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2014

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Professional Missionary, Amateur Parent: Using Missiological Principles and Family Systems Theory to Raise an Emotionally Healthy Family

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One of the saddest events that either of us has ever witnessed occurred at the retirement party for a missionary who had planted several churches and led many people to the Lord. One of the missionary's children stood up and started to summarize her father's many ministry related accomplishments. It was an impressive list of achievements that led to lasting fruit in a difficult field. She then went on to say that her one wish was that her father would have given as much time and energy to his children as he had to the people whom he had felt called to serve. She described how she and her siblings felt ignored, and even abandoned by their father. She expressed her belief that many of the difficulties that she had experienced in life, which included losing her faith, could have been avoided if she had only had a father who had been there for her when she needed him.

Everyone in the audience was shocked. It was one of those moments that are impossible to foresee. . . . Or could it have been foreseen? A quick Google search of "missionary abuse" indicates that there are many stories of missionary families suffering greatly because of the failures of highly esteemed professional missionaries. Could it have been prevented? It is impossible to say. Only God would be able to answer that. However, it is likely that some missionary fathers, like most fathers, lack some of the skills that would enable them raise their children as they would hope to.

Because of their passion and zeal for the Lord's work, many, if not most, missionary men are highly motivated to learn all they can about effectively serving the Lord in cross-cultural contexts, using whatever resources are available to them. Unfortunately, their fathering skills might not be as developed as their missionary skills. However, many missionary principles, especially missionary team principles, can be applied to family life to help prevent a family shipwreck like the one described above.

Like missionary teams, missionary families can be very complex. Family members with different personalities bringing different backgrounds, different expectations, different visions, different gifts, and different roles can function harmoniously together as a loving family that accomplishes great things for the Lord, or form a hodgepodge of individuals who do little else but frustrate one another because of their different interests. Thus the dynamics of a missionary family may be very similar to the dynamics of a missionary team.

Just as missionary teams have patterns of communication and behavior which either help them or hinder them from achieving their goals (White, 1992), so do families. Looking at patterns of communication and behavior is not simply a way of understanding missionary team dynamics.

Salvador Minuchin's family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974; Nichols, Minuchin, & Yung, 2006) encourages exactly this approach in order to understanding how families function. Minuchin focuses on the invisible behavioral and communication patterns that determine whether the relationships between individual family members are healthy or unhealthy for the family as a whole. By comparing missionary families to missionary teams, some of the processes that make or break a missionary family can be better understood.

Unhealthy Alliances

Let's take the example of two missionaries Al Elder and Chris Young who tend to have very different values. Al, the field chair, is an older missionary who has been on the field for over 30 years. He is a rugged individualist who has created various institutions during his life of ministry. He has a heart for evangelism, but as he approaches the end of his career, he tends to focus on preserving the gains made in the past and avoiding risky undertakings. Chris, on the other hand, is much younger and more relationally oriented. He is interested in experimenting with new forms of evangelism and church planting. He has trouble seeing the value of older institutions that the national believers are not interested in maintaining.

As can be expected, these differences have led to tensions between Al and Chris. Al views Chris as inexperienced, insensitive to the work God has done in the past, reckless, and insubordinate. Chris views Al as living in the past, insensitive to the work God is trying to do now, closed-minded, and a poor leader. This has created an unhealthy atmosphere among the missionaries. A third missionary, Bill Median who is in his 40s, finds himself in the middle of this.

Up to this point, Bill, who also is a member of the field leadership council, has wanted to remain loyal to Al, partially because it is easier, partially because he wants to respect authority, and partially because he has seen people who have disagreed with Al removed from leadership or forced to resign from the field. However, the younger missionary Chris trusts Bill and has asked Bill to mediate the dispute between him and Al.

Bill has a choice to make. He can take Al's side as he usually does. This is much easier and Bill personally risks losing nothing. Undoubtedly Al will use his power to silence Chris' complaints, either through threats or administrative action. Bill can justify supporting this in the name of legitimate authority and for the unity of field. If Bill takes this route, this would be an example of an *unhealthy alliance* between Bill and Al. Missionary teams exist to empower their members to accomplish more than they could as individuals. However, if alliances form which make it more difficult for other team members to accomplish their goals, rather than empowering team members, the team disempowers them. Unhealthy alliances are unspoken patterns of complicity and cooperation between two members of a team which prevent other team members from accomplishing their goals.

In our example, Al and Bill have an unhealthy alliance. This alliance has been used in the past to silence dissent. Bill can continue in this unhealthy alliance, but he has another option: playing the role of a mediator who can help the two parties understand each other and find a mutually beneficial solution, a sort of Yokefellow from the church of Philippi whom Paul asked to help two quarreling coworkers who were not getting along (Phil. 4: 3). Bill's mediation would change the power imbalance that has enabled Al's hurtful behavior in the past when he has faced people who disagreed with him. However, it may be risky; Al could turn against Bill, and remove both him and Chris from ministry.

Bill must choose. Does he allow the unhealthy alliance to continue? Or does he balance the power and work toward a mutually beneficial solution? Missionary fathers face similar choices in raising their families.

Family Applications. Like missionary teams, families often suffer because of an unhealthy distribution of power. In a healthy family, each member has enough power to influence other family members so that his or her physical, social, and emotional needs are met. Even little babies have enough power (by crying) to get parents to

change their diapers. Family members should have enough power to feel assured that they are understood and accepted as they progress through life. However, members of a family may join forces, intentionally or unintentionally, to limit the power of another member. This cooperation, often involving a parent inappropriately delegating his or her responsibility to oversee a child to another child, is known in family systems theory as an unhealthy alliance.

Unhealthy alliances lead to destructive imbalances that disempower. Let's consider the Smiths, a hypothetical missionary family starting a house church in a very unreached country. Both Mr. and Mrs. Smith grew up immaculately cared for homes. Big sister Brittany imitates her parents and strives to be clean and organized. Unfortunately, little brother Micah is anything but clean and organized. Brittany often makes negative comments about Micah being messy and disorganized. Because of the age difference, any efforts Micah makes to straighten his room are inferior to his sister's, and Brittany quickly discounts his efforts. Because Mr. Smith is so involved in ministry outside of the home, he has little energy to provide encouragement to members of his family. He counts on the female members to be the emotional regulators of the family. Rather than using his own power and judgment to notice Micah's progress, Mr. Smith takes Brittany's naïve (but highly vocal) position, unaware of the unhealthy alliance he is forming with her. Micah's efforts are overlooked regardless of his efforts to be neater. The alliance between Brittany and her father has led to Micah's disempowerment. In effect, Mr. Smith has created an unfair power balance by forsaking his responsibilities and allowing Brittany to assume a parenting role vis-à-vis her brother, a role that she is not equipped to play. This unhealthy alliance has disempowered Micah and has prevented him from receiving the encouragement he needs from his father as he tries to make age appropriate progress in accomplishing his responsibilities. If Micah cannot receive the encouragement he longs for from his father, where will it come from? The unhealthy alliance will need to be replaced with something healthier if Mr. Smith wishes to be more of an encouragement to his son.

Healthy Alliances

Many of us have had experiences with missionary teams, some good and some bad. One of the factors that determine whether missionary teams function well or not is the degree to which the members are committed to common goals (Dunaetz, 2010). On the most fundamental level, missionaries must be committed to the *goals of the team* in order for the team to function effectively. However, high performing missionary teams have members who are also committed to the *relationships within the team*. What is important to one team member becomes important to another, even if it has little or nothing to do with the purpose of the team.

Apart from the team's goals, each missionary has individual, personal goals. These may be specific to the individual and irrelevant to the team task, such as making progress on a stamp collection or developing a web site featuring photos of local birds. They may be indirectly related to the missionary task, such as when one team member especially enjoys cooking and sharing good meals with friends or another is working diligently to complete a graduate degree. These personal goals may also include goals that are common to all humans, such as living consistently with one's values and beliefs or having positive, friendly interactions with one's coworkers. Other personal goals that all missionaries would share to some degree would include caring for one's family and friends and making decisions that concern them in a fair and efficient way.

In healthy teams, the team members will help each other achieve not only the team's goals, but also each other's personal goals. When two missionaries collaborate to help a third missionary, this is especially encouraging. It helps solidify the team and motivates the third missionary to persevere, even when the going gets tough. This collaboration between two missionaries to help a third is an example of a *healthy alliance*. The two aligned missionaries coordinate their efforts to help a third missionary

achieve his or her personal goals. For example, if Al and Bill notice that their missionary colleague Chris seems a bit discouraged that a Bible study he is leading is not growing very quickly, they could agree to both thankfully mention Chris and the positive aspects of his Bible study in their next field meeting, knowing that Chris would be encouraged and strengthened to persevere when he hears a positive evaluation of his efforts in public.

Family Applications. Healthy alliances in families occur when two members work together to empower another family member to achieve his or her goals. For example, consider the hypothetical Jones family who is working with street children in a poor neighborhood of a large Asian city. Mr. and Mrs. Jones are both very involved in ministry and in raising their three children. At breakfast on their day off, Mom says she is thinking about cleaning the house and going grocery shopping although she is exhausted. Shortly after breakfast, Dad proposes to his five year old son Jacob, "Let's do something really fun today that will help mom feel better." Jacob smiles and agrees. Dad suggests to Jacob that they go to the supermarket to buy food for the week so that Mom can stay home to rest. As Dad and Jacob go up and down the grocery aisles, they have fun discussing the foods and the colorful wrappers they see, trying to choose the foods that Mom would most appreciate. When they arrive home, they put away the groceries, pretending to do so without Mom noticing. They then go into Jacob's room and Dad says, "Let's have a race to see who can pick up the most toys in five minutes." Each one races to pick them up. As they work together, they start laughing. There is a playful mood between them, and everything is straightened in just a few minutes. Dad states, "Jacob, you sure are a good kid. You've done a great job helping Mom." In this story, not only did Dad and Jacob form a healthy alliance to help Mom achieve her goals, they strengthened their own relationship by successfully achieving their own goals through cooperation.

The Executive Dyad

In missionary settings where a national church already exists, there are often two key organizations, the national church association and the organization that has been formed by the missionaries, which might be anything from a formal field conference to an informal missionary team. The head of the national church (often a cultural and ethnic insider) and the head of the mission (typically a foreigner) are both responsible for executing the programs necessary for accomplishing the mission of their own organization. The relationship between these two leaders, who may be called an *executive dyad*, is especially important for coordinating the efforts of the two organizations. A healthy executive dyad would work together to achieve goals that are common to both the national churches and the missions organization.

In a perfect world, these goals and interests would coincide with God's, and there would be no conflicts between the two heads. However, in a fallen world characterized by self-serving biases and cultural diversity, the national church and the mission often have seemingly contradictory goals. The national church might want the mission to provide pastoral leadership to established, stagnant churches, while the mission wants to prioritize evangelism and church planting in unreached regions. Or the national church might want the mission to establish new works in difficult to serve areas, but the mission wants to avoid stressing its missionaries beyond what they are able to handle. Nevertheless, the head of the mission and the head of the national church need to work together to find solutions to resolve these tensions, solutions which are not only acceptable to both organizations, but which benefit each organization and their individual members.

Family Applications. In a family situation, the executive dyad consists of the mother and the father. Normally, parents have different roles and responsibilities. Rather than creating inequality, different roles may actually strengthen the executive dyad, as each member brings some specific skill or strength into the relationship and the family. Each parent focuses on meeting different needs of the family members according

to their gifting. For example, the mother might use her gifts and skills to provide empathy and comfort; the father might use his to provide structured time for the family members to make meaning out of the events of the day. The parents may also have different interests which they will be motivated to address. The father may be more concerned about long term financial planning while the mother may be more concerned about responding to the immediate needs of the children.

Just as the national church leader and mission leader must listen to each other to resolve differences, it is essential that each spouse respects the opinions of the other as they make decisions together. If either the husband or the wife tries to dominate the other, the executive dyad is weakened because at least one member will not be able to perform optimally. Joint decision making becomes unlikely and optimal solutions are less likely to be found. The children are especially likely to suffer from a dysfunctional executive dyad because their well-being depends almost completely on it. Although they might not be of one mind on every detail of an issue, if the parents listen to and respect one another, they can collaborate to make the best decision possible. Such unity in decision making provides the family with the stability that is necessary for children to grow up securely.

Just as the executive dyad consisting of the national church leader and the mission leader tries to make decisions that benefit all who might be affected by them (national pastors, church members, those outside the church, and the missionaries), the executive dyad in a family (the parents) must try to make decisions that maximize the benefits for the family while minimizing the costs.

Making the best decisions for a family is not always easy considering the fatigue that missionary parents might be experiencing, including both physical and emotional fatigue. For example, if the father is too tired because of a day full of travel and meetings, he may lack the energy to communicate constructively with the rest of the family in order to resolve problems. Emotional fatigue may be caused by continually experiencing negative emotions such as sadness, anger, fear and confusion. This may occur when one parent experiences negative emotions directly, when something disagreeable happens to him or her, or indirectly, when the parent spends considerable time empathizing with a person who is experiencing something disagreeable. Emotional fatigue is especially dangerous for the well-being of a family because an emotionally fatigued parent may lack the energy to care for and respond appropriately to either their spouse or the children and thus damage relationships.

Conclusion

Effective fathering is difficult, even in a monocultural situation where financial stability is the norm. In a missionary context, fathering can be even more difficult. Missionary fathers might be highly motivated to focus on the missionary task that lies before them and less motivated to invest in family relationships. However, since God has also given us the mission to love and serve our families, any failure in our families must be considered a failure in missions. Looking at missiological principles and applying them to our families is one way to avoid some very costly mistakes.

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