



WHAT ABOUT MY FAMILY?!?!

Page 1 of 5

By Wayne D. Stocks

07/18/2012-07//25/2012 (Originally published in 3 installments)

This article, which was first published in the March/April issue of K! Magazine addresses the issue of how the church should address children of divorce and children from single-parent families in the context of family ministry.



Family ministry is all the buzz in the world of children's ministry these days. It seems as though the whole children's ministry world is painting the world orange! Deuteronomy 6 has become the "go to" verse in children's ministry, and for good reason. There is much to be learned there. God clearly calls the family to be the primary vessel for imparting and teaching spiritual truth to our kids.

Like many things, though, it's easy to take a good thing too far. In the lingo of Orange where red is the family and yellow is the church, there is a temptation to lean too far towards the red side (family) in order to compensate for years of yellow driven ministry. When churches do this, they run the risk of losing an ever growing segment of our population and a dwindling portion of our churches – children from divorced homes and single parent families. When our focus is simply on "helping parents to disciple their kids," what are we saying to kids whose parents have either abandoned them or are in no emotional or spiritual state to disciple them? In those situations, we leave these kids asking and wondering:

WHAT ABOUT MY FAMILY?

The Biblical Mandate

The Bible is clear that the primary responsibility for the spiritual nurture and discipleship of children lies squarely with parents. Deuteronomy 6:6-7 says:

"These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons 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 up."





WHAT ABOUT MY FAMILY?!?!

Page 2 of 5

By Wayne D. Stocks

07/18/2012-07//25/2012 (Originally published in 3 installments)

However, in the same book, God commanded His people:

The Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance among you, and the alien, the orphan and the widow who are in your town, shall come and eat and be satisfied, in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do. [Deuteronomy 14:29]

God, in his providence and love, knew that there would be children and families that did fit His plan for the created world, and He commanded His people to provide for them. And, lest someone argue that those are merely Old Testament commands, the Bible could not be more clear than in James 1:27. It states:

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

The Bible tells us that God is a Father to the fatherless (Psalm 68:5).

In our society today, it is children of divorce and children from single parents home who are left as orphans by virtue of their parents' physical and/or emotional absence. God's Word calls His people to stand in the gap for these kids and these families. In today's world, that is a role the church should fill.

The Problem of Children and Divorce

Before filling this role, we must have an adequate understanding of the magnitude of the problem. Consider the following statistics.

Since 1972, roughly 1,000,000 children each year have witnessed the divorce of their parents. In 2008, an additional 1.7 million children were born into single parent families. Other studies show that roughly one-half of all children in the United States will see the break-up of their parents' marriage. Half of those will also see the breakup of a parent's second marriage. Additionally, research from the Barna Group indicates that the divorce rate amongst born again Christians is as high as the rate for the population as a whole.

A 2010 government study shows that only 60.3% of kids currently live with their married biological parents. 3.1% live with unmarried biological parents while 5.4% live in step families and 27.1% live with a single or cohabiting parent. Another 4.1% live with grandparents, other relatives or elsewhere. That means that in a small group of ten kids in your ministry, at least four of them likely to be from "non-traditional" families. Rates of cohabitation are also on the rise leaving a situation where children from divorced and single parent homes are on a constant carousel of new people coming into and out of their "family." Add in stepsiblings,





WHAT ABOUT MY FAMILY?!?!

Page 3 of 5

By Wayne D. Stocks

07/18/2012-07//25/2012 (Originally published in 3 installments)

“new” grandparents and “friends” of mom or dad, and a child’s life can become a hopelessly complicated morass of people dictated by their parents’ relationship status.

Children of Divorce and The Church

If, as the church, we mean to embrace the idea of family ministry, we must define the term family, and any definition we use must be broad enough to include children living in single parent homes (by way of divorce or birth), stepfamilies, with other relatives, and nine of the above. Our approach to family ministry must be broad enough to ensure that these kids are not excluded from our ministries because of the choices of their parents.

All too often the church, many times without even realizing it, focuses on the “traditional” two married parent family model in our ministry to children and families.

Adult children of divorce often cite incidents during their childhood where people in the church, including paid staff, ignored them and their families when their parents’ got divorced. Worse yet, many recall that the people in their churches made them feel unwelcome in the church which eventually led to their ceasing coming to church all together.

In a survey I am currently conducting of adults whose parents divorced when they were children (<http://divorceministry4kids.com/divorce/>), this sentiment was echoed over and over again. One woman wrote of her experience in church following her parents’ divorce,

“I always felt left out. I did not fit in because I was not a regular anywhere.”

Another woman wrote:

YES! In the [NAME REDACTED] church you feel like you are somehow tainted when your parents are divorced. It completely changed the lens through which I understood and saw all Biblical truth and church doctrine.

Yet another responded,

“...the pastors wouldn't talk to us. Some of them ignored us.”





WHAT ABOUT MY FAMILY?!?!

Page 4 of 5

By Wayne D. Stocks

07/18/2012-07//25/2012 (Originally published in 3 installments)

Another woman, when asked if she felt judged at church gave an even more haunting response:

Not at the church I attended. They didn't get involved in people's lives. You didn't really know anyone except your own friends or school mates.

In her groundbreaking book *Between Two Worlds*, Elizabeth Marquardt studied the impacts of divorce by interviewing hundreds of grown children of divorce. She writes,

In perhaps the most poignant finding of the study, of those young adults who were regularly attending a church or synagogue at the time of their parents' divorce, two-thirds say that NO ONE – neither from clergy nor from the congregation – reached out to them during that critical time in their lives, while only one-quarter remember either a member of clergy or a person from the congregation doing so. [Emphasis added]

Let's think about that. Of those children attending church at the time of their parents' divorce, not one person from the church reached out to these kids in their time of greatest need. For those of us who work with children, that statistic alone should break our hearts and, more importantly, spur us on to action. The church as a whole, and those of us who minister to children in particular, have to stand up and speak for these kids, and these families, that are falling through the cracks in our churches.

What Can The Church Do?

So, what practical steps can a church or children's ministry take to ensure that these kids are not left out in the cold? What can we do to be the hands and feet of Jesus to these kids? Here are some suggestions to get started:

1. Get involved. Figure out which kids in your church are from divorced families so that you can know which kids may require special ministry.
2. Reach out. Take time to reach out to kids whose parents are getting divorced.
3. Offer support. Start a Divorce Care 4 Kids or similar support group in your church.
4. Be prepared. Study the impact of divorce on kids. Read books like *Between Two Worlds* and check out sites like DivorceMinistry4Kids.com for more information.
5. Make contact. Talk to both parents if possible - whether they come to your church or not.
6. Give thought. Think about children of divorce and children from single parent families when planning your and events.





WHAT ABOUT MY FAMILY?!?!

Page 5 of 5

By Wayne D. Stocks

07/18/2012-07//25/2012 (Originally published in 3 installments)

7. Remain available. Ministry to children of divorce takes a long term commitment. Make sure you are prepared to be there for the long haul.

Children of divorce and children in single parent homes face an uphill battle, but with the love of Jesus they can overcome their circumstances and thrive. Ultimate healing and contentment comes through a relationship with Jesus Christ, and it is our job as the church to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ to these kids and to their families. We are all part of God's family, and no child in our church should ever have to wonder, "What about my family?"

