

MOVING ON: THE NEW TEACHING ON FAMILY

This article is being written to share our experiences with a Christian movement. Those in this movement share, variously, a clutch of beliefs about family life. There is a common emphasis on topics such as the roles of men and women, the proper manner in which one should meet a life partner, standards of dress and modesty, and so on. Having no common title through which it is identified, I will refer to it from here as *the movement*.

The movement has been popularized through the work of a handful of North American teachers and then through a multitude of grassroots home based newsletters and support groups. It seems to have risen in popularity over the past fifteen years and has a stronger following among home educators.

The teachings of the movement share some similarities in their conception. There tends to be a romancing with the past, including an occasional gleaning from traditional Jewish culture. This affection with the old is reflected in various prescribed behaviour, including the standards of dress and modesty that are adopted. There is a consistent appeal to Scripture, the goal of which is to proof-text each precept to form an authentically Biblical approach.

We found that the people who are attracted to these teachings do so from the very best of intentions. They want more for their families. They see decay in the culture around them and are concerned that they see the same decay among those in the Church. They eagerly desire Biblical answers which will please God and bring about the best for them and their children. This was certainly the motivation that caused us to attach our sympathies with these beliefs. We thus became involved, for perhaps five or more years, with numerous families in the movement.

It was only after a few years that any real concerns emerged for us. Our understanding grew that, despite the wholesome goals that were promoted, the effect of the teaching of the movement was to compromise far more than the benefits we hoped to achieve. Distraction from the weightier things of the faith and a fracture in fellowship with other believers who don't share the cultural emphases of the movement are two of the disabling shortcomings we found through our attachment to these teachings.

It is foundational to the idea of culture that human beings distinguish themselves as members of a group in some way. This can start simply from a shared fondness for customs or beliefs. The use of language, usually particular words and phrases, together with various outward signs are common means by which members of a subculture will authenticate one another. However, when divine approval is given to these standards they become powerful measures for people to affirm themselves and to measure the worth of others. It seems obvious enough that the persistence of many Christian denominations and sects rests on this fact.

The movement identifies with particular cultural expressions. Tending to be nostalgic it romances the old, and is suspicious of the new. The standards it adopts are then given the

sense of being moral absolutes by affixing Biblical terms to them. Past standards of dress and behaviour, for example, are idealized by identifying them with terms such as modesty and purity.

As the distinctions with those outside the movement becomes more visible, the idea of being in the world becomes difficult and there is a sense of a barrier being erected against outsiders. Sadly, we even sensed that those outside the Church who sympathise with the values of the movement shared a deeper fellowship with them than those who are in Christ.

There are strong ideas about the protection of children in the movement. This thinking is often extended to the protection of single adults and particularly of single women. It is this which has given rise to some curious ideas about the way in which marriages are to be arranged. The prelude is often a series of getting-to-know-you weekends and holidays with other families in the movement. It is not difficult to detect a sub-theme here of families effectively dating one another in a bid for future matches to be found for their children.

When a young man becomes interested in a young woman, he can then stand to run a gauntlet of qualifying meetings and other requirements. This is often justified by appeal to customs of old, which may have little more than an inference in Scripture. The unrealism of this approach is found in the sad reality we have witnessed. Contrary to a general openness in the movement to people marrying at a younger age, the incidence of adult spinsters who have grown up with the movement is commonplace, their parents anxious to make the right matches after years of persisting with these principles.

A further curious observation we made about the movement is that, although it affirms patriarchy and male leadership, the instigators in families are often women. A few have assumed a high priestess-like persona and there was one we have had contact with who exerted a cult like influence over a number of families. This eventually resulted in a fallout of disillusionment and broken relationships.

These are general observations about the movement which have flowed from our experience. This has caused us to consider where the roots of weakness in its teaching lie, which I will note briefly.

The most marked shortcoming of the teaching of the movement is that it neglects the greatest themes of the Scriptures. When one speaks with people in the movement about the 'bigger picture', of matters of the Father's initiative, grace and Christ's completed work, the response is invariably one which struggles to see its relevance. If at all, the weightier stuff of the Bible is dealt with poorly, being dulled by a sense of sufficiency in a lifestyle focus. The teaching of the movement is, in short, moralistic and man-centred. Its weakness is clear enough in that it lacks broad-based support from recognized theologians, teachers and pastors.

Without a foundation of living Christian truth, the consequences are tragic. Sadly, perhaps without even realizing it, the behavioural standards promoted by the movement

can assert the status of doctrine. Christ's work becomes overshadowed by prescribed works as the means of merit. Salvation becomes a muddied concept as outward expressions obtain legitimizing power. There is a strong unspoken sense that adhering to the standards of the movement is what makes people authentically Christian.

The New Testament is clear enough about the perilous waters I am describing. Although the goals seem wholesome enough, where purity is sought through behaviour, the inevitable outcome is legalism. There is a danger of deserting the faith in exchange for temporal confidence in a means that people can control and feel safe.

This tragedy can be accounted for, at least in part, by the poverty of well-founded Christian teaching in the Church on the basic questions that people in the movement are asking. Our own attraction to the movement was based on a desire to learn more about how God regarded matters of everyday life. However our experience across a range of churches, including those that boast a thoughtful approach to the Scriptures, was that there is a vacuum of thought life about these issues in mainstream Christianity. As some who are seeking answers in these areas are moving on from Christ, it seems, sadly, that the minds of those with capacity to develop quality teaching are elsewhere. The conclusion I come to is a call for the Church to consider seriously its move into this battleground.