

## Widening Our Family

When you have serious problems in your life, in whom do you confide? In June 2006, Miller McPherson *et al.* published survey results showing a marked decline among Americans in the number of people in whom they can confide.[1] This survey, performed in 2004, replicated one from 1985. Americans in 1985 had three friends on average with whom they could “discuss important matters.” This dropped in only about two decades to about two. Compared to 1985, about 50% more people reported that their spouse is the *only* one in whom they could confide. Even more striking, the number of people who have *no one* in whom they can confide rose from 10% in 1985 to about 25% of the population in 2004. Even given uncertainties in this type of survey, the authors believe these results reflect a real increase in isolation. As they put it, “The general image is one of an already densely connected, close, homogeneous set of ties slowly closing in on itself, becoming smaller, more tightly interconnected, more focused on the very strong bonds of the nuclear family (spouses... and parents).” According to this study, more Americans only discuss weighty matters with their immediate families, and a substantial number of Americans discuss them with no one at all.

Family is becoming more central, often the sole source of support. How should Christians view the family? Jesus was certainly family-friendly: He supported honor for one’s parents; he showed love and approval for children; he held a very conservative view of marriage and divorce; and his condemnation of adultery took the law of Moses to a new level. Despite our culture’s enthusiastic rhetoric about family values, Americans fall far short of this standard. We all know how high the divorce rate is, even among church goers. In our culture marriages and families are regularly split asunder by those pursuing new relationships for a variety of reasons—something Jesus would have roundly condemned. Many of us at RCRC bear the life-long scars of such rifts. The unfortunate consequence of increasing marital instability is that as Americans count more and more on family, families are more and more fragile.

There is another element to Jesus' teaching about the family which is even more relevant to the study of McPherson *et al.* In the words of Georges Florovsky,

Christianity entered history as a new social order, or rather a new social dimension. From the very beginning Christianity was not primarily a doctrine, but exactly a community...Indeed, fellowship (*koinonia*) was the basic category of Christian experience. Primitive Christians felt themselves to be closely knit and bound together in a unity which radically transcended all human boundaries—of race, of culture, of social rank, and indeed the whole dimension of this world... From the point of view of Rome, all this could not help but appear seditious.[2]

Strong family structure was important in the self-understanding of first-century Roman culture, so this part of Jesus' message provoked persecution against the nascent church. The culture at large found this widening of the family very counter-cultural. Jesus welcomed *all* who would follow him into the family of God, as when he said "whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mk 3:34). Jesus also shocked listeners, Roman and Jewish alike, by insisting that obedience to him take priority over earthly families (cf. Mt 10:37). Jesus was far from encouraging the sort of closed-off family that is gaining prevalence in our society. Reaching out to the lonely and isolated around us, both in the church and at large, is part of our Christian mission.

We tend to feel the distance between us and others more acutely this time of year. It is often pointed out that depression peaks in winter, especially around Christmas. When better to seek out and include those who may be isolated? They may be at work, in church, or elsewhere. Building a strong, trustworthy friendship is time-consuming, but worth the effort. After all, if we look closely, many of us will find we also have few we can confide in. The Teacher of Ecclesiastes captured the situation well when he said, "If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up" (Eccl 4:10).

~Tim Collins

[1] M. McPherson, L. Smith-Lovin, M. E. Brashears, *Am. Soc. Rev.*, **71**, 353 (2006).

[2] As quoted in Barry Harvey, *Another City* (Trinity Press International: Harrisburg, Pa), 1999, p. 21.