
A pastoral-theological view on the fundamental role of the father in variance with contemporary family structures and its adverse challenges for fatherhood: A literature review

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Abstract

Pastoral Theology is a dispersed and changing field that involves many diverse participants and diverse methods. The field is concerned with the theory and practice of pastoral care and counselling. It seeks to bring religious and moral meanings to bear on the needs, problems, and activities of everyday human experience, it seeks to interpret their significance, to understand their aetiology, and to guide interventions appropriately. Our present society is not only in a moral crisis, but is experiencing challenges and enormous changes. Families experiencing violence, murder, drug and alcohol abuse, dishonesty, child molestation, lack of order and discipline at schools and homes. Numerous contemporary forms of family structures such as single parents, child-headed households, children who are raised by grandparents and guardians, gay men as parents, divorce and stepfamilies and feminism are all adverse challenges for fatherhood in society.

Opsomming

Pastorale teologie is 'n uiteenlopende en veranderende gebied wat baie diverse deelnemers en diverse metodes behels. Die veld is gemoeid met die teorie en praktyk van pastorale sorg en berading. Dit beoog om godsdienstige en morele betekenis te dra op die behoeftes, probleme en aktiwiteite van die alledaagse menslike ervaring, om hul betekenis te interpreteer, hul etiologie te verstaan en intervensies toepaslik te lei. Ons huidige samelewing is nie net in 'n morele krisis nie, maar dit ondervind uitdagings en enorme veranderings. Families ondervind geweld, moord, dwelm- en alkoholisbruik, oneerlikheid, kindermolestering, gebrek aan orde en dissipline by skole en huise. Verskeie hedendaagse vorms van familiestrukture soos enkelouers, huishoudings met kinders as ouers, kinders wat deur grootouers en voogde grootgemaak word, homoseksuele mans as ouers, egskeiding en stief-families en feminisme is almal nadelige uitdagings vir vaderskap in die samelewing.

Keywords:

pastoral-theological; view; role; father; contemporary family structures; challenges; fatherhood; literature review

1. Introduction

Over the last several decades, there has been a momentous debate sweeping across the world over the present health and future prospects of families. The complexity of world family transformations are on the increase, and the challenges to families are many such as demands of work, financial strain, marital tension and conflict, the drive for success, and the modern day stresses on children (cf. Clinton, 2010:33; Brown, 2003:1). Moreover, life is changing more rapidly and unpredictably than ever before. The world that professionals in every discipline have tried to understand and serve is changing ever so quickly (cf. Clark & Clark, 2010:37). To create and maintain a functioning family is no easy task, which is compounded by the complexity of contemporary family structures and specifically absent fathers (Freeks, 2017a:1-2; Freeks, 2017b:90-93; Freeks, 2016:1; Freeks, Greeff & Lotter, 2015c:46-47; Carstens, 2014:10; Freeks, 2011; Freeks & Lotter, 2009:520-524; Welch, 2007:2).

Socialization on the other hand has always had its challenges for parents to help children grow into adulthood (*cf.* Clark & Clark, 2010:38).

Welch (2007:2) is of the opinion that parents do not need a course in family life to allow them to be active family members, but it would seem that, although many parents are active family members, they still need to be equipped with life-skills, values, character formation, spiritual qualities, leadership, etc. (Freeks *et al.*, 2015c:28; Freeks, 2015a:1-4; Freeks, 2015b:25-26; Freeks, 2013:56-65, 68; Freeks & Lotter, 2011:581; Freeks, 2011; Freeks & Lotter, 2009:530-531; Freeks, 2007).

Active parenting is not enough when it comes to solving the problems societies are experiencing – children are still suffering and struggling the most.

One of the most basic, unexpected and extraordinary social trends of our time is the decline of fatherhood (Popenoe, 1996). Therefore, any study or research should be approached with the idea of the highest level of judgement and critique from an academic point of view, justification and substantiation of viewpoints and points of departure.

Witte (2009:xi) indicated that children or illegitimate children bear the sins of their fathers and mothers. He also stated that the world examining the pathos of child abuse and rape, child poverty and homelessness, juvenile delinquency and violence and illegitimacy and infanticide. Nothing tears the heart of a parent more than watching a son or daughter who is struggling in life (*cf.* Havens, 2010:45).

The author realizes that the above-mentioned challenges could not been fathomed at the onset of this article, however, Pastoral Theology give sound theological grounding to the article which is done within the parameters of Pastoral Studies.

2. The reason, focus and tasks for a Pastoral Theological view

The reason, focus and tasks for Pastoral Theology to step to the front was its role of mediation between the world and the church, between that which is outside (without scripture) and that which is inside (with scripture).

The pastoral encounter is always influenced by the view which the author holds about the human being (in this case the father), and vindicate or uphold it that way. Pastoral Theology aimed to link the idea of God with real and relevant experiences of humans so that existential meaning can be discovered (*cf.* Louw, 1999:3). Pastoral Theology has to do with the facilitating of meaning and meaning of experience in an effort to answer existential problems, and in this case fatherhood and contemporary family structures. What should be the focus of Pastoral Theology in this regard? The focus of Pastoral Theology should be the practical and everyday assistance to families who have life problems for example the absent father. Furthermore, Pastoral Theology should be interdisciplinary, and in dialogue with other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, gender, pastoral care, counselling and education regarding problems which families are experiencing in life.

Pastoral Theology is not a theology about pastoral care but rather a type of contextual theology, in other words, a way of doing theology *pastorally* (*cf.* Hunter, 1991:867). Although Pastoral Theology consists of the certain elements such as scripture bound, practical application, empirical reality, focus on the church and other communities of faith, it should also take notice of other contemporary family structures such as gay men as parents, single parenting, child-headed households, feminism (*cf.* Lotter, 2007:3), divorce and stepfamilies which are according to the author adverse challenges for fatherhood.

The Christian community, the church, its work and ministry should be the important foci of Pastoral Theology (*cf.* Pattison & Woodward, 2000:6). The interdisciplinary and practical aim of the theology, and its task should make informed interventions about the lives of people who are facing life transitions, stresses and crises (Marshall, Miller-McLemore & Wimberly, 2000:49). To accomplish its task, Pastoral Theological reflection must also take into consideration wider cultural issues that impact the lives of people including racial and ethnic traditions, inter-racial conflict, gender, equality, discrimination against people because of sexual preference, and issues related to technological and post-industrial economic changes (Marshall *et al.*, 2000:58). Pastoral Theology is seen by McClure (2008:191) as promoting the flourishing of all. By all one may ask: who are included into the “all”, would that be only church-focused or people in general, also those “outside” the church?

Lastly, Pastoral Theology seeks to bring religious and moral meanings to bear on the needs, problems, activities of human experience and guide appropriate and healing interventions such as care in the socialization process (cf. McClure, 2010:20).

3. Fatherhood from a Biblical perspective

3.1 A Biblical perspective

God created the male with a particular purpose in mind (Freeks, 2016:3, 9-20; Stringer, 2009:49-50; Freeks, 2004:13-27; Bergh, 2002:81-86; cf. also Gn 1:26-31; Lk 15:14-31; Jn 3:16; 14:16). He intended men to be fathers and that is why God designed them to be as they are (Munroe, 2008:23, Vorster, 2007:176). The father is in many cases also the husband in the house and greater emotional involvement like warmth, caring and security is of paramount importance (Visagie, 2005:93, cf. Vorster, 2007:174) except for the *other* roles fathers have to fulfill (cf. Freeks, 2011:204-210; Freeks, 2013:67-74).

However, in the Western world it is understood that a man becomes a father when he impregnates a woman and in many African contexts being a father has much more to do with kinship ties than with medically established paternity (Richter & Morrell, 2006:13). Fatherhood has a much broader meaning than just the biological production of children. Fatherhood is inherent in the man's very nature and authors such as Munroe (2008:24) is of the opinion that for a male it is not a choice to be a father because he underlined the aspect that the essence of the male is fatherhood, and God gave man the task of stewardship where man has to rule over God's creation.

Controversially, feminists believe that men are a *luxury* in the family (cf. Ericson, 1996:39). Feminism has huge implications for men and children because they highlighted the gendered nature of social relations. Considering the significant purpose of fatherhood, Munroe (2008:26) underlined the fact that the male was designated a *father* by the Creator, and also indicated that God was thinking "*father*" when He created man (Munroe, 2008:26). It seems then that fatherhood is associated with manhood because a man is someone who is expected to be able to take on the fatherhood role (Richter & Morrell, 2006:14-15).

3.2 *The impact of fatherhood*

Fathers have the unique opportunities to make an eternal investment and impact in the lives of their children (Munroe, 2008:7; Williams, 2008:18; Richter & Morrel, 2006:17). Hence, it is relevant to say that fatherhood can be the most fulfilling job a man can have. Dienhart (1998:35) summarizes the impact of fatherhood as the child-centered aspect that meets the needs of the child by ongoing work to create and maintain the relationship between father and child. This implies that fathers are important to their children and also children to their fathers, and the impact of this involvement may result in happier families (Cohen, 2001:5). Stringer (2009:49-50) and Dienhart (1998:4) broadens this impact by saying that most fathers have the desire, ability, and sense of obligation to care effectively for the next generation. This behavior, however, is not only his secular obligation, it is also a God-given assignment concerning his children as long as he lives.

3.3 *Duties, responsibility and accountability of fatherhood*

Fatherhood consists of several duties, accountabilities and responsibilities, such as communication, rules, managing their children's behavior, keeping them healthy, educating them, guiding them (physically, socially and emotionally), and taking care of them and loving them (Carstens, 2014:187-189; Payleitner, 2014:17-21; Blackthorn, 2004:4-5). The same can also be said about the demands on women when they are single parents or in co-operation with the father. All these duties, accountabilities and responsibilities are not only good but relevant in the upbringing of children (Austin, 2007:4). Most of these duties, this responsibility and accountability, are realized in his practical and physical interaction with his children such as fishing together (father and son), participating in activities or games, sports, family activities, outings and educational activities to name but a few (Freeks *et al.*, 2015c:36-37; Coakley, 2006:153-161; Freeks, 2004:89-95).

Most young fathers still need to learn the purpose, principles, and functions of true fatherhood (Munroe, 2008:17). These principles are more than just formulas, they are God-given imperatives which lay down laws that govern life and these principles are not learnt through any course but applied when they are present and involve in the lives of their children. It is expected of the father living in these times to be more involved with the children, not only instrumental but more affective (emotive) because his role will help in the forming and fixing of the child's identity as well as of his sexual identity, and shape diverse child outcomes such as depression, behavior and adjustments (Carstens, 2014:115-118; Cruz, King, Widaman, Leu, Cauce & Conger, 2011; Stringer, 2009:105-106; Bergh, 2002:83, *cf.* Freeks & Lotter, 2009:530).

4. The fundamental role of the father

4.1 *The father as a positive role model*

It is fundamental that the father should cultivate the idea to be a positive role model for his children (Freeks, 2011:209-210; Freeks, 2013:73-74; cf. Freeks & Lotter, 2009:530). Children are significant because they look up to people to whom they can relate and whom they can emulate, and here the actions and behavior of the father could play a significant role when the child's personality develops (cf. Blackthorn, 2004:5). His role is to show that he can be a model to be identified with for his children so that his children can live a high quality of life, and they can look up to him as an example of how to behave (Steytler, 2007:39).

Furthermore, the father can be a successful role model to his children if he adheres to Biblical examples in the Word of God, and apply Christian values and Christian character (cf. Freeks, 2017a:104; Van der Walt, 2010:215-219, Theron, 2008:82, Freeks & Lotter, 2009:530).

4.2 *The father as disciplinary figure*

Discipline is one of the most important aspects and part in the family context that need attention when a child is trained and educated (Nel & Steyn, 1985:32). If relations are good between the father and his children, he should teach them discipline because discipline set the limits of behavior. But if a child grow up without the involvement and presence of the father he could forfeit the necessary discipline and socializing with the father (cf. Freeks, 2004:102). The father should be the ideal parent who disciplines his children but he must keep in mind that discipline is not always punishment (cf. Munroe, 2008:123). In fact, discipline takes teaching to the next level where the child is not only taught but also *corrected* and *instructed*. This will help to shape a child's character because discipline now becomes training (Munroe, 2008:123).

Austin (2007:4), however, combined the discipline process with affection by saying that the father should care and love his children while he disciplines them (cf. also Larney, 2009:44). Where Munroe (2008) sees discipline as to teach and to correct the child, Henley (1997:118) refers to discipline as a two-sided coin where the one side is *direction* and the other is *correction*. Henley stated further that discipline refers also to *discipling*, in other words making disciples or followers (in this case his children) of good behavior and conduct, and this behavior can be best taught and demonstrated by the father (Henley, 1997:117).

Without good guidance on how to discipline your child will not be successful, but a disciplinary strategy will probably be the most effective way for the father to accomplish what he wants. Therefore, the father can be seen as the ideal figure when he educates and disciplines his children in the fear of the Lord (*cf.* Prov. 1:9).

5. Contemporary family structures as adverse challenges for fatherhood

5.1 Challenge 1: child-headed households

In 2004 approximately 840 000 children in South Africa lost their mother (parents), mostly because of HIV/Aids (Slot-Nielsen, 2004:1). That was 13 years ago, and the assumption is that the figures has drastically changed because by 2017. It is expected that there will be three million AIDS orphans unless comprehensive health interventions make it possible for children care-givers to live longer (Slot-Nielsen, 2004:1). These health interventions refer to programmes such as tests and better access to drugs. These interventions are good and very helpful, however, it is important and relevant that those children are in need of good parenting. London (2010:58) substantiate and indicated in his research that primary influences in the life of children are not sports, figures or rock stars, but the benefit of families where parents, father and or mother, should influence children positively. He indicated further that society who is supposed to influence children do not give proper examples (London, 2010:58).

In South Africa child-headed households are generally those where the main care-givers are sometimes younger than 15, and it is in line with the Constitution which defines a child as a person younger than 18 years. It is also true that children younger than 21 do not have the legal capacity to perform certain acts (*cf.* Slot-Nielsen, 2004:1) although this has changed to 18 in later legislation. Child-headed households are children that are been looked after by older siblings, who are still children themselves. Children growing up in child-headed households are facing many challenges and deprivations such as difficulty in getting food and shelter, serious threats to their education because of poverty, high risk of being sexually abused by neighbors and relatives, more child prostitution and child laboring and more likelihood of pursuing life on the streets. These children may also struggle to get births registered and to get health care treatment and social security (Slot-Nielsen, 2004:2). Hence, the researcher has great empathy and understand the complexity of this typical family structure and have been

working personally amongst these cases. These factors and challenges cannot be ignored and creates a vacuum that need to be fulfilled (*cf.* Freeks, Strydom & Bartlett, 2015d:45).

The fundamental role of the father should be the ideal suggestion and asset to these children and their challenges, but unfortunately there are sometimes no fathers present or involved in the lives of these children.

5.2 Challenge 2: gay men as parents

Gay fathers are a diverse group varying not only in race, social class, age, ethnicity, ability, religion, and demographic factors but also in how they became fathers. They explicitly choose to become parents (Mallon, 2004:2-3). Gay and lesbian families consist of same-sex partners who live together in the same household, and may include either natural-born or adopted children (Welch, 2007:13-14). There is no doubt that gay men can be outstanding fathers. Gay dads may feel that they succeeded in their fatherhood but they are often restrained by societal or familial pressures. As author, my question is: *Are gay dads good dads?* Some researchers indicated that they are. A study that was released in 2001 suggests that gay men who are planning to become fathers often give it much more thought than their heterosexual peer, and they also feel that they will manage their families (McGarry, 2003:31). They even felt that they take risks by coming out of the closet as gay men, and eventually, they are emotionally happier because they took those risks to become fathers and they have the instincts for parenthood (*cf.* McGarry, 2003:1). Notwithstanding, the term *gay dad* or *father* sets off two alarms. The first alarm related to sexism, which is the enduring belief in any society that parenting is the natural and sole domain of women. The second alarm is related to entrenched heterosexuality and parenting which is inextricably intertwined in our culture that the suggestion of gay fatherhood appears alien, unnatural, and even impossible. Thus, fatherhood can be compromised and society can be affected negatively.

5.3 Challenge 3: divorce and stepfamilies

The South Africa Institute of Race Relations published 56% of divorces with children where 48% of these children have no fathers, and which gives a total number of 3.95 million orphans, which can also be another challenge to fatherhood in South Africa (Frazier, 2015). Further, statisticians and sociologists debate the number of stepfamilies, and estimates vary greatly because in many countries there are no accurate census data on stepfamilies.

According to Deal (2010:49) divorce and stepfamily relationships became quite common. Deal mentioned an example of research that confirmed that 42% of adult Americans (95.5 million adults) have step relationship with either a stepparent, a step or half sibling, or a stepchild. Deal also mentioned that a divorce opens the door to serial family transitions, and does not necessarily end family life. In South Africa, it had become a custom that when a man marries a woman who already has one or more children, he has the option to accept her with or without the children (*cf.* Carsten, 2014:11).

Berger (1998:9-10) mentioned the stepfamily created by a remarriage into which either one or both spouses bring at least one child from a previous marriage. It indicated that stepfamilies are never simple because of their complicated structure, intricate dynamics, and multifaceted issues. It should be noted that stepfamilies are becoming the fastest growing family structure and have become so common that it was then (1998) the predominant family structure for example in the United States of America (*cf.* Berger, 1998:4-5).

Stepfamilies are a major type of family, and they are here to stay, to expand, and to become more and more visible. They are experiencing individual, marital, or family problems that motivate them to seek treatment (*cf.* Welch, 2007:11). Since 1998, from the research of Berger, the number of stepfamilies are on the increase, with more children affected now than ever before, and the problem of good fatherhood get more complicated.

5.4 Challenge 4: feminism

Since this article focuses on the pastoral theological paradigm, it is also crucial to discuss the role of feminism perspectives on Pastoral Theology (Moore, 2002:8 ff). The feminist aim is to improve women well-being by linking their personal predicaments and often untold private sorrows with their social position and status in society (Dominelli, 2002:6). They also sought to improve the conditions in which women live from their own point of view. The feminist believe that some kind of rights-orientated realist ethics is necessary to protect women from abuses such as genital mutilation, discrimination in employment and education, starvation of mothers and their children, and they are very concerned with the reconstruction of marriage (Brown, 2003:166). Hence, the challenging of unjust social relations that have oppressed women for centuries in different ways in every country in the world. Feminist also involved in mobilizing women who have not had a single view of either the causes of women's oppression, or of the ways

for ending it (Dominelli, 2002:3). Just as the feminist women movement made a mockery of the traditional female behavior so did society question the conduct and position of masculinity and leadership of men. Feminists highlighted the gendered nature of social relations in all spheres of public and also private life. They indicated that men are privileged at the expense of women in many dimensions of social existence, including their exclusion from the waged labor domain and men collar high-paying jobs (*cf.* Dominelli, 2002:5), as one of many areas where injustices of women were rampant.

The author agrees that the unfair treatment of women should be addressed, but the focus should not only be on women especially where children are involved. Further, the opinion of feminism should not be the only one that is valid regarding men and family.

5.5 Challenge 5: single parents

In South Africa, 31% of mothers are raising their babies without a father figure. Although 1.1 million births were registered for example in 2015, only 64% indicated that there is no information about the father which end up eventually in single parenting. Single parenting in South Africa is mainly the leading cause of the fatherhood problem because in 2015 approximately 886 202 babies were born, and 50% of the women who gave birth were single mothers with no help from the father (Hawkins, 2015).

The dawn of the new millennium saw an increase in parenting households where there is no spouse. Single-parents result either from divorce, the death of a spouse, or unmarried parenthood and are on the increase (Welch, 2007:10-11), the ones that are mostly affected is of course the children, and when children are living with single parents, they often have poor well-groomed emotional outcomes (*cf.* Deal, 2010:50).

6. Findings

Contemporary family structures can compromise fatherhood and can be adverse challenges in society. Although the father can be considered as the ideal role model and disciplinary figure for his children in the home, contemporary family structures can complicate this fundamental role.

7. Recommendations

The fundamental role of the father should be accentuated so that it can be a *buffer* against these complex family structures in society. According to scripture this role is the highest, noblest calling from God and therefore, the father should be seen as the responsible figure in the family. Being the responsible figure in the home, the father must be aware of this deeply committed and pointedly proactive task regarding fatherhood. Moreover, fatherhood should be practiced in the Christian home and Christian community from a Biblical point of view. The Christian community should be an important focus for Pastoral Theology.

8. Conclusion

Family scientists have considered men's contribution and participation in family life to be fundamental in any society. Studies of men has evolved to a current interest irrespective the contemporary family structures in society.

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