Postmodernism and the Family: 
A Christian Response to Post-Modern Trends in Family and Divorce

By Joshua Becker

“I can do anything, I’ll tell you why. I’m the one who took a walk on the moon, and I made the seven wonders too. There is nothing that I cannot do, cause I am human. There is nothing that I can not be, I’m the one who sailed the seven seas, and I know that it is all in me, cause I am human.” These lines are from Rod Stewart’s recently released album *Human*. One can easily tell that the main message of the song is the glorification of humanity, but more specifically the individual. Stewart refers to the great achievements of mankind and states that because humans made them, and since he is a human, he, as an individual, is just as important. In essence it is taking the old phrase, “man is the measure of all things” and going one more step to say that since I am man, “I am the measure of all things.” Perhaps this sounds arrogant, but maybe one can understand the reasoning a little better if they know something about Rod.

Before recording this last album he had cancer in his throat. In order to operate, his vocal cords had to be cut. Despite that, he has managed to recover and record his newest album. In a world where mankind has the ability to do that, does it not make sense to sing, “And I know that it is all in me, cause I am human”?

However, this mentality of man as the master of all is a common one throughout history. In the most recent decades it has merely taken on the title of postmodernism. But what does a person mean when they say postmodernism? Perhaps defining that word is one of the trickiest things to do. One of the first realizations one needs to come to when dealing with the term is that it can mean a lot of different things in different contexts (Woods 5). Yet, there are some aspects of the term that reach across all fields. Perhaps the most distinguishing feature is that postmodernism rejects universal truths in favor of individual ones. What this means is that
instead of accepting things as true or good across the board, they can be good or true to one person, but false and evil to another. Essentially it is the ultimate form of relativism, because it goes beyond existentialism to assert that not only does each individual determine their own reality, but that no higher reality exists except that which the individual creates. Thus, postmodernism is not only relativistic, but it is the ultimate expression of human arrogance. For while the principles of reason and logic have dominated thought and asserted that man is master of the world, they did so only on the grounds that man’s reason and logic can carry him through all. Postmodernism eliminates such a notion and proclaims that all one needs is consciousness to be the master of their reality. Logic and reason are out, because one can determine truth well enough without them. With this kind of thought so dominant in our society, it is worthwhile to examine how it has affected the most basic unit of society—the family. In particular, how postmodernism has influenced current trends regarding family time and divorce. As Christians we need to take the additional step of examining how we are to respond to these trends in light of the principles God has given us in His Word.

To say that postmodernism has influenced the family is only to state the obvious. In a country where in any given year there will be one divorce for every two marriages, where many parents send their children to day care, where both parents work so that they can have all the material possessions this age says are a must, and when these actions are considered fine and acceptable, it becomes obvious that attitudes have changed from the traditional view on the family. While one could also consider the depravities of teenagers getting pregnant out of marriage, the acceptance of same sex marriages and other such issues, for Christians who either have families now or will have families, the issues of family time and divorce will be far more pressing.
When talking about family time, perhaps many people would say that there is not a problem with the amount of time that families spent together. Research indicates that such a notion is incorrect. John Robinson, of the University of Maryland, found that parents spent an average of 17 hours a week interacting with their children in 1985, as opposed to the approximately 30 hours that parents spent per week in 1965 (Mattox 9). From the number of articles out there on the importance of spending time with the family, it would appear that the situation has not improved. Another indicator of how much time parents spend with their children is how many children go to day care. In June of 1998, about 13 million children, under the age of six, spent part or all of their day “in the care of someone other than their parents” (Holcomb 177). The 1990 census records that there were approximately 18 million children under the age of five in the United States. Unless ten years of growth have increased this total by 8 million, it would mean that over half of the children under six in the U.S. are not in their parents care for some of the day. This would again support the statement that parents are spending less time with their children.

Even after the fact that parents spend less time with their children is established, it is logical to ask whether this has an impact upon the family. Research indicates that quantity and quality of family time can have profound influences upon children. One study of 90,000 teenagers revealed that “those who felt emotionally close to their families were much less likely to engage in risky behaviors, from drugs to sex” (Larson 130). Such emotional bonds are difficult to form if parents and children interact only in a limited fashion. Harvard Graduate School of Education researchers have even suggested that something as simple as eating supper

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1 1990 statistics were included here because 2000 statistics were not available at the time of writing. They were taken from the government website: <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsTable?_lang=en&_vt_name=DEC_1990_STF1_DP1&_geo_id=01000US>
as a family can improve children’s vocabulary, because they are exposed to rare and advanced words (Alberston 163). Eating suppers as a family also improves children’s school performance, and is linked to higher ACT scores (Becker). However, perhaps the most powerful reason of all for parents to spend more time with their children comes from the kids themselves. 1,500 school children, when asked what they thought made a happy family, responded that “doing things together” was the answer (Mattox 31). They did not ask for toys or money or other material things, just spending more time with their parents.

If even children can recognize the need for families to interact, why do parents have such a difficult time realizing this same fact? Or if they do realize it, why do they not make it a higher priority? Perhaps there are several reasons that can answer these questions. One of the most powerful is the factor of money. Mattox’s article on family time suggests that it is ironic that “while America has experienced steady growth in its gross national product, the economic pressures on families with children have risen significantly” (11). As strange as such a statement sounds, the facts support it. A 1997 study by the U.S. Department of Labor found that the majority of American families worked more hours in 1997 than in 1979. But for fifty percent of American families their earnings in “real wages” did not keep pace with their increased workload (Ellman 28-29). This means that half of the families in America have to work more hours just to keep their income from shrinking. In addition to this basic need for a family to work more to keep their income the same, many family costs such as “housing, healthcare, transportation and higher education have significantly outpaced the general inflation rate” (Mattox 11).

All of these factors are further strained when one considers the additional social pressure of materialism. Often today many parents consciously chose to work more so that they might have more material possessions. They may do this even if they realize that spending time with
their children is important. Today’s society places a high value on owning the latest
technological items or getting a new car every few years. Such a mindset further increases the
strain on a family’s income.

Another large factor that plays into the family time equation is the general obsession with
careerism that has struck America. While in the past this problem presented itself primarily to
men, because they tended to be the one working outside the home, it has now become a general
problem. Several articles reveal that as women’s role in the workplace has increased, their desire
to be homemakers has decreased, because it is viewed as less important than other careers. This
is in keeping with the societal view that men and women are equal. Thus, if a husband can
pursue his career, and leave the task of being a homemaker to the wife, why could not she do the
same? Because postmodernism accepts such a view of equality, it has become acceptable in
many people’s minds. Therefore, under postmodern thought, both parents are free to pursue
their own careers instead of spending time with their children.

While there may be other factors in the family time debate, the issues of money and
careerism seem to be the most predominant. Both provide parents with excuses to not spend
time with their children. While the second may seem more selfish, the first can actually be a real
problem that families have to face. Thus, dealing with the money issue can be a real difficulty,
however it should not be used as an excuse to avoid interacting with one’s children.

Another important issue facing the family today is divorce. Whether a person has been
through one personally or not, the regularity with which they take place has made most
Americans very aware of their occurrence. It is often very easy to look at this problem and be
tempted to say that since it does occur so frequently, maybe there is nothing wrong with it. Or
one can ask why it has not destroyed our society already if it is such a dangerous problem.
However, when one delves into the research that has been done on the subject, it quickly becomes apparent that divorce is having a negative impact upon our society. When considering the effects of divorce, it is particularly worthwhile to examine how it impacts children. The effects upon children can be viewed from two perspectives. One, how does the divorce effect them, and second, how does the single parent home situation effect them.

On the matter of the immediate effects\(^2\) of divorce, one must understand that many of these effects are psychological in nature. Christine Gorman cites high divorce rates as one of the leading reasons why children between the ages of 9 and 17 are more stressed out today than 50 years ago. In fact, she stated that the normal anxiety level for children today is higher than that of children who were treated for psychiatric disorders 50 years ago (168). Many other studies have indicated that divorce leads to such problems as poorer performance for children in school, in emotional functioning, in behavioral functioning and in self-esteem (Ayoub 297). Some of this research indicates that the parental conflict that accompanies divorce is part of the reason for these problems in children (Ayoub 298). Since many marriages that end in divorce have parental conflict in them, one can begin to understand part of how divorce can affect children.

However, another factor that can affect children profoundly is the loss of a stable family unit. In fact, the group most impacted by a divorce is the teenage/adult children of the divorcing couple. One of the reasons for this greater impact upon them is because if they have grown up within a stable family, the loss of that center of stability can have great and lasting influences upon them. This loss of stability in their parents relationship can make their own relationships less stable (Becker).

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\(^2\) By immediate effects the author means those that stem from the divorce, and or the events leading up to it. While they may not manifest themselves until after the divorce, their cause is from the divorce.
The other fact that is worth considering in how divorce can impact children is the effects of the single parent home upon raising a child. Part of this argument is merely a revisitation of the previous statements about family time. If a fully functioning family unit will have monetary problems and difficulty finding time for parent children interaction, how much greater will the problem be if there is only one parent to earn money. Another effect is that the children become pseudo-adults. In a study done on single parent and only-child families, the researchers concluded that many of the teenage children “bypassed being an adolescent and instead pretended that they were already adults” (Bayrakal 5). This particular development was attributed to the fact that many divorced parents, especially those of only-children, treat their children as spouse substitutes (Bayrakal 1). This emotional connection between divorced parent and only-child can lead to an unhealthy situation where it is extremely difficult for the child to separate from their parent and become an independent individual (Bayrakal 6). Thus the detrimental effects of a single parent home situation become apparent.

Both family time and divorce are problems that face America as a nation. They also are issues that Christians living in 21st century America have to deal with as well. In order to do that, Christians must not only possess knowledge of the facts that the world has to offer on the matter, they must also search the Scriptures to find what God says on these matters. Only when Christians do that can they begin to make the right decisions regarding family time and divorce.

So, what does the Bible say about family time? This is a particularly good question. God never clearly specified that parents must spend a certain number of hours each day with their children. Rather He established a clear order to how the parent-child relationship should exist. He set up responsibilities not only for children to honor and obey their parents (Ex. 20:12), but also He gave parents duties that they must fulfill regarding their children. On a basic level He
gave parents the duty to physically provide for their children (2 Cor. 12:14). Another duty that parents have is to properly discipline their children (Prov. 13:24). To properly discipline children does take a certain amount of time and effort, and so parents must spend some time doing this. However, the most important task that God gives parents is to spiritually provide for them. In Old Testament times, God instructed the Israelites to impress His commands upon their children, and to talk about them with their children in every situation whether it be at home, on the road, lying down or standing up (Deut. 6:7, 11:19). Paul echoes these words when he writes to the Ephesians, “bring them [children] up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (6:4). Jesus Himself rebuked His disciples when they tried to keep people from bringing their little children to Him (Mark 10:13-16). Thus, it is quite apparent that God desires His people to care for their children in such a way that they come to faith in Him as their Savior from sin. This task does take time and effort. Christians are often tempted to think that physical care for their children is their chief concern. However, spiritually nurturing their children should never take a second place to merely providing for physical needs.

On the matter of divorce little needs to be said. Numerous passages in Scripture make it clear that God intended marriage to be a lifelong union between two people (Rom. 7:2). At one point in the Gospel of Mark Jesus elaborates on God’s statement in Genesis that the two shall become one flesh by saying, “Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate” (10:9). In fact, God expressly forbids divorce except on the grounds of marital unfaithfulness (Matt. 5:32). Therefore, Christians should not divorce, except on this basis. However, when dealing with other people who have divorced, one must remember that there is sin in the world and they should not shun those who divorce, unless they are unrepentant. It is important to
remember that God’s forgiving grace is the most powerful medicine that can be given to families that have been ravaged by divorce.

So do I determine everything because I am human? Postmodernism would say yes, that all issues, including how people manage their family time and whether or not they divorce, are decided as right or wrong solely from an individual point of view. An ever-growing number of people in our society agree with this point of view. It appeals to man’s sinful pride and arrogance. However, human reason can reveal that, despite what people want to believe, there are problems that arise from how families use their time and whether or not they divorce. And as Christians, the Bible even goes further in helping consider where the appropriate boundaries are in these areas. Truly, postmodern thought is leading America down the wrong path, which could and is having serious repercussions on the family. However, when man rejects God’s Word and prostrates himself to idols of his own making, ultimately he can only say, “I know that it is all in me, cause I am human.”