

A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF AND RESPONSE TO THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF MERITOCRACY ON FAMILY LIFE IN SINGAPORE¹

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ABSTRACT

This article briefly traces the reasons why Singapore has adopted meritocracy as a national policy. The social impact of this, especially on the quality of family life, is also highlighted. The article then attempts a Christian-secular presentation to underscore work-family complexities faced by people living in a meritocratic culture. Finally, a spirituality of grace and gifting is proposed as a way of living in Singapore – one that helps Christians and the Church to be pro-family in a success-oriented society without undermining the virtues of diligence and excellence.

1. MERITOCRACY: THE CHOSEN WAY FOR SINGAPORE

Singapore was once a British colony. Today, she has attained an economic stature that is not only respected in Asia, but also in the world. How does Singapore, with only a population of slightly more than four million people and a total land area of only 682.7 sq km, manage to outdo so many countries in economic terms? How does Singapore, with hardly any natural resources and only gained independence after separation from Malaysia in 1965, achieve so much economically in so short a time? To answer these questions, it is necessary to understand the national mindset very much promoted by the government since independence.

In fact, even before independence, the early seeds of meritocracy were sowed. In 1961, the government set up the Economic Development Board (EDB) and entrusted it with two crucial responsibilities – attracting foreign investments and developing local businesses into competitive enterprises. The former chairman of the EDB, Philip Yeo, once exhorted:

Almost every country that had industrialised before us had strengths in raw materials, large home markets, well-developed industrial skills and relevant education systems. Singapore had none of these advantages. Yet, we succeeded. Why?

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Singapore's economic success over the past 36 years was due to our focus on growth and emphasis on doing all the things necessary to support that growth. We invested heavily in infrastructure and education. But more importantly, we dared to challenge convention, and have continued to do so ever since.

These initiatives needed vision and daring – in short, a pioneering spirit. It is this spirit that must be kept alive if Singapore is to remain successful in the next millennium.

Some Singaporeans worry about the stress from a fast-paced life, and ask why we are so keen to be No. 1. They want to know what is wrong with being No. 2. Nothing is wrong with being in the No. 2 position, but that is not the point. The issue is about desiring to be and working at being No. 1. It is a mindset; a competitive spirit; not so much the absolute position we actually achieve.

If we are satisfied with being No. 2, we will gradually slip to the third position, the fifth position, then 10th and 20th and so on.

Similarly, if we are No. 1 and we take it for granted, we know for sure that someone will overtake us.³

Philip Yeo's words have aptly reflected the mindset of many Singaporeans – in order not to lose out, one must always compete to stay ahead.⁴ While this mindset is not necessarily wrong, the worrying thing is that many seem to have placed economic pursuit as the overriding concern in life.

When asked if it would be always like living in a “pressure cooker” in Singapore, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong answered:

It would always be in Singapore. You can't slow down. If I may give an example. Let's take the port of Singapore. Can you slow down? Why do you want to work 365 days a year and 24 hours a day? Slow down. Relax. Tanjung Pelepas will take over. West Port will take over. And then what do we become?

In this game, if you're not No. 1 or No. 2, you are nothing.

So we have to be realistic.⁵

Meritocracy – the emphasis on competing and staying ahead of others; on giving the best rewards to the most able - has instilled in many Singaporeans a certain drivenness. Indeed, by circumstance and by choice, Singapore as a nation has adopted meritocracy as the way to achieve both survival and prosperity. How has this drive to achieve affected family life in Singapore society as a whole? How can the Church and Christians in Singapore

³ This is an excerpt of Philip Yeo's message in the 1997 *EDB Yearbook* which was reproduced on page 15 of *The Sunday Times* on 26 October 1997 under the heading: “Why we must be obsessed with being No. 1.”

⁴ This mindset is commonly known in Singapore as the *kiasu* mentality. Literally, *kiasu* means “fear of losing.”

⁵ *The Straits Times* 24 January 2001. Face To Face With The PM, pH3.

respond adequately without undermining the virtues of diligence and excellence? Before answering these, we need to first appreciate historically why the country has chosen the way of meritocracy.

Prior to merger with Malaysia, Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's founding Prime Minister, was convinced that an independent Singapore would not be viable without the Malayan mainland. But as events had dictated, she had to separate from Malaysia and become an independent nation. The uncertainties ahead made independence a heavy load. Indeed, Singapore leaders felt that the country was like a "child untimely borne," but they would have to prove their own "prophecy of doom" wrong. They learnt that Singapore's potential would make others envious of her, and Singapore's small size would make her vulnerable to unfair treatment. Nevertheless, they had to lead all Singaporeans to believe in themselves and battle the odds together.

This then paved the way for the birth of meritocracy in Singapore. The sense of being betrayed by the impotent protection of their British colonial masters in World War II; the sense of being dehumanised by the brutality of Japanese occupation; the sense of being bullied by their Malaysian counterparts – all these fuelled the will of both leaders and people in Singapore not to depend on others, but on themselves. This steely determination to succeed becomes a national mindset when people become bent on pushing themselves to compare and compete in order to outperform one another, especially in material terms.

2. HOW RESULTANT SOCIAL TRENDS ARE AFFECTING FAMILIES

2.1 Narrow view of success

Over the years, Singapore has learnt to compete with the outside world and excel. But this tendency is also readily observable among Singaporeans themselves as they compete and compare with one another in many areas. This is largely due to the system of meritocracy designed and nurtured by the government since the early years of independence. For example, prestigious government scholarships are given to outstanding students on merit alone, putting "the child of a taxi driver on par with that of a merchant banker" (Mahizhnan & Lee 1998:5). As such, many young Singaporeans are already pushing themselves and striving for material success via the route of meritocracy. A young student who puts in hours into his studies will pour in hours into his work when he enters the working world.⁶

The government recognises that the people view success only in a narrow, economic sense in its report, *Singapore 21*, which spells out its aspirations for Singapore in the new millennium.⁷ It now calls on the people to define success beyond the basic survival level to the higher social and spiritual dimensions (Government 1999:20).

Explaining the need for this redefinition, the report acknowledges:

⁶ Many parents are also pushing their children hard in their studies, as evident in the large number of students taking private tuition lessons. The desire to excel and succeed has generally made the school, the workplace and even the home, stressful and competitive.

⁷ Five features are listed by the government as pillars of a 21st century Singapore - every Singaporean matters; strong families; opportunities for all; feeling passionately for Singapore; active citizens in nation-building.

There are good historical reasons why Singaporeans view success narrowly. Economics was the imperative when the country first came into being. When we had nothing, having something was success. Education was pursued as the path to a good job.

On the positive side, a narrow definition of success has helped to maintain Singapore's competitive edge by feeding the desire to excel. But it has also had undesirable social effects (Government 1999:18-19).⁸

As for the family, the report gloomily forecasts:

As Singapore enters the next century, the family will come under increased strain. Nuclear families will be the trend. In most cases, both mother and father will be working. In a knowledge-driven workplace, their jobs will be less secure and more demanding. At home, their children will be open to more influences and be harder to manage (Government 1999:25).

Undoubtedly, Singapore has achieved great economic success. This is the result of belief, unity, and diligence combining to fire up perseverance, optimism, excellence and competition in the will of people. And this success culture is beginning to assert its influence in other spheres. People are not only challenged to be productive workers, but also to be active volunteers in social work and strong builders of family life.

2.2 Uncertain spousal roles

Generally, Singaporeans are fairly chauvinistic on the issue of feminism. They are supportive of it only in agreeing that women should have their own career. Otherwise, most still hold on to very traditional beliefs about woman, and have high expectations about her balancing career and family (Kau, Tan & Wirtz 1998:114).

With dual-income families becoming the norm, the call then is for man and woman to be partners in family life. But this is a Herculean effort for the man because of the various reasons pointed out by Janet Salaff (1998:255-56):

- men with higher incomes have not increased their share of household chores
- they turn their energies to new money-making opportunities
- those with children who are no longer infants justify their withdrawal from housework because they think they are now less needed at home
- many bring work home or take courses or start own businesses as they rise in their careers.

⁸ Some of the undesired social effects identified are: an unforgiving society that does not believe in giving a second chance to those who have failed; a risk aversion attitude that avoids trying new grounds for fear of failing; mismatched talents in that some end up like "square pegs in round holes" in life ("e.g." a talented violinist chooses to be a banker, even a mediocre one, because of the lure of better material returns).

This general reluctance of the man to be more involved in family life is potentially detrimental to the home. This is because Singapore women today are much better educated. The modern Singapore female feels stifled being home bound, and values the sense of fulfilment and security that comes from working. Also, a highly educated woman today will want to discuss and make joint decisions with her husband over important home matters (Kuo & Wong 1979:57).⁹ These aspirations of the modern woman in Singapore certainly require that the man discards his traditional view of “man works outside and woman stays inside.”

Sociologist Stella Quah (1998:173-74) comments that the need to review the traditional perception of spousal roles in the contemporary Singapore family is largely due to three social trends which do not necessarily pull in the same direction:

- the need to uphold traditional social values in order to safeguard family stability and social order
- the need to sustain the national economy which requires both men and women in the labour force
- the need for gender equality which matches the emphasis on meritocracy.

In sum, the debate over spousal roles is not one about battle of the sexes. Rather, it brings into focus the need for married couples in Singapore today to work at becoming strong partners in the home and active participants in the economy. The working woman is not to neglect her traditional duty as homemaker, and the working man is to cultivate an “untraditional” willingness to share family chores as co-housekeeper.

3. A CHRISTIAN-SECULAR PRESENTATION

There are two challenges posed by meritocracy and faced by people in Singapore. These will now serve as “talking points” in this Christian-secular presentation.

3.1 The challenge to remain competitive

The secular voice. Many secular ideas on success are impacting the lives of Singaporeans today. These views bear great influence on people’s perceptions, values and aspirations at the personal and societal levels in Singapore.

Among the many success gurus who have sold their ideas to Singaporeans is Shiv Khera.¹⁰ He links success with having the winning edge. This winning factor is the result of excellence, not perfection. In fact, if you try to be perfect in order to taste success, you are being neurotic. On the other hand, when you strive to excel as your approach to success, you are being progressive because you view that things can always be done better or improved (Khera 1998:36).

⁹ It must be noted that the modern working woman in Singapore still sees her work as secondary to her roles as wife and mother (Kuo & Wong 1979:58).

¹⁰ Khera is the founder of Qualified Learning Systems Inc, USA. He is also a noted business consultant and much sought-after speaker on successful entrepreneurship. In April and October 2000, he was in Singapore to conduct seminars organised by the Marketing Institute of Singapore for top executives.

In a sense, Khera views success as both subjective and objective in that it has to do with both feelings and tangible results - success is the feelings that come from a job well done *and* the visible achievement of some desired objectives. However, the emphasis in success is not on the end, but on the process - it is not measured by your position in life, but by the way you overcome the odds in order to get there. Success can be described this way:

Success in life is not determined by how we are doing compared with others, but how we are doing compared with what we are capable of doing. Successful people compete against themselves. They better their own record and keep improving constantly (Khera 1998:39).

In order to be successful as an individual or as a people, at least three qualities are indispensable - commitment, hardworking and positive believing. Commitment here has to do with “playing to win.” To have such a commitment is to function from a position of strength, and thus, to thrive on pressure (Khera 1998:45).

Khera (1998:49) also maintains that the quality of hardworking is another essential for success. To be hardworking is to recognise that success is not plain luck, but the work of the law of cause and effect. What causes success to be a fruitful effect is the hard work which a person puts in to constantly excel in what is being done.

Besides commitment and hard work, the quality of positive believing is also important in ensuring success. Positive believing is more than positive thinking. Positive thinking is very much wishful dreaming if the desire to work and prepare hard is absent. On the other hand, positive believing is being convinced that hard work and preparation will result in the fruition of your aspirations. Hence, positive believing is an attitude of confidence that results from a thorough preparation to embark on ambitious undertakings (Khera 1998:53).

Shiv Khera maintains that we cannot run away from competing in life, and to compete is to aim at triumphing over others. He (Khera 1998:217) said:

The reality is that life is a competition and we have to compete. In fact, competition makes competitive people grow. The objective is to win, no question - but to win fairly, squarely, decently and by the rules.

Another noted figure who has spoken to top government and corporate thinkers in Singapore is Michael Porter, a Harvard academic. He views success largely in terms of material prosperity that requires certain beliefs/attitudes. He (Porter 2000:21-22) specifies three of these:

- *The belief in productivity*: The way to achieve lasting prosperity is to increase productivity. The use of control, government favours and military powers can only give a false sense of abundance as these measures really stifle the will to compete in the long run.

- *The belief that wealth is unlimited:* This is so because wealth is created through the creative use of ideas and insights. In this sense, it is not fixed even if resources are scarce.

- *The belief in the good of certain essentials:* Some of these essentials may seem like hard options because they demand a radical change in old thinking. These necessities that can contribute to material prosperity are: innovation, competition, accountability, technology, labour force, merger with others, collaboration with suppliers/customers, global networking, education/skills, and wage increases according to productivity levels.

The Christian response. Jon Johnston (1985:30) laments that success is often perceived as the state of “attaining cultural goals that are sure to elevate one’s perceived importance within that culture.”¹¹ This perception is unfortunate as it ties success solely to an elevation of power, privilege and wealth.

Johnston asserts that success considered in such terms of ascendancy does not necessarily imply that one is also excelling in life. Instead, he (Johnston 1985:33) draws up a list of contrasts between success and excellence:

- Success bases your worth by comparing with others; excellence bases your value by measuring you against your own potential.
- Success is the reward of a few though the dream of many; excellence is available to all though rightly understood only by a few.
- Success focuses on external things; excellence attends to the internal spirit.
- Success entices you to manipulate others; excellence encourages you to value others as the apex of God’s creation.

Johnston (1985:49) is of the opinion that Christians are called more to demonstrate excellence than success in life. He sees an inseparable link between excellence and *agape* love. In fact, excellence is the way of *agape* love (1 Cor 12:31). Such excellence is within the potential of everyone because God Himself is the source and supplier of this excellence (Johnston 1985:51). The motive for excellence in life for the Christian is to grow in *agape* love in order to glorify God.

The way to grow in Christian excellence and to experience God enabling you is to see life itself as a vocation. You strive to develop your talents and maximise your strengths so that you can serve others more effectively and with a greater capacity for love in the whole of life (Johnston 1985:71-72). To excel is to push oneself to a greater height, but at the same time, to be more gracious toward others when you are there. As Johnston (1985:163) puts it:

As God increases our responsibility and prosperity, we must do more than say thanks and hoard. Our task is not barn-building and amassing a fortune.

¹¹ Jon Johnston is professor of sociology, anthropology and social psychology at Pepperdine University, and adjunct professor at Fuller Theological Seminary; both of these schools are in California, USA.

Rather, we must forever realise that we are given more in order to give more. Our tight fists must relax as we allow their contents to slip through our fingers and land on areas of severe need. These areas are close to the heart of God.

Agreeing with Johnston, Tom Morris (1994:51) adds that success is very much about “using our talents and following our hearts; true to ourselves and good to others” (Morris 1994:32).¹²

In order that success be truly meaningful, one must have goals consistent with one’s value system. Morris (1994:51) says this concerning the relationship between one’s goals and values:

One of the worst things that can happen in connection with goal-directed behaviour is for a person to take on goals from other people just to please them, or to benefit from their favour, despite the fact that the values and desires behind those goals are alien to his own value system and destructive for him to embrace

However, Morris cautions that to have goals does not mean to have all your desires met. He (Morris 1994:53) argues:

Drawing a clear distinction between desires and goals has a liberating result. We need not be bullied by our own desires. You can have a desire and not set yourself the goal of satisfying it. Desiring is not always up to us. It is not always within our control. But goal setting is. Once we see this distinction we can clearly see that an unsatisfied desire is not the same thing as a failure. You can be happy with many unsatisfied desires as long as you don’t embrace them and set their fulfilment as a goal.

Morris (1994:284) calls on each person to contribute and participate in this life to his/her fullest. And when these become the primary goals in one’s life, then things like wealth, power, status, fame and enhanced self-esteem are enjoyed only as secondary consequences of success. Morris (1994:226) contends that success is excellence only if there is a good measure of balance, and he describes his perspective of excellence this way:

The obligation of excellence ... does not demand *unreasonable* dedication to superior performance in everything we do. It just requires of us that we make the most of our time and talents in a balanced way as we live our lives. We should care about whatever we are doing. We should invest ourselves *wholeheartedly* in anything we choose to do, but that investment should be made *wisely* as well. A healthy human life involves many commitments, many interests, and many values

Morris suggests that each person has the ethical obligation to excel in what he/she is doing. This obligation is not to be better than all others, but to be the best that one personally can be. In this light, he (Morris 1994:226) makes this connection between competitive excellence and personal excellence:

¹² Morris is professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, and holds a joint PhD in philosophy and religious studies from Yale University.

Any goal of competitive excellence should ultimately be for us just a means to pursue personal excellence. We benchmark against others in competitive situations. We push them to push us to become the best that we're capable of being. But if we're pushing them properly, then they are being pressed to become the best that they're capable of being

Evaluation of views. Shiv Khera does well to say that successful people compete against themselves by trying to improve on their personal best all the time. But what is problematic is that he also asserts that successful people have a commitment to "play to win." By this, Khera implies that winning over others is an important commitment in one's quest for success.

Paul's words in 1 Cor 9:24-27 provide an appropriate check. Here, Paul likens his ministry for the Lord as running in a race. Only one will eventually get the prize as the winner, and Paul pushes himself to be that person. However, he qualifies in v 27 that what is of utmost importance to him is not so much to win the prize, but "not be disqualified for the prize." In other words, Paul considers doing well as not necessarily in terms of winning though it is a valid motivation, but more importantly, in terms of finishing well. And to finish well may well mean winning over the odds and pressing on with integrity to complete what one has first set out to do.

Khera also propagates positive believing as a hallmark of success-oriented behaviour. Again, such an attitude is another kind of denial - the denial of reality. In Ec 3:1-8, one is told to acknowledge that there are both positive and negative times of reality. Thus, to pretend that the positive is negative, and vice versa, can be emotionally and spiritually harmful because such a denial traps people in a world of illusions and make-beliefs. What one then needs to do is not to deny reality but to respond to it appropriately, recognising that there is a time for everything in life.

Many of the secular perspectives that have been highlighted are affirmed in the Christian response of the dialogue. For example, it is repeatedly stated that success is more than just the attainment of material blessings; it also embraces the responsibility to live for God spiritually and morally in the midst of abundance and opportunities. One expression of this embracement is to regard excellence in terms of growing in *agape* love as asserted by Jon Johnston. His call is worth noting as it challenges one to pursue excellence with an other-centred focus - that is, with the aim of glorifying God and serving others. Indeed, to succeed in excelling, one not only pushes oneself to reach greater heights, but also to be more gracious toward others.

However, Johnston needs to be qualified in that this graciousness toward others is not to condescend to them, but to empower them. To condescend to people is really to act in a way that indicates that one considers oneself as superior to them. This is really a subtle way of lording over others in the fashion of the world. On the other hand, to empower others is to share God's *agape* love by giving part of what one has been blessed so that others too can be similarly blessed.

Tom Morris does well to remind that success is only meaningful if it is in terms of attaining goals that are consistent with one's own values and purpose, and not what others have imposed upon him/her. But the big question for the Christian here is: "How do I know my values and purpose are any better than that of others?" Hence, just like Johnston, Morris needs to be qualified in that the Christian must choose values and purpose that are in accordance to the teachings of Scripture. Indeed, it is true that God does not fault one for working hard and putting in one's best efforts, but for having a wrong order of values and priorities. The right order of concerns will allow one to enjoy success in gaining wealth and esteem as by-products, and not embrace them as all-consuming goals.

Morris also tries to draw a distinction between goals and desires. He says that while goal setting is within one's personal control, desires are not. This assertion does not seem to be true. In fact, it does seem that goal setting, which is often an external activity, can easily be imposed upon a person by others. On the other hand, desiring, which is very much an internal yearning, is often controlled by the stirring in one's heart. It is important for the Christian to note this lest he/she thinks that it is fine to have all kinds of desires since they are beyond one's control. Also, Morris argues that since one cannot control his/her desires, it is all right to desire just about anything as long as one is prudent with his/her goal setting. In fact, he says that this will spare a person unnecessary disappointment and pain since he/she will not be hurt by an unfulfilled desire if he/she has not made its fulfilment as his/her goal in the first place.

This thinking is certainly against Jesus' radical teachings in Mt 5. For example, Jesus teaches in that chapter that the one who is angry enough to desire the death of someone, has already committed a sin even though he has not made actual murder his goal. Also, in Ja 1:14-15, one is told that man is tempted by "his own evil desire" and this desire "gives birth to sin." The implication here is that desires are within one's control, and he/she indeed must learn to control them because desires cannot remain passive in a person. Desires that are unchecked often seek out their own fulfilment by arousing one to act in response to them. Thus, self-control is embodied in the fruit of the Spirit in Gl 5:22-23, and one exercises it to check the desires in him/her. Self-control in a materialistic world is especially relevant in reminding people that God's concern is much more than economics. Though economic health is important to the dignity of human lives, people are to ultimately find their worth not in economic power, but in God's redemptive grace.

3.2 The challenge to family stability

The secular voice. In recent years, there seems to be a shift of emphasis concerning how spouses can communicate and relate better in their marriage. Instead of going straight into techniques, the new emphasis focuses on understanding differences between the genders. John Gray (1993:4), a prominent advocate of this emphasis today, believes that recognising these differences can free people from the act of judging one another.¹³

Gray (1993:14-16) claims that failing to acknowledge that man and woman are indeed different would bring about negative effects. For example, elaborating on why spousal intimacy can be so elusive to some couples, Gray (1993:23) points out that woman has a

¹³ Gray is a noted speaker on couples therapy. He shared platform with former US president, Bill Clinton, when both were in Singapore in May 2002 to address the National Achievers Congress.

tendency to give more if she is receiving less, hoping to deserve more in return from the man. On the other hand, man has a tendency to give less in return if he is receiving more, thinking that he has done enough to deserve it (Gray 1993:25). “This is one of the reasons why, after winning or earning the love of a woman, men may become lazy in the relationship. As long as she continues to give with a smile on her face, he assumes that he is giving enough. He doesn’t feel motivated to give more” (Gray 1993:25-26).

In view of this difference in gender behaviour, it is easy to see how intimacy in relationship can be hindered - the woman pursues by giving more to signal that things are not all right, but the man unintentionally distances himself by not responding with more because he thinks that everything is all right.

Ken Canfield, founder and president of the American National Centre for Fathering, has been instrumental in inspiring some young fathers in Singapore to set up a similar centre in their own country. He (Canfield 1999:88) argues that what is needed today is really involved fatherhood, and stresses the non-substitutionary nature of fatherhood this way:

A father’s involvement with his children is unique. We could, of course, also compare a list of the benefits of mother involvement. But we would be mistaken if we believed those lists of benefits would be the same. Even if you could arrange for your wife to be with your children 168 hours a week, even if you could afford to hire a couple of private teachers and coaches and clergymen, and even if you were allowed to lavish your children with the best educational tools and self-esteem strategies ... A father’s role in the lives of his children is unique; a mother cannot do what he does.

Canfield also points out that the workplace is where a man meets “the most resistance to his fathering commitment.” Apparently, taking time off for one’s children is not well taken by many employers. Hence, the man unwittingly chooses to seek his worth and identity in the workplace instead of the home. Moreover, rewards at the workplace are fairly immediate - such as, bonuses, raises and promotions. Besides the extra money, the man is also drawn more readily to work than home because the accompanying rewards “fulfil deeper needs for power, recognition, achievement and identity” (Canfield 1999:97).

Canfield sums up his views of involved fatherhood by stressing that a father nurtures by becoming a model to his boy and showing affection to his girl. For example, when the father engages his son in meaningful conversations, he is showing the lad how to be a boy. When the father expresses his emotions in an appropriate manner before his son, he is showing him how to be a man. When the father treats his wife and daughter in an appropriate manner before his son, he is showing him how to be a husband and father (Canfield 1999:138).

Turning his attention to nurturing girls, Canfield observes that most fathers are uncomfortable with showing affection to their daughters when they become adolescents. He (Canfield 1999:139-40) advises the father that “you act as a kind of first boyfriend, and you play a large role in showing her what a proper, respectful response sounds and feels like. If you fail to affirm your daughter’s femininity by showing her physical and verbal affection,

she may very likely discover it on her own, in unhealthy relationships with the men in her life.”

The Christian response. Jack and Judy Balswick claim that the social sciences have indicated that gender differences are the results of cultural conditioning rather than natural development.¹⁴ The advent of the technological age attests to this claim. For example, “before the machine age, the physiological differences between the sexes determined one’s work role. Being larger and stronger than women, men were expected to do most of the heavy work. Since women give birth to babies and nurse them during infancy, they were more involved in child care. With the emergence of electronics and computers, however, the most valued work is no longer manual labour, but rather work that demands the development of the mind” (Balswick & Balswick 1991:154).

In cautioning against reading our cultural images into the biblical portrait of the family, they (Balswick & Balswick 1991:286) comment:

Christians commonly fall into the trap of assuming that the particular family form existing in their culture is God’s deal. They read their own cultural standards into Scripture and accept all biblical accounts of family life as if they were normative. But some of the accounts of how the family was organised during biblical times were never intended to dictate how it should be organised in all cultures at all times.

In fact, a theology of family relationships can be constructed by using God’s covenant with Israel as a basis. This approach features the following sequences which will eventually result in intimacy (Balswick & Balswick 1991:23-32):

- *Covenant*: going back to the times of Noah and Abraham, God’s covenants with them were based on His commitments regardless of their acceptance or rejection. However, the potential benefits/blessings were conditional in that they had to fulfil their due responsibilities. Thus, God desired that His unconditional commitment (unilateral covenant) was to be reciprocated by man. In the same way, spousal relationship is covenantal in that it starts with the unconditional commitment of one, and matures into the reciprocation of the other.

- *Grace*: “although the covenant of grace rules out law as a basis for family relationships, family members living in grace will accept law in the form of patterns, order, and responsibility in relationships.” Thus, male headship and female submission in the family become the outworking of grace, not of law, between the spouses.

- *Empowering*: spouses empower by encouraging each other to use their strengths and develop their potential. This allows the empowered to grow by doing rather than by depending.

¹⁴ The Balswicks are professors in family studies at Fuller Theological Seminary in California, USA.

- *Intimacy*: God demonstrates the desire for intimacy by knowing a person and wanting to be known by that person. After the Fall, Adam and Eve were afraid of being known intimately, and thus, they covered and hid. This then points to the key in establishing intimacy - the need to communicate freely and openly. Indeed, the marks of spousal intimacy are honest sharing without the fear of rejection, and forgiving and being forgiven. All these again point back to the covenantal concept of unconditional love and commitment.

Using this theological basis, the Balswicks warn against the segregation of spousal roles. They (Balswick & Balswick 1991:81-85) assert that segregation of spousal roles only came about when the Industrial Revolution sent the men from their home farms to the city factories for work. Before that, both spouses worked on the farm and shared in parenting their children. Segregation of roles was the result of the urbanisation of families. With the emergence of the urban family, home life and work life became divided with the man working outside the home and the woman inside it. While segregation tends to label tasks as either *male* or *female*, differentiation allows room for interchange in that “husbands and wives agree to serve one another by taking on assigned tasks which contribute to the maintenance of the household.” Adaptability is the quality of allowing spousal roles to be differentiated rather than to be segregated, and basing it on scriptural teachings about order, harmony, consideration and love.

In Eph 5:25, Paul calls on husbands to love their wives “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Don Browning believes that this Pauline teaching retains the essence of male headship but challenges the Greco-Roman code of male dominance in the family.¹⁵ He (Browning et al 1997:144-45) highlights three differences between this Pauline call and the Greco-Roman code (as represented in Aristotelian thinking):

- Before v 25, Paul has already called family members to “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” in v 21. This is an equality expressed through mutual submission. On the other hand, Aristotelian thinking only advocates “proportional friendship,” not full equality. The greater person - that is, the patriarchal male - should be “more equal” than the rest in the family. Hence, it is never in Aristotelian thinking that husband and wife should submit to each other on equal terms. Rather, this “proportional submission” is to be on the husband’s terms.

- To “be subject” in v 21 implies that husband and wife are to regard each other as capable of leading. Hence, there will be times when it is necessary and fitting for the wife to take the leading role. On the other hand, Aristotle confers this right to rule or lead only to the husband.

- When husband and wife submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (v 21), Paul implies that both spouses have trust in each other’s leadership because each leads in the spirit of Christ’s love. Again, this does not correspond with Aristotelian thinking which views man as having better

¹⁵ Don Browning is professor of religion and psychological studies at the Divinity School, University of Chicago.

rational capacity than woman, and thus, should be given the responsibility to lead.

Evaluation of views. John Gray's call to understand gender differences rather than to implement techniques in enhancing spousal intimacy is commendable. While sexual differences relate to biology, gender differences relate to psychology. If God created man and woman with biological differences, it then follows that He also created them with psychological differences. And the differences in the way they think and respond are just expressions with which man and woman complement each other in their relationship. These differences are meant to enable man and woman to establish interrelatedness instead of disconnectedness. Gray is right to point out that a recognition of these differences can free man and woman from judging each other. This awareness of the differences help them to accept each other's thinking and action as different, and not necessarily wrong.

However, to respond maturely in everyday relationships and situations, we need more than Gray's psychology to help explain the male and female natures. More importantly, we need a theology to help express the Christ-like nature. Expectedly, it must transcend whatever set patterns that psychology has used to explain human behaviour so that the mature person is not merely more man or woman, but more Christlike.

Hence, psychology is helpful in that it enables us to better understand humankind as created men and women. However, the quest for mature personhood transcends psychology because it is not to be more man or more woman, but to be more Christlike. Jack and Judy Balswick call on the Christian man to find his manhood not by proving his masculine superiority over his wife, but by his willingness to be equally involved with her in their life together.

The Balswicks are right to affirm that love and faithfulness in a marital relationship are expressions of a covenantal commitment. Out of these expressions, male headship and female submission become the outworking of grace, and freedom to develop one's potential becomes an outworking of empowerment.

In the case of the man, he can initiate this enhancement by reminding himself that he is covenanted to exercise accountability, and not only authority. 1 Tm 2:13-14 in the NIV reads: "For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner." This passage has often been used to emphasise man's authority over woman. But what is often overlooked is the emphasis on man's accountability before God in this passage. In saying that Adam was formed first, Paul is here indicating that the first person answerable to God was Adam, not Eve. And in saying that Adam was not the one deceived, Paul is here indicating that Adam was deliberate. Unlike Eve who was a deceived sinner, Adam was a deliberate sinner, and that made him more accountable before God.

Thus, man is not to be so focused on his authority that he forgets about his accountability. While authority may make him adamant on law and power in the family, accountability will make him adaptable to the outworking of grace and empowerment for the good of the woman.

Though both the Balswicks and Browning have done well by asserting that to better understand the biblical teachings on the family for today, one must exegete not only the biblical text, but also exegete the text in the context of its socio-cultural world. However, it must be cautioned that when applying the biblical text to contemporary culture, reverence for God's timeless truths must be the guiding force. Though times have changed, one must still decide what has not as far as God's design for the family is concerned. For example, the Balswicks have called for adaptation rather than segregation of spousal roles. However, in the family relationship, equality is not to deny gender differences, but to exercise them in a complementary manner so that there is enhanced union in the relationship. Any equality that causes the family to divide rather than to unite is not part of God's design.

4. TOWARD A SPIRITUALITY OF GRACE AND GIFTING

Grace reminds us to be grateful of who we are and what we have. Ultimately, we are to find our worth and sufficiency in God's grace toward us. On the other hand, we are to be good stewards of our God-given potential and abilities. We develop and use these to make a difference for God in where God has called us to be and what He has called us to do.

4.1 What it should be: living by the Word

It is too simplistic to redefine success in a few words. But if we are to temper the ill effects of meritocracy with a spirituality of grace and gifting, a biblical-theological redefinition of success should embodied the following:

- Success has to do with a man pushing himself to do his honest best, but not necessarily to end up as the best. It is not about winning over others though this can be a valid motivation. More importantly, it is about finishing well with integrity and dignity. Competition is for one to reach his personal best without reducing the worth of others. Competition is desirable if it is a way of bringing the best out of one another; of spurring one another unto love and good works.

- The realisation of a man's potential does not only mean that he has achieved something materially because what he has achieved relationally is just as important. This emphasis on both the material and relational implies that a man must balance his pursuits in life so that these are in line with God's values and purpose. The relational dimension further implies that a man's potential is not so much about his independence of others, but his interdependence with others.

- Enjoyment is not only personal as it also embraces the responsibility to love God and others with one's material blessings. The materially successful man has the spiritual responsibility to be godly before the Almighty and the moral responsibility to be gracious to the less fortunate.

- Since the Christ-like personality embodies both masculine and feminine traits, taking up certain roles may just make one more Christlike rather than less masculine or less feminine. For example, child nurturing and housework

do not necessarily make a man less masculine. On the other hand, earning big money and holding a high-position job do not necessarily make a woman less feminine. In fact, such endeavours by the man and woman may well be their way of serving each other, and the family with Christ-like love and faithfulness.

- *Man as sole provider is a cultural rather than a biblical assertion.* Eden was an agricultural setting whereby manual labour, not technology, was the means of livelihood. Hence, the physically stronger Adam was told by God to work the ground, and Eve to care for children and home. But the age of technology has made such division unnecessary because the most valued work outside the home today demands more brain than muscles. Advances in the study of families in Bible times have also indicated that many of the passages pertaining to family life are descriptive rather than prescriptive in purpose. In fact, the family structure in those days was more like a clan, and thus, more extended and very unlike the structure of the contemporary nuclear family.¹⁶

4.2 What it is: living with realities

This writer has done an opinion poll with Christian men using questionnaires. Based on the statistical findings in this poll, some comments can serve as preliminary assumptions for further research:¹⁷

- The Christian family man is generally a person with good education and holding a well-paying but demanding job.
- Though he can afford economically to bring up more children, he chooses only to have only one or two. This is because he is well aware of the demands in building up a family.
- The Christian family man is generally under pressure to compete and excel in his work. He is caught up in a culture that often presses for results in terms of not only doing one's best, but also winning over others. Thus, he is constantly tempted to focus on this-worldly pursuits and conquests.
- Though he values his family, he often does so in material terms. This then helps him to justify placing work as more important than family when there is a clash of priority. The challenge is for him to work on the emotional aspects of being intimate and nurturing at home.
- Being constantly influenced by a result-oriented and materialistic culture, the Christian man is generally quite confused as to how he can be a man of God and a man in the world at the same time. On one hand, he values earning power, control and the right to have the "final say" in the workplace. On the

¹⁶ Leo Perdue has done some commendable work on families in ancient Israel.

¹⁷ The statistical tables are presented in the writer's PhD dissertation titled "Singapore's Success Culture and Its Challenges to Christian Men in Building Strong Families." A total of 60 Christian men responded to this opinion poll.

other, he sees the need for non-monetary passion, integrity, sharing with and listening to others, especially in the home. The consolation is that while he may often be tempted to follow the world in his work, he tries hard to be “traditionally Christian” as a family man - to provide well for his family, listen to them as their head, involve them in major decision making, and participate in family life.

To test the validity of these comments, in-depth conversations were carried out with some men. Again, though not definitive in conclusions, these conversations have helped to construct a preliminary profile of the average Christian man in Singapore as a basis for broader research:¹⁸

- i. He accepts competition as inevitable in a meritocratic society.
- ii. He works hard so as to develop to his best potential and to provide well for his family materially.
- iii. He often has little time to bond with his family relationally unless he makes a deliberate effort to do so.
- iv. He does not equate male headship with sole leadership at home. Hence, he shares or delegates family responsibilities, including that of breadwinning, housekeeping and parenting.
- v. He discusses rather than dictates decisions related to major family concerns. Hence, he is pragmatic enough to seek and adopt alternatives that are most beneficial to the family.

4.3 What it can be: living by grace and gifting

Having identified what it means to live by the Word and what the realities are, some suggestions on being pro-family in a meritocratic culture are now proposed.

Suggestion I: Work hard so as to earn enough to turn limited time and energy into actual pro-family events. With good incomes, people have enough to possess what they want materially. However, they do well to remind themselves that though they may have enough to possess many material things, they do not have to possess all of them in order to be happy. But then, how do people make pro-family “investments” with the earnings they have? Some common family concerns today are highlighted in order to get some leads in answering this question:

- i. The education system in Singapore is competitive and parents obviously want their children to succeed educationally. Many of them feel that personally coaching their children in their studies is a good means of bonding with them. However, the reality is that they often lack the time and energy after work to do a good job with their children. Moreover, some have found

¹⁸ The conversations were carried out with six men, and the full transcripts and interpretation of their sentiments are presented in the writer’s dissertation.

that they do not have the skills, patience and updated knowledge to tutor their children effectively in their studies. Hence, what is meant to be a time of bonding between parent and child can turn into a very stressful period for both.

Competent tutors not only help children in their studies, but also allow parents to maximise every opportunity for relationship building and bonding with their children.

ii. Men have recently been encouraged to be more actively involved in housekeeping, especially if their wives are working. Such involvement is supposed to help bring man and wife closer together. Again, the reality is that both may already be too tired, and the limited time and energy they have can be better spent in just being together and enjoying each other without exerting themselves any further.

An alternative then is to employ a foreign domestic helper. But this option of foreign domestic helpers is not without difficulties. One of which is the cultural gap between these domestic helpers and their Singapore employers. In fact, many conflicts between these maids and their employers are the results of this cultural gap and misunderstanding. In short, though employing a foreign maid is a viable option in relieving the couple of the burden of housework, it is no guarantee that things will be easier at home. In fact, the very presence of a stay-in foreign maid can easily upset the established relational dynamics in the family system. Hence, besides being able to pay for a maid, what is equally essential is being prepared to relate with a maid in a cross-culturally sensitive manner.

iii. Many Singapore families are taking overseas holidays during school vacations. This indicates that many are willing to spend money in order to have some time together. However, the thing that prevents busy people from coming together as a family is often not a problem with money, but with the mind. This has to do with a cultivated lifestyle – that is – the habit of being so intense and driven in what one has been doing that the preoccupation with it makes it difficult for one to focus on and enjoy a new experience.

That being the tendency, the act of coming together must then be a constant feature in family life in spite of many competing demands. Learning to enjoy the present moment together, be it just a family meal, is a disciplined state of mind that can be cultivated only through deliberate, regular efforts. Indeed, family holidays are truly “time together” not because people have the money for them, but because they have the mind for them.

iv. Many parents in Singapore like to send their children for enrichment instructions, such as playing the piano. This is not necessarily wrong, especially if the child has an aptitude for it. However, many of such instructions are also examination-oriented, and this inevitably adds another load to the already examination-stressed child.

Perhaps, a better option is to get together for some exercise-oriented activities – like canoeing and racket games. These activities will inject the element of fun, so essential in family bonding, into the time together. These will also help one to de-stress and keep fit physically. Indeed, healthy bonding, healthy minds and healthy bodies are worth making the effort.

Suggestion II: Adopt an extended family member into one's own home. This can be a grandparent, an elderly uncle or aunt. After all, the family in biblical times was definitely more extended than the nuclear family of today. By adopting such a member of one's extended family, and allowing him/her to help out in areas like supervision, housekeeping or child caring (not the parenting), the elderly person is made to feel that he/she can still contribute. In fact, their presence at home can give the working parents better peace of mind in the workplace, knowing that both home and children are in good hands.

For Christian families to help strengthen the bonds of human relationships in their society, what is needed is for them to first nurture a wider and stronger community sense within their own family context. Hence, the suggestion of adopting an extended family member into one's home is an attempt to bring about this sense of social cohesion - learning to bridge intergenerational gaps and live together within the family as a fundamental step toward living together with others in the larger society. More importantly for the Christian family, it is modelling before the young the virtue of loving and honouring the elders, especially one's parents.

Suggestion III: Encourage and challenge Christians to give more. Many churches in Singapore today have set up various family-related services for the public. These include child care centres, before-and-after-school care, elderly care, and family counselling. However, much can still be done in terms of setting up more of these facilities and services, and upgrading existing ones. The Church should encourage and challenge Christians to give more in two ways:

- i. Give financially to these facilities and services so that quality can be assured. This will not only benefit the Christians themselves as they too can have access to these, but also to the society or community in general.
- ii. Give time to these facilities and services as volunteers. Many Christians are relevantly trained themselves to effectively complement the full-time staff in these areas. Such volunteerism allows blessed and gifted Christians to look beyond themselves and to “love their neighbours.”

Many pastors and lay Christians have been competently trained in counselling because it has become a major need in the contemporary church. While this need is real and valid, what is disturbing is this - many Christians seem to lack grounding in their faith, resulting in them often not able to adequately handle their problems in life. Anthony Yeo (2000:76), who is a Christian himself and serves as Clinical Director of the Counselling and Care Centre in Singapore, sounds out his concern about counselling emerging as a major feature of Christian ministry:

... it is pastoral care that should be the prominent feature of Christian ministry. If people can experience care and concern within the Christian community, not only can problems be dealt with, they would also have available to them resources for coping with difficulties of life

... not all need counselling ... not all have special needs, although all may have need for a listening ear, shoulder to cry on and a helping hand.

Taking Yeo's comments a step further, what can be implied is that many Christians who are competently trained in counselling may be using their skills only to meet church needs. In other words, if counselling has become a prominent feature only within the context of church ministry, it does indicate that the Church has failed in two respects - i) it has not adequately strengthened the faith of its people in that many are unable to personally take control of life's problems; ii) it has not made an adequate impact on the larger society in that many of its trained people are serving in church to satisfy "private consumption" rather than outside church to be a "healing balm" to the hurting world.

Suggestion IV: Emphasise family life education. This will help Christians to communicate, to impart values and to establish biblical rituals in family life. With such equipping, they can even be encouraged to participate in family life education, or be family life educators in the workplace as well.

Perhaps, one problem facing many Christians in Singapore today has to do with the fact that they are first-generation believers. This means that many Christian families do not have any Christian home traditions or rituals to go by. What happens then is that the children of these first-generation Christians are constantly taught in church that worshipping God is important, yet they have hardly seen it reinforced at home because there is no vital family worship. The lessons that these young ones have learnt in church are then nothing more than empty religious talks to them. Larry Christenson (1970:159) rightly points out that "young people who rebel against the Christian Faith are not rebelling against God at all. They have never had an actual encounter with the Living God to rebel against. They are rebelling against a dead religious formalism."

Christenson must be commended here for a reminder of great significance - faith and its practice are not merely taught to the young in church, but more importantly, to be caught at home. This implies that Christian parents are to exemplify the faith life before their children at home. If children are taught that the worship of God is important, then they must see it not only in church, but also at home as they see their father (and mother) regularly worshipping God at home and bringing the family together in worship. Indeed, for the Christian family, time together is not just centred on work, studies, things and pleasure, but on the worship of God as well. Otherwise, the message unwittingly sent to the innocent young is that God is given attention only when convenient.

The challenge then is for the church to emphasise family life as a key focus in Christian education, and to encourage and challenge parents to both reinforce and re-enact the Christian faith at home. Parents are to be examples of recipients of God's love and of lovers after God's heart before their children. Family life becomes strong when there is unconditional devotion to one another as a result of appreciating God's unconditional love for

each family member. For example, family worship reminds us that God created man in His own image. Thus, the man who earns less money than another, or the child who scores lower grades than another can still come home as one worthy of love and acceptance because he is in God's image, and not as a failure or handicap. This then is the determinative dimension that those in the church can demonstrate to the world in which many families are being torn apart because people fail to fulfil mutually imposed conditions for loving and accepting one another.

Suggestion V: Honour Christ above culture by speaking truth in love. In an Asian context like that of Singapore, the value of "face" is very important. To have "face" is to be able to hold up one's head and look good before others. However, a negative expression of "face" is the stubborn refusal to admit one's folly or deficiency before others.

The other side of this "face" culture is not embarrassing someone by making him lose "face." This can bring about damaging effects to family and community relationships. Relational problems are not resolved but simply "swept under the carpet." The reality then is that family relationships lack truth speaking, and become very superficial because of suppressed feelings and lack of openness. However, if the family is the basic unit of community, then Christians are to impact society by practising truth telling in love to one another. They do this by beginning in their own homes.

In summation, Christians individually and as the Church in Singapore can now work not in isolation, but in collaboration with the nation's efforts to make strong families a pillar of society. The suggestions proposed are meant to stimulate further thinking on how Christians can work hard not only for the sake of doing well in a meritocratic society, but more importantly, for the purpose of being pro-family in a success-oriented culture.

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