

Work and family, why does nobody think they've got it right?

Steve Holmes

I am sitting on a train, approximately 450 miles from home. I have just left the meeting I agreed to write this article.

I pick up a voicemail message from the school my elder daughter attends requesting that I collect her as she is ill. It is some hours old. I assume someone else has collected her, but actually have no idea who, or where or how my daughter currently is. I make several calls, battling against intermittent mobile reception. I still don't know where or how my daughter is. Heather, my wife, is at work, some distance from the school, and has heard nothing from them. We assume our childminder has collected our daughter, but I cannot confirm this. Forty minutes after collecting the voicemail, I speak to my daughter. She is fine. I phone Heather.

The dilemmas faced by working parents? How about whether you go to meetings – even meetings about important, strategic tasks of Christian mission – miles from home, and so are not available for your children when they need you?

The first dilemma is simple: to work or not? I have never met a working parent who thinks they have got it right. Actually, delete “working”: mothers who choose to stay at home with their children tend to question whether that decision is self-indulgent or a refusal of their vocation. Fathers who choose to stay at home are regarded as weird, or worse.¹ Working mothers worry that they should be staying at home; working fathers worry that they expect the mother to do everything; people who work part-time worry that they are sacrificing both their career and their children in some desperate attempt to “have it all”.

If you choose to work, there are other decisions to be made. We used to live near London. There, the question of staying at home is simply irrelevant for 90 per cent of families because two incomes are needed to pay the mortgage or rent. Of course, those people who have high-powered jobs may worry that they never see their children, because they are expected to work long hours, and then faced at least 90 minutes of commuting home. Some people, mothers or fathers, decided to take a low-pay, low-skill, local job to be near the children, sacrificing promising careers for the sake of the family. We didn't: Heather and I both have God-given vocations that we are good at and care about, hers in healthcare, mine in ministry and theological education. Both of us worked “in town”; we staggered our days and juggled our diaries to be able to give the girls their breakfast and their evening meal at home. Prior to this I had worked short hours on the days when Heather was at work, arriving in the office something past ten and leaving again around four – university work is generally fairly flexible, and I tried to make up the time in the evenings and at weekends.

If both parents work, who will look after the children? There is precisely one good solution: able-bodied and retired grandparents living nearby. That at least has a chance of working, although the standard difficulties of family arrangements can ruin it, too. Otherwise you are faced with the choice of childminder or nursery. Nurseries are professional and inflexible; childminders flexible but not always professional. Take your pick.²

We have been blessed by wonderful childminders who our girls have loved being with, but the problems do not go away. Last month, for example, after an extraordinarily heavy period of exam marking, which involved working to one in the morning four nights in a week, I was badly behind on everything else. Two relatively quiet weeks beckoned to clear the backlog, but suddenly our childminder needed to be in the USA to be with a dying family member. Heather called in every favour she could and I ferried the girls from one house to the next, and took time off work (my diary was deliberately empty) whenever there was no one else to look after them.

Such emergencies are the common stuff of parenting, of course. Many employers write a certain number of days of “carer's leave” into contracts these days (although some I have worked for make it very clear what they think about anyone actually asking to take it, particularly if you are male). But it is not just the emergencies or the time; it is the competing claims on the same period of time. I recall being at an important meeting in Cardiff. The meeting went on longer than any of us had expected. I couldn't leave because someone else's livelihood depended on the discussions. The time when I needed to leave to collect my daughter from the childminder in Staines rapidly receded. Something had to give. In the end it was the speed limit. The meeting mattered. My daughter mattered. There are no easy answers at such times.

All this before mentioning church. In London, the joys of commuting meant sometimes going straight from train station to leaders' meeting, not pausing to see the family on the way. Should I have resigned from the leadership of the church to fulfil my responsibilities as a father? I believe not, but who can tell? The other leaders were juggling the same issues, of course. Meetings were regularly switched from one house to another because someone's spouse was late home or away on business. The church went through a bad patch – we lost our minister in difficult circumstances. I took on the preaching ministry for a term to try to provide some healing and continuity. For two months, every Saturday was spent writing sermons (it was a busy time at work, too); at the end of it, one of my fellow-leaders discovered how little I'd seen the family and banned me from preaching. Was it a bad decision to take on the task? I don't know. God was clearly in the preaching, and the church found healing and blessing, but my family suffered. What preacher cannot give that testimony?

Issues of family are not confined to childcare: spouses face dilemmas when both are working. When I trained for ministry, I asked for a church within commuting distance of Heather's job: God had called her to it, and so presumably was calling me to something compatible. But then I was offered a new job which meant moving to Scotland. Heather gave up her post and spent a year looking for a new one.

At this point, of course, in an article in a Christian publication, the writer is supposed to appeal to biblical wisdom, or at least quote a text or two to justify their ideas before proclaiming the problem solved. But which biblical text should I invoke? Abraham giving Sarah to Pharaoh as a concubine, or Sarah giving Hagar to Abraham in an early attempt at surrogate motherhood? Perhaps the happy family arrangements of Jacob, Rachel and Leah? David and his relationships with Michal, Abigail, Bathsheeba, Absalom, and the rest? How about Joseph and Mary, homeless in Bethlehem, she a young teenager carrying a child that isn't his? These are hardly stories of perfect family life.

I could appeal to the Church's alleged support for the "traditional family" (i.e. a compact family unit, composed of husband, wife and a small number of children, in which the husband is employed, the wife performs childcare and homemaking functions, and everybody is happy and fulfilled), but this pattern is totally alien to Scripture, totally unworkable in practice, and has no place in the Church. It is a 1950s invention based on a false memory of a supposed Victorian golden age and has done incalculable damage, as far as I can see. What about single parents and their offspring? Are they to be feared and loathed in equal measure (and remember single parents will sometimes include women who conceive after rape, families where one partner has died, and many other people whose conduct has been unimpeachable even by the most pharisaic amongst us – and will always include innocent children, who did not choose their family unit)? Are childless couples and single people are to be pitied, regardless of their own feelings about their state (singleness can be a spiritual gift in Scripture, of course)? Are extended families to be honoured distantly at Christmas and other festivals, but otherwise ignored? Are these the ideals the Church should proclaim? No.

Historically, families in which both parents work are, of course, the norm. Labour on farms and in cottage industries was never the preserve of men only. Amongst the European nobility, the alliance of "sword and distaff"³ suggests a gender-segregated system, but one which explicitly placed political power in the hands of the men and economic power in the hands of the women. Children were cared for not by otherwise-unemployed wives, but by grandparents or others too old to work the farm, or indeed by older siblings. If you were rich, you bought a slave or employed a servant to care for the children. Single parenthood was common, as was orphanhood, and many children were brought up by women who were not their mother, or by their fathers alone (look at the statistics for death in childbirth prior to the invention of antibiotics for evidence of this). It seems that biblical family life fits such patterns as well. Our arrangement with a childminder, our friends who are single parents or who live in family units with natural and step-children intermingled is far more "traditional", and certainly far more biblical, than any concept of a "traditional family". As far as I can see, there has never been an age or a culture when the strictures about the necessity of focused maternal care have been anything other than an unobtainable dream for the vast majority of people.

So, the dilemmas we face today are not new. Mothers and fathers – and all other human beings – have always struggled to balance the different calls on their lives and time. If we are to find an example in David, let us find it when he struggles to balance family responsibility and religious duty when faced with the scorn of Michal, or when his public role as king demands he rejoice in the face of his private grief at the death of his son Absalom. Or perhaps we can look to Eli, trying – and apparently failing – to balance his calling to serve before the Lord and his duties as a father. In the New Testament, let us find our guidance in the differing patterns of balance evident amongst the early Christian leaders in Acts: Paul's apparent lack of family responsibility, and relegation of his work as a tent-maker, to focus single-mindedly on his role in the Church; Priscilla and Aquilla's shared Christian ministry; Lydia's successful business career, enabling her to serve the Church; and so on.

God calls each of us to several roles, and asks us to find balanced and creative ways of honouring each of them. Our culture has

so exalted the place of “work” (seemingly defined as a task performed for pay, typically away from the home) that most of us have the balances badly out of kilter. What are Church leaders to do?

Well, of course, the first answer is simple: struggle along, like everybody else. And second, perhaps, be honest about the struggles. Name the issues. Don’t pretend they’re not there, or that they are easily solved. Ask what can be done to make your church part of the solution, not part of the problem: can meeting times be moved – or meetings just cancelled (please!)? Can the rhetoric and practice of church organisations and events be changed so that everyone feels welcome? Could you run a daytime home group, and provide people to offer childcare so non-working parents and carers (from all the churches in the town) can really study and pray together? Are there folk in your church who could offer befriending and respite care for single parents? Could you run an after-school club, a good place for kids to be between leaving school and their parents getting home from work, or do something specific for the single fathers in the area, who are so often excluded from everything, or find practical ways of helping shift-workers with young families? Above all, can we speak good news to struggling people, feeling guilty about their own lives and decisions? When the so-called “experts” in the media offer nothing but moralistic pharisaical denunciations, can churches learn to speak comfort, not further judgement, to the worried and hurting?

Robert Jenson, an American theologian, when asked what it means for God to be eternal responded, “It means God has enough time – and I don’t!” God calls us to various roles, and sometimes, often perhaps, they collide. In our present culture, where employment has seized a place far beyond what it deserves, and where notions of parenthood and childrearing are seemingly incurably romantic, this is a particularly violent and messy collision. The culture will not be changed overnight, but we can at least imagine what counter-cultural good news churches might speak and live.

ENDNOTES

1 Some of the looks, and indeed comments, you get when you walk in to a “mums[!] and toddlers” group, even one run by your own church, suggest that some of those present assume that any man in the room must be a paedophile. I write from experience.

2 It has been suggested that nursery is bad for young children. For example, a recent article in The Guardian asserted in robust terms that mothers – it was that personalised – are harming their children if they leave them for anything more than a few hours, and that very rarely, any time before their second birthday. Thirty seconds’ reading was enough to convince me that the claims were largely rubbish, and completely unsupported by the few snippets of evidence quoted. Being evicted because your parents have failed to keep up their mortgage payments is worse for children, but for some reason no one mentions this.

3 A distaff is a weaving implement. The word first appeared in English around the year 1,000. Since women were the ones who did the spinning, the meaning extended to mean “women’s work” and the word came to be used figuratively of the female sex. Hence, the contrast with men’s work – fighting.

Taken from the article, ‘Work and Family, or, Why Does Nobody Think They’ve Got It Right?’ by Steve Holmes, published in Bible in TransMission, Spring 2010, and is reproduced here with the permission of Bible Society.

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Steve Holmes is a university lecturer, an ordained minister, and a husband and father. He wishes he were a husband and father, an ordained minister, and a university lecturer. “I tell our stories, not because we have had it bad – we have, in fact, had it pretty easy thus far, or so it seems to me – but because I suppose they are typical of the sorts of pressures people face.”

