purpose of life then changed from “living a life of service to others” to “survival of the fittest.” Since this places the individual “ME” at the center of concern rather than the community “WE,” morality shifts from absolute to relative. To put it bluntly, “sin” has changed from being self-centered to being “intolerant.”

These shifts in cultural logic drive the common sense of family relationships. Models of interaction patterns are endlessly portrayed in the media of the culture. Humorous sitcoms portray winning as more important than doing something that would help the relationships involved:

“What’s going on?” Jason queries, entering a group of guys who are exchanging humorous chatter. “What do you think?” Karl throws back. “You seem to know everything.” Jason pauses for a moment and then comes up with the perfect put-down, “I may

not know everything, but I do know one thing for sure.” “What’s that?” Karl challenges, with a little disgusted snort. “I know that you are one ugly dude,” Jason responds, walking out with the admiration of the rest for his quick come-back.

In this typical TV interchange, Jason won the interaction, to the cheers of his friends. But he damaged a relationship! Cultural logic says winning and coming out on top is more important than relationships!

### **A Look at How Family Units Are Formed Today**

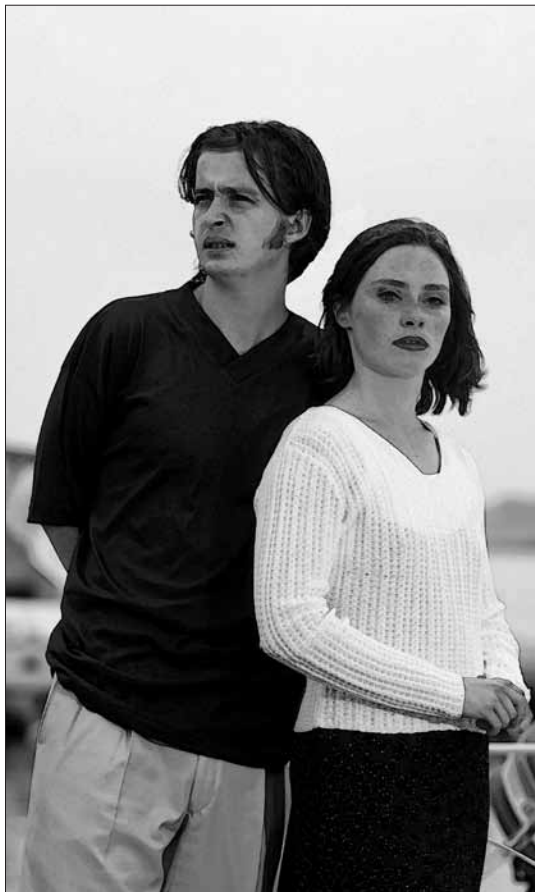
**A. The beginning of the relationship—“Me-Satisfaction.”** Travis and Julie felt the attraction as soon as they saw each other. They met at a party and quickly were drawn to each other, excited about being together. They stayed up much of the night, sharing their lives. They could not get enough of each other. The relationship continued, developing quickly through texting, meeting together when they could, and spending several evenings a week together. Within several weeks, they were sexually involved and then moved in with each other after several months. This seemed quite normal



to them . . . this was the model of the culture to give sexual freedom to consenting adults. They were getting their needs met and agreed to stay together as long as they enjoyed each other. They agreed that there was no commitment unless the relationship developed into a long-term one.

**B. The Start of the Power Struggles—“Me-Strategies.”** Julie noticed that after they started having sex, the long, soul-searching conversations stopped. Travis seemed more interested in her body than her soul . . . and seemed to have lost some interest in getting to know what she was thinking and feeling. She also realized that she was not as “starry-eyed” over Travis, but had lost some of her respect.

Travis noticed that Julie was not as much fun anymore. They did not laugh or kid around like they first did. She no longer felt soft and exciting, and she more often seemed to be critical of his behaviour. He would find



himself withdrawing after she told him once again how he disappointed her.

Travis gave in for awhile and apologized, but gradually became more resentful of her critical reactions and escalated the arguments. She started getting jealous of one of his former girlfriends, and the arguments became more frequent and heated. Julie really wanted the relationship to work, but was puzzled by his lack of interest in her. She did not trust him completely and started checking up on him.

But they found that being intimate would get the mood back. She loved the way he touched her, and he loved the way she responded to him. An evening of love-making would get the mood back for the next few days . . . but at a price. Sex was becoming addictive—they had to jump in bed to fix the mood, and Julie was sacrificing her body for the relationship.

### **C. The Dissolution of the Relationship—“ME-Justification.”**

About ten months into the relationship, Julie started feeling very anxious about the relationship. She was still being intimate and felt that she loved him, but she was becoming so resentful of his lack of interest in her or commitment to the relationship. Without wanting to, she pushed for more commitment so that she would not feel so used.

Travis became more puzzled. He felt that he loved Julie, but she seemed more demanding of his time. She wanted to know where he was at all times. He was feeling smothered and started wanting more space. Finally he suggested that they take a break from the relationship so he could have time to think about it.

Julie reacted to his suggestion with horror. She was convinced that he wanted to see his former girlfriend, and that he was just appeasing her. She blew up at him and demanded that he show her his phone so she could see his text messages. With that, Travis could no longer take her control and packed up to leave. They parted, hurt, angry, and bitter.

## A Look at Parenting as a “WE” as Compared to “ME”

THE YEARLONG “MARRIAGE” of Travis and Julie is the norm of today’s culture. Many individuals go through multiple “marriages” of this uncommitted nature before finally settling into a more permanent one when it is time to have a baby. What is learned through this repeated behaviour is how to be a “ME.” It is like a training ground for survival, learning how to look out after self and not put your trust in another person for the long term.

After the marriage, so many couples remain two “ME’s” and never build a healthy “WE.” Without knowing it, the couple deals with situations to the best of their individual abilities, often struggling when their realities clash. They just do not know how to form a “WE” and deal with the situation together.

The following is an example of how a couple could change the family interaction patterns by forming a “WE.”

Tiffany was upset. Her brother had teased her and she came running to her parents. “Brian laughed at me again,” she began with tears in her eyes. What happened next was disaster. Dad scooped Tiffany up in his arms and yelled at his son, “Brian, get in here!” Mom looked away in disgust, knowing he would blame Brian again. “She’s got him wrapped around her little finger,” she thought in anger. As the four gathered in the den, Mom and Dad did not look at each other. Dad directed his words at his son, “I told you never to tease your sister again,” he threatened with anger barely under control. Brian remained silent during the tongue-lashing, infuriated by the smug smile of his sister who was safe in father’s arms. The scene ended as Brian stomped out of the room and Mom gave Dad an angry look. They were obviously not a team when it came to raising their children!

Such interaction only breeds more anger and upset. Mom may even go behind Dad’s back to comfort Brian, since she feels he was unjustly criticized. Dad would feel his authority undermined. There would be war in the household when Brian became a teenager! This home is not a safe place!

Take another look at the family scene. What would happen in the same situation if there were a united front? What would happen if the parents formed a “WE”?

Tiffany was upset. Her brother had teased her and she came running to her parents. “Brian laughed at me again,” she began with tears in her eyes. What happened next almost seemed like a well-rehearsed sequence of events. Mom and Dad looked at each other with a knowing smile. Dad scooped Tiffany up in his arms and gave her a big hug. Mom called out to Brian, “Would you come here please? WE would like to talk to you.” As the four gathered in the den, Mom and Dad looked at each other again and smiled. Dad began, “WE want the two of you to get along.” Mom picked up the same idea and added, “So let’s talk this over so WE can learn from what just happened.” In the next few minutes, the truth came out and both admitted doing things to the other to escalate the situation. With peace restored, Brian and Tiffany went back to what they were doing. Mom and Dad smiled as their eyes met, obviously a team when it came to raising their children!

## Bringing in Faith Can Help Form the “WE”

VIRTUALLY ALL FAMILY DISTRESS comes from each member of the family feeling compelled to act as a “ME.” The sad fact, given all the cultural modelling, is that families do not know better. It seems normal to act for self and not trust the family unit. The wisdom of the Christian faith is that relationships do not work when everyone is thinking of self (sin) since this causes power

struggles, hurt feelings, and resentment. Relationships work when everyone is more concerned for the good of the whole (WE).

The following is an example from my own counselling of how a counsellor or family minister could teach a family the value of becoming a “WE.”

Alan’s mother called, “I’m having problems getting my teenage son to obey. His behavior has been getting worse and worse. I think he needs help.” I was waiting in my office. Alan sauntered in first, taking the choice seat and spreading his legs out to claim his territory. It was clear that he had quite an attitude and was used to controlling things. Then mother marched in, almost tripping over Alan’s feet, selected a chair next to him and glared at Alan for not moving his feet. Alan put a little smirk on his face and looked away. Finally father came in, carefully walking past Alan’s sprawled feet, choosing a chair that was furthest away . . . then he began staring at books in my office.

Mother looked at me, expecting me to begin. When I shrugged, she immediately took charge. Looking at Alan with obvious anger, she commanded, “Now you tell Dr. Ludwig what you did last night!” Alan gave his mother a look of disdain and with a defiant shrug, replied, “I don’t have to do anything.”

With that, mother quickly looked at father, angry that he was letting Alan get by with such disrespect. Father felt the look coming and let out a big sigh, turning his head away to look more closely at the book titles. Mother then looked at me, angry that I was not doing anything!

Fifteen seconds had gone by. It was obvious that the WE had broken down between mother and father. Alan was having a field day with the situation, knowing that he did not have to obey mom if dad did not support her! I sent the son out and tried to help the parents:

I looked at the mother and said, “You are very angry right now. Most of your anger is at your husband’s lack of support. You are trying very hard to control your son, but he does not support you!” Her eyes widened as

she listened, then nodded in agreement as she glared at her husband with an “I told you so” look.

Then I addressed the father, “And you are very angry with your wife at this point. It’s either her way or no way. She reacts, then expects you to back her up when you do not agree with her aggressive tactics.” He looked at me with surprise, then shot a glance at his wife that meant, “You listen to him.”

Then I softened and addressed both of them: “The problem that you are having is the breakdown of the united front. Your son is quite brilliant. He probably learned early in life how to split the two of you apart and now is able to do it at will. And it is getting dangerous, because he is stuck in the cracks and is way too immature for his age.”

I explained that Christ came so that we could love one another in a way that we cannot do ourselves. I told them that each had worked very hard to try to make the family work, but that the wisdom from above is that they work together!

I then gave them “WE” homework. Addressing the mother, I advised, “Don’t you ever react to your son out of your own emotions. That is too dangerous. I saw the way he can make you angry. He knows you all too well. So when you notice something, first turn to your husband and ask to talk it through. Ally first, then correct your son as a WE!”

Addressing the father, I suggested, “Don’t you ever put your wife off with something like, ‘what’s the big deal?’ or by turning away from her like I saw a few minutes ago. No, when she shares something she has noticed and is concerned about, treat her insight as a gift and immediately ally with her to form the WE. Add your own input, but make sure you are a united front when addressing Alan.”

I practiced with them, role-playing their son, leading them in prayer to help the mood between them until I was confident they knew what they were to do. Then I sent them home, asking them to think WE and say WE anytime their son was involved.

They listened closely and were able to follow through because they did have a good

relationship outside of this breakdown of the WE. They also valued their faith, but did not know how to use their faith in this situation.

They came back the next week and exclaimed that a miracle had happened. Much of the son's disrespect was gone, and he even called the previous night to ask if he could stay out an extra 15 minutes since he was having trouble getting a ride home. Mother answered the phone and did it right. She said, "Just a minute, I will talk it over with your father and WE will get back to you."

I saw Alan for a few minutes that day also. He came in and tried to show his previous attitude when he complained, "Boy, you have ruined my life!" But the way he said it, it seemed more like he was thanking me, for now he could be a kid and grow up with the security that the WE gives! He felt the security of a healthy Christian family!

### **"WE" Strategies Can Work even for the Blended Family**

THE FAMILY is the new mission field! Broken relationships, resentment, escalation of anger, deep hurt—these all are the state of so many homes. Families need help, but the church is too often seen as having no power except to make people feel guilty. To enter this mission field, the church needs to show it has real solutions that will bring health and healing to the family.

The power is always in Christ's presence that helps form the "WE." His deepest prayer to his Father was, "That they may be one as we are one." (John 17:17) Bringing one's faith to a concrete family situation can lead to the breaking of the "ME" patterns. The following is an example of a blended family and the difference it would make to use Christ's help to shift from "ME" to "WE" strategies:

It was 1:30 A.M. Duane was up pacing the floor. His 18-year-old son was supposed to be in at 12:00. "Why don't you come to bed?" his wife called out. "He'll be here soon. Something probably happened to make him late." She got an immediate reaction.

"Why do you always take up for him?" Duane challenged. "He knows you will be understanding ... boy does he manipulate you." "So you think blowing up at him is the right way to handle this?" his wife shot back. "Some loving father you turned out to be!" Duane felt his anger escalate, but before he could say another word, the door opened and there stood a defiant son. "Where have you been?" Duane demanded, dangerously close to the edge, "You are almost two hours late." "Aw, cool down, Pops," came the slurred answer. "Another two months and I'm out of here!" Smelling the liquor and hearing the disrespect, Duane grabbed his son and slammed him up against the wall. "There, that will teach him a lesson," Duane rationalized to himself, "It's about time he knew who was the boss around here."

That was physical abuse—not done out of loving concern for the son, but out of the need of the father to assert his shaky authority. You might even say that "Satan entered" Duane's household that night, invited by all parties involved!

1. The son chose alcohol to give him that "I don't care" attitude that could defy his father. He could have invited God in and have a heart-to-heart talk with his father about how he felt like a ten-year old when his father lectured him.

2. The wife chose a "zinger" to express her frustration, implying that Duane was not a good father, rather than sitting down with a prayer together and sharing her concerns from her heart.

3. Duane chose physical violence to show that he was the head of the household instead of commanding respect by bringing the situation to God in prayer and being open to listen and talk things through in a heart-to-heart fashion.

And they all lied to each other! The son said he only had a "few beers" when he knew that it was more like eight or ten. Duane said that he was doing this out of

concern for his son, but he knew deep down that he was just feeling powerless. His wife said she was only protecting her son, but she knew also deep down that she was just getting even with her over-bearing husband and silently cheered when her son defied him!

Imagine the difference if Duane had confessed, "Look, I have a problem with my anger" or if his wife had confessed, "I do take my son's side against you and that is wrong," or if the son had confessed, "I got drunk tonight and I'm sorry—I made an immature decision." Each of the three, speaking the truth in a spirit of love, could have resisted the devil and invited Christ into their hearts and home. It's as simple, but as profoundly unnatural as that!

It was after midnight. The police had called a few minutes earlier, waking the parents out of a deep sleep. Their son, it seems, had been detained, along

with his teenage friends for damaging mailboxes. As he walked in the door to find Mom and Dad waiting for him in the living room, his first words were, "I'm sorry ... I made some bad choices tonight." Obviously penitent, he went through every detail, not trying to cover or put the blame elsewhere. As he finished, Dad was the first to comment, "You did make bad choices, and I must tell you that when the police called, your Mom and I went through some very bad moments. I am still upset about your lack of respect for other's property and how easy it was for you to go along with the crowd." Then as he looked at his wife, tears came to both of their eyes. "We forgive you," were the most beautiful and comforting words this teenager could hear. The scene ended in a three-way hug and a prayer of thanksgiving for the love and forgiveness they could share.

