

# Is the gospel good news for families today?

**Adam Eakins**

At our café church we have had the opportunity to express the gospel message to a variety of different make up of families. They have generally been different from our now very outdated idea of 2.4 children living with both of their birth parents. Looking at some recent Government statistics we are probably all acutely aware that family life in our culture has changed. It can now mean one mum, a step-dad, one dad and a step-mum and now two dads or mums. Children can be living with step-brothers and sisters or/and half-brothers and sisters. The family landscape has changed.

Here are some recent stats:-

- The number of cohabiting couple families in the UK increased by 65 per cent between 1996 and 2006, from 1.4 million to 2.3 million.
- The 2001 Census shows there were over 876,000 stepfamilies in the UK, 5.3 per cent of all families. Stepfamilies comprised just over 4 per cent of married couple families but 17 per cent of cohabiting couple families.<sup>1</sup>
- Four in ten marriages are re-marriages for at least one of the adults.
- The number of second or subsequent marriages has increased from 36,000 in 1971 to 116,694 in 1995.
- Rising divorce rates mean there are over half a million stepfamilies and over 2.5 million children involved in a stepfamily.
- There are around one million dependent stepchildren under 16 years old.<sup>2</sup>
- "It is predicted that by 2010 there will be more children living in a stepfamily than in a biological family."<sup>3</sup>

We could debate what impact that is having on families and society as a whole but that is for another article. My aim in writing this is to reflect on what the gospel story might look like as it interacts with a whole variety of different families and how it works in practice.

This was a subject I was asked to speak on recently at a conference. I have never felt so inadequate in addressing a subject before because I feel that my own theological reflection on this is still in its early stages of thought and the way the church is seeking to address the challenges this brings is still developing. We are seeking to be inclusive letting context and theology be separated from tradition in seeking to understand what the gospel message is for families today.

There are two occasions in John's gospel which are helpful where Jesus has an encounter with two different women. The woman at the well in Chapter Four and the woman caught in adultery in Chapter Eight. Both are very well known stories with many viewpoints that can be drawn out. However, as I reflect on them I notice one key difference. Jesus says to the woman caught in adultery, "neither do I condemn you, go now and leave your life of sin." On the other hand after Jesus reveals his knowledge of the Samaritan woman's living arrangements he never mentions it again. It leaves me with the question how do we balance grace and truth?

---

<sup>1</sup> National Statistics, 4<sup>th</sup> October 2007

<sup>2</sup> Parentline Plus [www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

<sup>3</sup> 'Stepfamilies: Surviving and Thriving in a New Family' by Suzie Hayman (Published by Simon and Schuster Ltd, 2006)

So often the gospel we offer or present comes loaded with a whole set of unspoken or spoken issues of behaviour. Do we require lifestyle changes in line with our beliefs about the gospel before we would allow someone to take any kind of lead in being a witness? Is that what Jesus did? It appears not if what happens next to the women at the well in John 4:39.

Behaviour was so important in Jesus' day. You had to be seen to do the right thing in public and living a respectful religious life was one of the highest priorities. Behaving respectfully and being quick to judge and condemn those who didn't match the standards was everywhere in Jesus' time. Isn't it a good job that is no longer a problem today in our churches? We have moved on and those times were so different from our inclusive non-judgemental churches which represent the gospel today!!!

Now please don't read what I'm not writing. I'm not saying that grace means that lifestyle is not important I believe in a call to holiness and to be imitators of Christ. It's just that I have begun to question what the key elements of the gospel are. Is it a fixed thing or can it be a moving line in the sand? Maybe that was what Jesus was drawing as he knelt down before all those men willing to stone the adulterous woman.

Let me expand. When my parents were dating, part of the gospel truth was that you didn't go to the cinema or go dancing – it was considered sin. If I was writing this 20 years ago we might be having a debate about whether a divorced person can be remarried in the church or have a leadership role in the church. These are no longer debates for most of us, why? Have we adapted the gospel to meet our cultural changes or have we gone back to scriptures to gain a different understanding of scriptural teaching on divorce. When people say gospel truth or living the gospel, who's reading of the gospel do we mean? Do we have a gospel which has not been tainted by culture and tradition? I ask myself the question what in twenty years time will we look back at now and say, "I can't believe we use to do that or believe that."

So I come back to what is the heart of the gospel? The word I am left with from both encounters Jesus has is the word love. A love which is inclusive, breaks down barriers and cares compassionately. Yes, there does appear to be a time for words on lifestyle but never without grace offered first. How that works out when a gay couple ask you to bless their civil partnership, I am not sure. Can you have a couple on your leadership team if on becoming Christians they decide that they are not ready for marriage but are still living together? Any help in thinking this all out is very welcome.