

Carlson, Allan C. and Paul T. Mero. *The Natural Family: A Manifesto*. Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing, 2007. 256 pp. \$27.95.

Introduction

R. Albert Mohler said of *The Natural Family*, “The manifesto these authors have offered in defense of the natural family demands the attention of all those who would defend civilization’s most basic institution.” I could not agree more. Allan Carlson and Paul Mero’s call to arms has opened my eyes to the need for preserving God’s most basic unit of human society in a culture that openly opposes the establishment and expansion of traditional families.

More importantly and more personally though, this book exposed my own latent individualism and my predilections against the family. I would never have thought of myself as anti-family, but in reading *The Natural Family*, it became apparent that I share(d) certain presuppositions with opponents of the family. This illumination was disturbing and convicting. It has challenged me to renew my mind with a more biblical vision of human relationships that embrace the family as a glorious, God-given institution designed for fellowship, nurture, self-sacrificing love, and the maturity of God’s *Imago Dei*.

In this book review, I will reflect on those two pressing concerns. First, I confess that this book convicted me of an anti-family worldview latent in my heart. Therefore, I will examine my own heart with the pages of this book looking for deficits in my commitment to the family. Second, in response to Carlson and Mero’s call for action, I will suggest ways that pastors can and should promote “family values” in the church.

Freedom and Family

In chapter three, Carlson and Mero pose an interesting thought experiment. They ask, “If you could create society the way you think it should be, what would that society be centered around? The individual? The church? The corporation? The state? Or the family” (79)?

While the question ironically caters to individualistic authority, thought, and expression, their statistical and qualitative answers overwhelmingly favor the family as the proper building block of society. They explore each of these elements in detail, and show how the family is the most healthy and functional unit of them all (see chapter four in particular).

This chapter follows another (chapter two) where they trace out religious traditions and sociological research to show how the “natural” supremely benefits the family. They contend, “The family, when functioning as the *cell of society*, delivers all that is good, precious, and necessary to life as human beings” (61). Resultantly, Carlson and Mero make a compelling argument for building society with healthy families and not liberated individuals. This family-friendly assertion flies in the face of America’s individualism and my own inherent commitment to personal freedom.

It seems that somewhere in my life, I developed feelings and convictions about the need for uninhibited freedom. I can recall thinking many times that freedom is imperative for happiness and an essential necessity for living the abundant life. Without it, the blessings of life are in danger of being withheld because they may be out of reach. This perspective results in lifestyle maneuvers that protect freedom—always keeping options open, being slow to commit, and maintaining a plethora of backup plans. As a Christian, this translates into an insatiable desire to preserve my freedom to go anywhere and do anything to serve my Lord. At least, that is the spin. I must have freedom to follow.

Sadly, this individualist expression of faith is severely lacking in the communal commitment that Jesus Christ calls his followers to embrace—consider the thirty-plus “one another” statements. Graciously, God has been prying this kind of individualism from my life over the last half-decade. The Spirit of Christ has instructed me in the purpose of the church, in all of its multifarious beauties and blunders. God has taught me that the Christian life is one lived together, where “life together,” to use Bonhoeffer’s expression, is only possible in covenant community with other locally assembled believers. God has faithfully broken much of my selfish individualism by increasing my commitment to the local church, yet this book shows another arena where my individualism still persists.

While Carlson and Mero’s manifesto calls for legislative changes that promote family (see chapters seven and eight), I know personally a more powerful change needs to take place in my heart. I need to have a greater love for my niece, nephews, brother and sisters-in-law. The change that will most deeply impact my life is one accomplished by the recreative power of the Holy Spirit, not the reformist vision of Washington lobbyists—though I applaud the latter’s efforts. What I need is a deeper contrition over the brokenness of homes, the divorces of parents, and the physical and emotional abandonment that children experience by self-seeking parents. The reality is that if I do not embrace such a vision, my family will suffer the effects.

For this needed change, I am thankful for the lessons I have learned from my wife’s family. I am from a small family. I have one brother, and four cousins—two of whom I have never met. In short, family ties are not strong in my family. My father and mother have lived apart – not divorce or separated, but physically distant – for more than a decade. Such limited relationships reflect a family of strong-willed individuals. My wife’s family, on the other hand,

is much larger, tight-knit, and emotionally connected. I have learned much from them, as I need to. This book has reinforced the things I have seen modeled in her family.

The Natural Family shows the intrinsic value of strong families and it has called me back to the wise plan of God in marriage and family life. Only in such environs are men and women made in the image of God most likely to mature. Carlson and Mero write, “The family...is the primal economic community, where exchanges properly occur on the basis of altruism, charity, and compassion, where the pure socialist vision—‘from each according to his ability; to each according to his need’—actually works” (61).¹ Or as Moses writes, “And these words that I command you today...You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise... You shall write them on the doorpost of you house and on your gates” (Deut. 6:6-9). The point is the same. In the context of a nuclear family, children are most likely to find stability and personal health. Here they will mature. Moreover, the truths of God’s word, the gospel, and the message of living for Christ are most clearly taught and demonstrated in a home where mom and dad reflect the biblical roles prescribed in the Scriptures. Such is undermined in individualistic Christianity, where everyone does what is right in there own eyes.

For the Pastor

This commitment to the family is absolute for the pastor, as well. The Scriptures constantly refer to the church as a house, a family, and a gathering of God’s sons and daughters united together as a body and growing in maturity together (cf. 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:12-16; 1 Tim.

¹ What they call a “socialist vision” is actually biblical. 2 Corinthians 8:13-15 reads, “For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened; but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack—that there may be equality. As it is written, “He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack (NKJV).” Here the principal of the stronger helping the weaker is seen, and the needy being benefited by the materially prosperous is reciprocally established. See also Exodus 16:18.

3:15). Moreover, the pastor is called to be a man who manages his own household well (1 Tim. 3:4-5). Why is that? Perhaps, it is a testing ground for the pastor's ability to shepherd, but it is also so that man's family might reflect in minuet what the church ought to look like full-orbed community, that is a family of believers who love one another, bear with one another, forgive one another, and sojourn together through this hostile world.

So, pastors must model these things in their own homes. They must treasure their wives and children, spending time with them, cultivating relationships, patiently instructing and leading them as a gentle and protective shepherd. They must see their ministry to wife and child(ren) as primary for the sake of their souls, and for the sake of those souls who are watching, who are looking to see a vision of genuine family life.

The pastor must also preach and teach in a way that edifies the family. He will fail to fully minister to the families in the congregation if he fails to address such unpopular issues as complementary marriages, masculinity and femininity, parenting, the disciplining of children, moral purity, the purposes of sex and sexuality, the dangers of the homosexual agenda, and the understanding of children as a blessing to be sought and embraced. In an age when legislation promotes on-demand abortions and no-fault divorces, when advertising breeds discontentment, and when the entertainment industry and Christians "celebrities" support the fashionableness and benefits of divorce, two-income homes, and child care, prophetically telling the people of God what the word of God says about the families of God will be a litmus test for faithful preaching.

Families have been so redefined in this century, only a commitment to expounding the inerrant word of God will be able to renew the minds of the Christians called to holiness. This is the pastor's first task. Additionally, his task must be to cultivate in his people a brokenness for the destruction that has gone on with families in this nation and in the world. He must not be

content to give his people information, but he must lead his people to grieve over the demoralizing of families.

Conclusion

These are just some of the ways a faithful pastor must promote the “natural family.” While I desire to be a pastor, I admit that I have much to learn and many tears to shed over the state of my family and the families that I know in the church. May God give me and us the spirit of John the Baptist, of whom it says, “And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction” (Mal. 4:6). We know that in this fallen world God’s judgment is coming, and that he will judge those families who have rejected his wisdom for their own; but may we as pastors be faithful to lead our people back to God’s ideals for the family and may the church of Jesus Christ be upbuilt as a result.