

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

A CHURCH BASED CURRICULUM PROVIDING MARRIAGE AND FAMILY  
EDUCATION FOR STEPFAMILIES AND MINISTERS

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BY

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**Thesis Project Approval Sheet**

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## ABSTRACT

### A CHURCH BASED CURRICULUM PROVIDING MARRIAGE AND FAMILY EDUCATION FOR STEPFAMILIES AND MINISTERS

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Liberty School of Divinity, 2016

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Within the American population, the Stepfamily now outnumbers that of the traditional nuclear family; a trend mirrored in the local church. Stepfamilies within the church culture struggle in navigating the relational complexities, emotional and spiritual strain, and biblical confusion inherent to the formation of a stepfamily, while church leaders lack both understanding and the training necessary to minister to this growing population. Often step-families choose anonymity or leave the local church for fear of being shunned. In synthesizing, existing research with data garnered from stepfamilies via their participation in an anonymous online survey and participatory learning activity (PLA), challenges unique to stepfamily members in relation to the church can be classified. Armed with this data, a comprehensive and biblically based curriculum will be developed to train members of stepfamilies and those who minister to them.

Thesis Project Topic length: 135 words.

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## Chapter 1 -- Introduction

Though stepfamilies are not a recent phenomenon, the growth in the stepfamily population is arguably phenomenal. The Stepfamily Resource Center reports that most American families have shifted from what was considered the traditional biologically bonded family to a nation in which most families divorce, many of them going on to remarry or form a cohabitating relationship.<sup>1</sup> What is more, E. Mavis Hetherington calculates that 30% of all weddings in the US give birth to a stepfamily (i.e., are stepcouple weddings).<sup>2</sup> M. M. Sweeney reported that 42% of adults have at least one steprelative, with 30% indicating they have a step- or half-sibling; however, the researcher postulates that the number of stepfamilies in America is quite higher. Sweeney writes:

The government reporting of population figures indicates families in which the child resides. So, if the child lives with a divorced, single parent and the other nonresident parent has remarried, the child is not included in the calculations as being a member of a stepfamily. Children who are 18 and older or no longer living at home are not included in estimations.<sup>3</sup>

There are indications that with thirteen-hundred new stepfamilies beginning each day that the percentage of stepfamilies represents more than half the family population in America.

The Christian church's demographics tend to mimic secular statistics. Per a Barna research report, the current divorce rate in America is roughly 33% while the divorce rate for born-again Christians is 32%.<sup>4</sup> That said, a national population consisting of more than 50%

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1. The Stepfamily Foundation Inc, Stepfamily Statistics, accessed October 5, 2016, <http://www.stepfamily.org/stepfamily-statistics.html#sthash.pSvttkL6.dpuf>.

2. E. Mavis Hetherington and John Kelly, *For Better or for Worse Divorce Reconsidered* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002).

3. M.M. Sweeney, "Remarriage and Stepfamilies: Strategic Sites for Family Scholarship in the 21st Century," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72 (2010): 680, accessed October 1, 2016, <http://www.stepfamilies.info/stepfamily-fact-sheet.php>.

4. Barna, New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released, March 31, 2008, accessed September 15, 2016, <https://www.barna.com/research/new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released/>.

stepfamilies would imply that half of the families in any given local congregation are stepfamilies in some form.

### Statement of Problem

The problem arises for stepfamilies when they attempt to assimilate into today's church culture. Religious beliefs about divorce and remarriage and the Christian faith cause many stepfamily members to either conceal their family dynamic or mislead church attendees about the composition of their family for fear of negative reprisals. Some members of stepfamilies have been negatively judged either overtly or passively, denied leadership and ministry positions, become the subject of gossip, and even shunned by the church community altogether.

Authors Moe and Paige Becnel point out that there exists people and organizations that teach all divorce in a person's past constitutes continual sin, that "... People are permanently 'stained' by divorce, that God does not forgive divorce, that neither God nor the Christian Church has a use for divorced people and that God will not bless remarriages or Blended Families."<sup>5</sup> In this light stepfamilies and their individual members are denied the healing and restoration that comes from the ministry of grace and mercy found only in the body of Christ.

Ron L. Deal rightly states, "Every family, including the stepfamily, is founded on the marital relationship. The complexity of stepfamily life makes nurturing the marital relationship a tremendous challenge."<sup>6</sup> Ministering to the church's unique stepfamily population is critical to ending the divorce and remarriage cycle. According to Deal, 60-65% of stepfamily marriages end within five years.<sup>7</sup> Tragically, many of the children in these families will perpetuate the

5. Moe Becnal and Paige Becnal, *God Breathes on Blended Families: Twelve Fundamentals to Build Your Family*, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Blending a Family Ministry, 2009), 3-4.

6. Ron L. Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2002), 76.

7. Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 76.

cycle of divorce in their adult lives. Stepfamily ministry has arrived as the newest challenge for American churches. However, most ministers and church leaders are not aware of the problems these families are facing, or they choose to ignore the plight of the stepfamily entirely.

The American stepfamily consists of a marriage in which at least one spouse becomes a stepparent no matter the age of the children.<sup>8</sup> Stepfamilies can consist of children from one new spouse, both new spouses, or a combination in which children exist from at least one previous relationship with biological children from the new marriage. When there are children in a stepfamily that are not related by blood, they are referred to as stepsiblings, while children in a stepfamily that share one parent biologically are referred to as halfsiblings. The descriptors, “his children,” “her children,” or “our children,” are commonly used to describe the differences in a familial relationship. The most complex stepfamily type, “his, mine, and ours,” refers to children in the stepfamily that are from two previous marriages and the current remarriage.

The local Christian Church is a local organization (local church) that regularly gathers for worship. The term evangelical when used refers to theologically conservative individuals coming together to form a church that affirms biblical inspiration and salvation as a personal faith experience in Jesus Christ. Moreover, for this Theses Project, a church member is any church attendee that attends church on a regular basis and associates themselves with a local church by name and affiliation. Finally, for this Theses Project, a church leader is a recognized individual who holds some authority and responsibility in the local church. Church leaders can be either part of the laity or the staff as a paid minister. Church leadership can include pastors, deacons, elders, administrators, specific ministry leaders, small group leaders, etc.

One begins to appreciate the added complexities a stepfamily encounters when it forms. Add to these newly formed relationships the complexity of multiple sets of grandparents, other

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8. Becnel and Becnel, *God Breathes on Blended Families*, xxiii.

extended family members, ex-spouses, intimate friends from previous marriages, legal issues, and lingering guilt and unresolved loss due to divorce, and it is no mystery as to why stepfamilies struggle to survive, let alone flourish. Family Court Judge, Judy A. Hall remarks, “Even in the most functional families, there are conflict and resolution. That is the reality of life; that is the reality of the family; and that is the reality of the stepfamily.”<sup>9</sup>

A church-based and biblically sound curriculum will provide stepfamilies with the insight and tools needed to become a functioning family unit while at the same time equipping church leadership to come along side these families to put an end to the cycle of divorce and remarriage. It is imperative that the church supports these families who often comprise half of any given church’s population so that the members thrive in life and in serving the kingdom of God. God loves and offers forgiveness to the imperfect members of stepfamilies the same way He loves and forgives members of traditional families. Stepfamilies, after all, are real families.

#### Statement of Limitations

This Theses Project, “A Church Based Curriculum Providing Marriage and Family Education for Stepfamilies and Ministers,” though wide-ranging in its application will be limited in several ways. First, the current study on stepfamilies will include data from the perspective of the American adult; that is, participants that are eighteen years or older. Second, distinctions such as race, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and cultural differences will not be factors in this study. What is more, a person’s denomination or religious self-identity, though included in the survey, will not determine the final content of the curriculum. However, the curriculum will as its biblical foundation be Evangelical in its approach.

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9. Judy A. Hall, *When Elephants Fight: A Guide to Effective Stepparenting* (Mustang, OK: Tate Publishing & Enterprises, 2006), 39.

Third, the study will not distinguish between the participant's number of remarriages, nor will it account for those who consider themselves married without official status. Finally, this Theses Project will not reflect the dynamic that adoption or foster care brings to the stepfamily milieu. Moreover, stepfamilies that include only one parent in the home with stepchildren present will not be a factor in the content of the primary curriculum. Limitations aside, the church-based stepfamily curriculum will address the unique challenges inherent to any stepfamily setting as it relates to life in and around the church.

### Theoretical Basis

The conceptual basis for developing a church-based curriculum for the education of stepfamilies and ministers is supported by existing ministry best practices, together with theological, biblical, and historical data. Stepfamily experts, Ron L. Deal and David H. Olson, postulate that remarried couples face a 25% higher chance of divorce than do first marriages. Add children to the family equation from either spouse, and the couple (stepcouple) faces a 50% higher rate of divorce.<sup>10</sup> The couple's marriage is central to the family, and a healthy and vital marriage is critical to the success of a stepfamily.

The authors identify five types of married couples: vitalized, harmonious, conventional, conflicted, and devitalized.<sup>11</sup> In describing the differences between each marriage model, one must look at the level of their relational strengths, such as communication, conflict resolution, spirituality, and role sharing to name a few.<sup>12</sup> These traits are vital to any relationship and are particularly challenging for stepcouples who struggle to navigate through the additional complexities inherent to a stepfamily. Perhaps the most profound challenge a stepcouple faces in

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10. Ron L. Deal and David H. Olson, *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage: Keys to Success in the Blended Family* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishing, 2015), 54.

11. Ibid., 53.

12. Deal and Olson, *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*, 55.

forming a new family is what Maggie Scarf calls “Insider/Outsider Positions.”<sup>13</sup> Scarf points out, “In this marital schema, there is no time for the couple to get to know one another slowly, in their exclusive world, for the children and the family culture are already in place and demand the biological parent’s attention.”<sup>14</sup>

The marriage then is where any therapeutic family curriculum must begin. After all, a marriage of any kind brings with it not only the strength qualities of each partner but also the person’s weaknesses, losses, and brokenness. Perhaps this is what Gary Thomas was alluding to when the author contends, “A wedding calls us to our highest and best, in fact, to almost impossible ideals.”<sup>15</sup> A stepcouple must participate in their own healing process even as they become one. Moe and Paige Becnel maintain that everyone has personal baggage and they bring that baggage into the newly formed marriage and stepfamily. “Divorce,” the couple says, “. . . is never an escape from baggage; it actually creates more baggage.”<sup>16</sup>

Every human being in this fallen world deals with family of origin issues, world view challenges, existential confusion, guilt, and many other dysfunctional qualities.<sup>17</sup> In acknowledging this truth, new spouses can employ strategies based on a theology of grace, mercy, restoration, and reconciliation. A proper understanding of one’s sin nature, forgiveness, and the complexities associated with forming a stepfamily empowers a couple to create a safe, functioning, and spiritually healthy family system. The local church should be equipped at every level to assist a newly formed stepfamily to flourish even amid such relational difficulty.

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13. Maggie Scarf, *The Remarriage Blueprint: How Remarried Couples and Their Families Succeed or Fail* (New York: Scribner, 2013), 60.

14. *Ibid.*, 61.

15. Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 2000), 16.

16. Becnal and Becnal, *God Breathes on Blended Families*, 30.

17. See Romans 3:23; Romans 7.

The local church with its various leaders should meet stepfamily challenges before a stepcouple marries, as well as after the stepfamily is formed, addressing the different milestones a family realizes as the children grow. Unfortunately, the local church has largely been maladroit if not unaccommodating when it comes to ministering to stepcouples and stepfamilies in their church. Thus, the couple and their new family face the disillusionment, disappointment, and deep frustration complex relationships can cause without the benefit of a loving faith family. If a stepfamily does attend a church regularly, they do so with a certain anonymity for fear of judgment, condemnation, and reprisal.

These “closet stepfamily members” who protect their family status by choosing not to divulge their remarriage and stepchildren to the congregation and leadership are sentenced to quietly suffer as their marriage and family face the daunting statistics of yet another broken home. Consequently, the local church with its unique God-given ability to minister to its own becomes increasingly irrelevant to perhaps more than half of their community.

Misunderstanding or agnosticism surrounding the plight or distorted perceptions of the American stepfamily negatively affects the stepfamily’s ability to enter corporate worship liturgically, serve in various ministries and leadership roles, or join in authentic community and fellowship.<sup>18</sup> What is more, the church itself in failing to embrace the stepfamily and its different members cannot properly engage in meaningful outreach ministry nor realize its full potential for disciple making.

Arguably, the Gospel is inclusive and concrete for those who find themselves marginalized and disenfranchised for whatever reason. In speaking to the Gospel as it relates to stepfamilies, Lauren L. Townsend points out that “It embodies living relief from the bondage of ideologies, theologies, and social systems that diminish dispossessed persons’ humanity. It

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18. See, Hebrews 10:24-25.



restores hurting, marginalized people to wholeness and full participation in the body of Christ.”<sup>19</sup> The full involvement in the body of Christ for the marginalized stepfamily necessarily speaks to full acceptance of its members. Pastors and others in the local church are positioned to offer stepfamilies hope and the freedom to realize spiritual prosperity.

Any effective church-based curriculum geared toward ministering to stepfamilies while equipping church leadership to facilitate the same must include a more comprehensive look at the biblical record concerning marriage, remarriage, and the stepfamily. Propagating a very narrow view on divorce and remarriage no matter how biblical it seems can potentially negate the character of God and His redemptive power.

Though the curriculum will not focus merely on a doctrine of divorce and remarriage in the church a broader approach to a so-called biblical excuse for divorce or “biblical divorce” is appropriate. This approach will necessarily challenge traditional uses of both Jesus’ and Paul’s statements on divorce; that is, the adultery and abandonment reasons for the termination of marriage.<sup>20</sup> For instance, a narrow view on these verses prejudices the wife who ends a marriage due to physical, emotional, or even sexual abuse in the confines of marriage. A toxic marriage that includes egregious abuse does not honor the institution of marriage nor does it glorify God. Though the Bible does show that God hates divorce, it also reports that God hates the violence of men, which effectively equates to abandoning a wife.<sup>21</sup>

Abuse is but one contributing factor to divorce and remarriage in the church that brings tremendous loss and shame into a new marriage. When those who have remarried, and form a stepfamily encounter judgment or worse, be it passive or explicit, the wounding and loss

19. Loren Townsend, *Introduction to Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 26–27.

20. See Matthew 5:32; 1 Corinthians 7:15.

21. “I hate divorce,” says the Lord God of Israel, “and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,” says the Lord Almighty. Malachi 2:16.

suffocating the family increase exponentially. The Becnals rightly state that when a local church adopts this posture of judgment and condemnation, “. . . It discounts God’s mercy and grace, which have been freely given to all.”<sup>22</sup>

This prevailing judgmental attitude in today’s church implies that divorce and remarried attendees are second class Christians not worthy of the life abundant Jesus came to give those who would believe.<sup>23</sup> Second class status in the local church causes stepparents to live with low levels of hope and low expectations for their family’s future and the future of their children. Low levels of hopefulness relegate a stepfamily to a meager spiritual existence and eventually a shipwrecked faith. Remarkably, the biblical and historical records are replete with accounts of “non-traditional” families that are used mightily by God.

God’s first divine institution was the marriage between one man and one woman.<sup>24</sup> The marriage between a man and a woman was designed to remain intact until one of the spouses dies. The church, a gathering of local believers, should be able to support the divine institution of marriage. Arguably, the church should be able and willing to support a second or third marriage so that the cycle of divorce and remarriage is repented of and stopped. God’s church belongs to God’s mission, and that mission in making disciples extends to all members of God’s family regardless of past sins.

Space does not allow for an exhaustive discussion of the various family types recorded in the Bible; however, one need not explore the Scriptures long before they find family structures that do not comply with God’s original design for marriage. Abraham, the father of all nations, fathered at least two sons; Isaac and Ishmael, who were half-brothers. A generation later Jacob,

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22. Becnal and Becnal, *God Breathes on Blended Families*, 4.

23. See John 10:10.

24. See Genesis 2:24.

later to be called Israel and one of the patriarchs of God's people, had many sons from different women.<sup>25</sup> The biblical accounts of patriarchal dysfunction are not to say that God condones familial relationships formed outside of His will, but it does demonstrate that God can and will use people in profound ways once these families are redeemed.

God chose Joseph who was clearly not the biological father of the Messiah to raise Jesus, the son of God. Joseph was faithful to God's calling. Men and women who are redeemed and remarry must offer their new marriage and resulting stepfamily to God through repentance and faithfully dedicate their family to kingdom service. Moe and Paige Becnel provide the following definition of repentance, "Such sorrow for past life as produces a new life."<sup>26</sup> That said, a couple that repents from a divorce or the death of a previous marriage realized because of the sins of pride, selfishness, sexual immorality, and unforgiveness can be and will be forgiven. God cherishes and uses forgiven people and so should His church.

Ancient history notwithstanding, America was founded by stepfamilies. George Washington was a stepfather, as was Paul Revere and James Madison. Ben Franklin was born into a second marriage and started his printing business with his half-brother James.<sup>27</sup> Lisa Wilson points out that "Unlike today, death, not divorce, defined early American stepfamilies."<sup>28</sup> In fact, the word "step," derived from an Old English word, "*Steop*," means bereavement. A *steopbear* or stepchild was a bereaved child, and the stepparent was a parent of a child in mourning.<sup>29</sup>

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25. See Genesis 16:15; 30:1-24.

26. Becnal and Becnal, *God Breathes on Blended Families*, 6.

27. Lisa Wilson, *A History of Stepfamilies in Early America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 1.

28. Wilson, *A History of Stepfamilies in Early America*, 2.

29. Wilson, *A History of Stepfamilies in Early America*, 2.

Though most stepfamilies today are formed due to divorce rather than death there is still an element of bereavement associated with the passing of marriage. The adult will need to grieve the loss of the marital relationship they shared with the now ex-spouse, while the children must cope with limited access to at least one of their biological parents. Though the reasons for stepfamily formation has shifted there remains, for the members of the new family, unresolved loss and tremendous pain. The local church must stand in the gap for these families that constitute up to half of any given assembly. A church-based curriculum that educates both the family and church leadership is long overdue.

#### Statement of Methodology

Education is often the key to solving many of the problems people face in their daily life. However, education isolated from the community is simply the acquisition of knowledge with little to no opportunity to apply what is learned. In other words, passively learning about strategies to form and exist in a functional family unit created after the loss of a spouse because of death or divorce ignores the personal nature of the stepfamily. Hearing the voices of stepfamily members is needed in a safe, nonjudgmental setting. That setting should be the family's local church because the local church should be central to the life of the stepfamily. A church-based curriculum flexible enough to engage a local church's culture directed toward the complexness of the American stepfamily offers the various members a chance to heal and grow emotionally and spiritually.

The core curriculum will be founded on data gleaned from a survey that explores parenting and co-parenting issues in and around the stepfamily. Moreover, the study will capture the perceptions of what makes a stepfamily work or not work. Finally, the survey will shed light on what stepfamilies experience in the local church and their understanding of the biblical record as it relates to divorce, remarriage, and the family unit. Data from the survey will assist in

building individual modules that can be either emphasized or deemphasized depending on the specific needs of a congregation. Part of the original research and resultant curriculum will also utilize an instrument known as a participatory learning activity (PLA).

The PLA is a very specialized focus group tool that allows non-homogenous groups to build a consensus on ranking priorities associated with an issue. The stepfamily PLA research question for this study is, “What are the top five factors or challenges for stepfamilies in relation to church life?” Several groups will brainstorm together as teams to create a list of any factors the participants deem valuable as it relates to the question. Subsequently, each member of a team will then have an opportunity to vote on each item in the list giving each item a vote of zero to three with a total of ten votes per person. Once the votes are totaled, a separate matrix is used to record and rank the top five factors against one another.

Once the matrix contains the five factors, the group participants will discuss which factors are more important or more prevalent in comparison to the other factors on the matrix. When the comparisons are made, the five factors will again be ranked in the order of importance from one to five. Though all factors are important, identifying the number one factor allows the curriculum to be modified to emphasize a particular group’s main issue or concern, while giving less emphasis to other areas of less interest. Once each group has identified a top factor as it relates to the PLA question the researcher and or facilitator will lead an open discussion. Apart from the actual research instruments used for this Thesis Project, the project will include chapters on the foundation for and the actual applied research surrounding the stepfamily and today’s local church as well as the results of the applied research conducted for this study and other existing studies.

Chapter two will introduce the reader to an original foundation of the research subject and reveal the issues that necessitate the development of a church-based curriculum for the

stepfamily and those who would minister to them. Cultural changes inside and outside of the church call Christians to discern today's relevant issues. Though the Bible certainly informs the student of Scripture that God does not change, God is also a God of change. George Barna in addressing the church's growing irrelevance in today's culture asserts that God wants His people, "... To be wise about what's happening here and now."<sup>30</sup> Since more than 50 percent of a local congregation is likely to be connected to a stepfamily or remarriage scenario, Christians must discern how best to minister to the unique and growing needs of this population.

The problem in reaching those in stepfamilies is multifaceted. On the one hand, the stepfamily deals with the same issues and challenges that all families face on a daily and life stage basis. However, the stigma of remarriage in the church and the complicated issues of loss, grief, and resentment that come together under a new roof leave these precious Christians floundering in their faith. Members of all types of families are primarily looking for love and security.

When the church ignores or is inept at ministering to the stepfamily's struggles, then the church becomes less relevant and even toxic to the cause of love. Stepfamilies will increasingly become unchurched and or de-churched. Barna rightly points out:

Most churchless people aren't looking for a church. They're seeking an encounter with God. And even if they're not seeking Him directly, the vast majority are seeking to experience the essence of who He is: love. According to the apostle John, God is love (1 John 4:8) and, what's more, those who follow Christ should be known for their love (see John 13:15).<sup>31</sup>

Ministering to families in the church and those the church is trying to reach outside of Sunday service is a labor of love. Since stepfamilies are authentic families, then access to Jesus and His love should never be denied by members of the body of Christ. The foundational issues that

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30. Barna Group, *Churchless: Understanding Today's unchurched and How to Connect with Them : Based on Surveys by Barna Group* (n.p.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2014), 189.

31. Barna Group, *Churchless*, 183.

require research about the stepfamily and the local church discussed in chapter two lay the groundwork for developing the research instruments and literature investigation discussed in chapter three.

Chapter Three will introduce the reader to the original applied research conducted as part of this Thesis Project. Additionally, this chapter will explain the who and the why in the research conducted and include other research and work carried out in this field of study. Though statistics exist on various aspects of the stepfamily much of the data is antiquated or incomplete. Even if superior data existed statistically, there is little if any data on the life of the stepfamily as it relates to their encounters with the local church.

The questions furnished in this project's survey cover several broad categories. Categories include demographic information, family structure, parenting issues, stepparenting issues, biblical understanding of the family, and church experience as a stepfamily. The data collected will be used to identify parenting and stepparenting challenges along with relational trials the stepcouple encounters. Moreover, the findings from the biblical and church questions as well as the participatory learning activity will help guide the development of a church-based curriculum that will instruct stepfamily members, congregants, and church leaders.

Chapter four will examine the results of the research conducted concerning stepfamilies and life in the local church and compare the findings with experts in the fields of marriage and family, stepfamily life and therapy, and the various theological positions that are concerned with divorce and remarriage. Moreover, chapter four will begin to outline specific modules for a church-based curriculum built on research findings and the collected wisdom available through secular and Christian stepfamily resources.

General approaches to marriage and family life were consulted where appropriate in the development of the curriculum. Since God designed marriage and created man and woman,

biblical truth applies to all marriages once redeemed. There is no place for demoting any Christian to second-class status in the church or Christianity in general. God judges impartially, for example, the apostle Paul puts circumcision in its proper place. Paul taught that there was no superior status for those physically circumcised versus those who were physically uncircumcised.<sup>32</sup>

Those who have repented are free. Those Christians in the church who have not repented are to be lovingly taught about God's mercy and grace and the gift of repentance. Mercy triumphs over judgment, so the research is designed not only to identify common challenges inherent to a stepfamily but also to expose error and misconceptions in the family and the church as it relates to remarriage, forgiveness, and healthy family life.<sup>33</sup> To many families born of a second or third marriage who profess to know Christ as their Lord and Savior have either left the church or no longer serve the church to the detriment of their faith and the life of the local church.

Chapter five will act as the conclusion to this Thesis Project. The final chapter covers all the main points, assertions, findings, and further questions. In addition to providing a solution for the stepfamilies in a local church context, there is a discussion about the opportunities for further development in this arena. It seems that every time one question or challenge related to stepfamily life is solved another difficult situation shows itself.

The combinations of family dynamic and structure are as varied as the personalities that make up a family system. Arguably, there are enough ministry opportunities for reaching stepfamilies and their individual members to last for decades. The objective of this research on

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32. See, Romans 2:1-28.

33. See, James 2:13.



stepfamilies and the studies that follow is to arrest the cycle of divorce and remarriage in the church while bringing glory to God.

## Review of Literature

### **Books**

Ron Deal's, *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family*, is perhaps one of the most recognized guides on the challenges modern stepfamilies face today. Written from the perspective of a Christian counselor, Deal offers seven logical and executable steps that lead the reader through perceptive areas of a potential downfall for the new or existing stepfamily. The author's seven steps begin with God's redemptive character, roles of each family member, common pitfalls, and the all-important healthy marriage of the couple. Deal acknowledges that "Not all stepfamilies have a difficult journey, but most will experience unexpected challenges."<sup>34</sup> The core issue for stepfamilies and its members is identity.

One of the most difficult challenges confronting stepparents are the problems surrounding the new spouse's children and the necessary task of appropriate discipline. *Positive Discipline for Blended Families: Nurturing Harmony, Respect, and Unity in Your New Stepfamily*, written by Jane Nelsen, Cheryl Erwin, and H Stephen Glenn, though written in 1997, is one of the most comprehensive tomes about discipline as it relates to another's child. *Positive Discipline* is an instructive work for stepparents that discusses communication barriers, commitment and teamwork, new traditions, and mutual respect and dignity for each member.

Grace Gabe and Jean Lipman-Blumen address an area that many others in the field of marriage and family systems have only given cursory treatment. *Making Adult Stepfamilies work: Strategies for the Whole Family When a Parent Marries Later in Life* operates under the

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34. Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 21.

premise that many believe a remarriage later in life avoids the conflicts and emotional dynamics associated with second or more marriages with school age children. The authors rightly point out, “Adult stepfamilies have been largely neglected, except by a small number of social and behavior scientists.”<sup>35</sup> This paucity of research being true, there is a need for a relatively comprehensive curriculum that is flexible enough to instruct diverse demographics under the stepfamily tent.

Rick Horne, author of *Get Outta My Face!: How to Reach Angry, Unmotivated Teens with Biblical Counsel*, is a unique book that specifically addresses the awkward and often turbulent adolescent years. Though adolescence is a recent construct as history goes, it is a challenge for all families, Christian, and non-Christian homes alike, as well as for traditional families or those in a stepfamily. The biblical approach to Horne’s work is particularly useful in a church-based curriculum.

The fourth edition of editor Froma Walsh’s *Normal Family Processes: Growing Diversity and Complexity*, explores family normality and the healthy functioning of families in a profusion of contexts. Walsh’s work is helpful on several fronts because the researcher can compare the stepfamily dynamic along different modern family phenomena such as LGBT families, traditional families, single parent homes, and many other variations of the family unit.

In understanding family diversity, one can compare the coping strategies employed by different situations that lead to building resilience rather than dysfunction. Walsh elucidates, “The very concept of family has been undergoing redefinition as profound social, economic, and political changes of recent decades have altered the landscape of family life.”<sup>36</sup> The church, as

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35. Grace Gabe and Jean Lipman-Blumen, *Making Adult Stepfamilies Work: Strategies for the Whole Family When a Parent Marries Later in Life* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), xi.

36. *Normal Family Processes: Growing Diversity and Complexity*, ed. Froma Walsh, 4th ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2012), 4.

the only beacon of immutability and truth, and the center of the community, must not be absent amidst this ever-changing landscape.

*Stepfamily Therapy: A 10 Step Clinical Approach*, by Scott Browning and Elise Artelt, stands in juxtaposition to the seven-step approach by Ron Deal. That is, Deal's work targets the stepfamily members directly, while clinicians and therapists are the targets of Browning and Artelt's work. The authors of *Stepfamily Therapy* offer a history of stepfamily formation followed by a discussion of why stepfamilies are particularly vulnerable. The work arises from the frustration of family therapists who have struggled with the complexities of stepfamily dysfunction. By and large, the author's approach is based on an intervention model that focuses on the different subsystems within the stepfamily system.<sup>37</sup>

Combining theology with traditional counseling practices, albeit nuanced for the pastoral context, *Pastoral Care with Stepfamilies: Mapping the Wilderness*, by Loren L. Townsend seems to be a singular work that approaches the stepfamily from a pastoral care perspective. Townsend rightly asserts, "There is no research or speculation on religious development in stepfamilies."<sup>38</sup> Not surprisingly, there has been little to no attempt in serious literature to investigate a theology of any kind that engrosses divorce, remarriage, and the subsequent formation of a stepfamily. This vacuum is one of the primary reasons stepfamilies remain largely invisible and inactive in today's church.

The second edition of *God Breathes on Blended Families: Twelve Fundamentals to Build Your Family*, written by Moe and Paige Becnel, offers twelve steps based on the biblical principles of redemption, restoration, mercy, and forgiveness. Though this second marriage couple due to separate divorces admits to many struggles over their journey, the lessons learned

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37. Scott Browning and Elise Artelt, *Stepfamily Therapy: A 10-step Clinical Approach* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2012), 7.

38. Townsend, *Introduction to Pastoral Counseling*, 11.

are captured in their story of healing and grace. The couple covers everything from familial roles, child discipline, the marriage, and extended family challenges. Additionally, the authors offer material from the child's point of view, and the important role prayer plays in the big picture. Unique and distinctively Christian the Becnells based this work on their continuing ministry to stepfamilies located at [blendingfamily.com](http://blendingfamily.com).

Marriages of all types rely on healthy communication grounded in love and respect. Emerson Eggerichs, *Cracking the Communication Code, Love for Her, Respect for Him: The Secret to Speaking Your Mate's Language*, applies across the spectrum of relationships. Whether a so-called traditional marriage or a newly formed marriage, formed from the ashes of loss and grief, couples must be able to communicate effectively. Eggerichs assumption is betrayed by the comment, "For men and women the biggest problem by far was a lack of communication."<sup>39</sup> Arguably, effective communication between the stepfather or stepmother and the corresponding spouse is a vital component in providing a stable and flourishing stepfamily life.

If healthy communication practices and disciplines are paramount to a thriving stepfamily existence, financial practices must rank close to the top of priorities for the stepcouple. *Money Advice for Your Successful Remarriage: Handling Delicate Financial Issues Intelligently and Lovingly*, by Patricia Schiff Estess, is a much-needed resource for the leaders of a modern-day stepfamily. The author's work certainly contains up to date strategies that work in all types of relationships, but the core of this book focuses on the proper communication practices in the realm of household and family finances. Estess focuses on "A more talk, less fight

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39. Emerson Eggerichs, *Cracking the Communication Code* (Nashville, TN: Integrity Publishers, 2007), 4.

communication plan,” that even includes a chapter on prenuptial agreements and their place in a newly formed family.<sup>40</sup>

Gary Thomas’ classic work, *Sacred Marriage: What if God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More than to Make Us Happy*, places marriage where it belongs, before God. Any marital or family training or therapy must grasp the loss both spouses and the children bring to the system. Though true in all relationships expectations must be grounded. Thomas identifies one of the roots of unmet expectations. The author contends, “Contempt is conceived with expectations. Respect is conceived with expressions of gratitude.”<sup>41</sup> If the remarriage is viewed regarding redemption and grace, then the only proper response is thanksgiving.

Maggie Scarf provides a new look at the structure of the stepfamily in her work, *The Remarriage Blueprint: How Remarried Couples and Their Families succeed or Fail*. Stepfamilies are simply different. Scarf contends, “. . . later marriages differ from first-time marriages in terms of their fundamental structure, their basic blueprint for living.”<sup>42</sup> Scarf covers familiar territory, that is, roles, discipline, marital functioning, but does so in the framework of an architectural model. One of the unique features of Scarf’s work is the intimate interviews of both successful and unsuccessful remarriages that are woven throughout the more technical portions of the book.

From the unique perspective of a family court judge and stepmother, Judy A. Hall provides a no non-sense look at the challenges facing, and remedies available, to stepfamilies. The judge’s work, *When Elephants Fight: A Guide to Effective Stepparenting*, focuses on the couples right thinking. This cognitive approach finds its foundation in a person’s attitude as it

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40. Patricia S. Estess, *Money Advice for Your Successful Remarriage: Handling Delicate Financial Issues with Love and Understanding*, rev. ed. (Cincinnati, OH: Betterway Books, 1996), 25.

41. Thomas, *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy*, 67.

42. Scarf, *The Remarriage Blueprint*, 53.

relates to expectations, communication, emotional needs and baggage, and healthy compromise. Even one's sense of humor comes into play in this rather comprehensive look into stepfamily life.

Because both conventional and evolving wisdom propagates that the healthy stepfamily begins and ends with the marriage (stepcouple) itself, stepcouples must understand the work that is required to flourish within the stepfamily paradigm. Susan Wisdom and Jennifer Green's *Stepcoupling: Creating and Sustaining a Strong Marriage in Today's Blended Family*, addresses the remarried couple's expectations, boundaries, tolerance levels, and communications skills. The authors rightly include ample discussion surrounding the children in a stepfamily as it relates to the couple's ability to grow in togetherness. However, Wisdom and Green point out that the couple must balance themselves first: "They undergo the upheaval of different housing, new employment, changed standards of living, new parental roles, new child roles, and additional household responsibilities together."<sup>43</sup>

Though any stepfamily curriculum will necessarily focus on existing stepfamily systems, for the training to be wholly sufficient, addressing pre-marital factors for stepcouples is helpful. *Saving your Second Marriage Before It Starts: Nine Questions to Ask Before, and After, You Remarry*, written by Les and Leslie Parrott, is a profound yet simple approach to self-counsel for any couple considering remarriage. Like many books on the topic of remarriage and blended family life, the Parrotts tackle the myths associated with creating a new family, along with the pitfalls associated with poor communication and family origin issues.

*A History of Stepfamilies in Early America*, by Lisa Wilson is an elucidating work that reveals the history of the stepfamily in America. Many newly formed or veteran stepfamilies do not realize they are not alone in their struggles, especially in the contemporary church of

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43. Susan Wisdom and Jennifer Green, *Stepcoupling: Creating and Sustaining a Strong Marriage in Today's blended Family* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002), 47.

America. Wilson opens her work with a rather provocative statement, “Stepfamilies founded our nation.”<sup>44</sup> Though most early stepfamilies were created out of need due to the death of one of the spouses, the loss felt by children and an estranged spouse after a divorce is unfathomed. Wilson’s work allows the stepfamily member and researcher alike to step back from their current understanding of stepfamily life and view the modern phenomenon from a wider angle.

George Barna, of Barna Group and his work, *Churchless: Understanding Today’s Unchurched and How to Connect with Them*, gives the reader insight into why so many Americans consider the church irrelevant and why the de-churched find the local church so toxic. As stepfamilies continue to feel marginalized in the church many have left the church or refused to enter biblical community for fear of reprisals. Barna’s work enables a church and its leadership to better understand the characteristics of those who have shunned the church for fear of being shunned by the church.

The Stepfamily in the local church is the essence of this Thesis Project. Bill Donahue, the author of *The Irresistible Community” An invitation to Life Together*, promulgates that the church of all places should be a place where everyone is heard, appreciated and ultimately loved. The church is, after all, a haven for the broken, marginalized, and even disenfranchised of the earth. These words tragically describe the American stepfamily in all too familiar terms. Donahue explains that all people (that includes those in stepfamilies) need the biblical community to heal and continue:

When your heart gets heavy and your life gets hard and your faith is fragile, do you consider throwing in the towel? You won’t be the first one to ponder the idea. That’s why we need community. On our own, the temptation to walk away from difficult decisions and challenging circumstances, or even our faith in Christ, is just too great.<sup>45</sup>

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44. Wilson, *A History of Stepfamilies in Early America*, 1.

45. Bill Donahue, *The Irresistible Community: An Invitation to Life Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2015), 159.

In this light, it is imperative the church once again stands in the gap for all peoples and leads people to the grace and love of Christ.

Pastors Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop speak of the church community as one that is diverse not just in ethnicity but cultural and circumstantial background. The author's work, *The Compelling Community: Where God's Power Makes a Church Attractive*, addresses the need for the church to be more inclusive in its approach to the community inside and outside of its brick and mortar structure. Dever and Dunlop speaking of church authority state the following:

In any relationship of authority, the antidote to fear is understanding. We fear authority that's used without regard for our needs. But when one in authority shows he understands and has considered our situation and needs, trust becomes attractive.<sup>46</sup>

In embracing stepfamilies and their members, the church becomes an authority in the life of that stepfamily and offers real hope for their future. Within that hope, the family grows in Christ.

### ***Journal Articles***

Jan M. Nichols, Maddy Phillips, Sarah W. Whitton, Kim Halford, and Matthew R. Sanders, authors of "Promoting Healthy Stepfamilies: Couples' Reasons for Seeking Help and Perceived Benefits from Intervention," shed light on the need for outside intervention for many stepfamilies.<sup>47</sup> The researchers contend that there is ample documentation of a stepfamily's reluctance to seek help of any kind. The parents in these stepfamilies desire to be better spouses, parents, and family team members in the face of confrontational relationships between stepparents and stepchildren and deteriorating relationships between the biological members.

Kathleen M. McInnis, author of, "Bibliotherapy: Adjunct to Traditional Counseling with Children of Stepfamilies." From the journal, *Child Welfare* provides insight on how the Bible

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46. Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop, *The Compelling Community: Where God's power Makes a Church Attractive*, 9Marks books (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 92.

47. Jan M. Nichols et al., "Promoting Healthy Stepfamilies: Couples' Reasons for Seeking Help and Perceived Benefits from Intervention.," *Family Matters*, no. 77 (Winter 2007).



can be used to assist children in adjusting to stepfamily life.<sup>48</sup> Though dated (1982) the article opens the possibility of using various modalities to assist children in expressing their emotions and feelings as they struggle with new roles in the stepfamily. Bibliotherapy in some form, especially using stories of family conflict in the Bible, can alleviate the pressure of a biological or stepparent when trying to communicate with a child about their feelings openly.

James Furrow and Gail Palmer collaborators on the study, “EFFT and Blended Families: Building Bonds from the Inside Out,” shows how the underpinning of emotionally focused family therapy can aid in an understanding of each stepfamily member’s individual place along a complicated journey as the family unit is reformed. A particularly interesting feature of this article is the discussion on attachment theory. Arguably, remarried parents with children who are educated on the various characteristics associated with attachment theory will be better equipped to recognize a child’s responses to anxiety.

A parent, whether biological or step, can approach conflict in a less personal way if they understand the potential reasons behind such behavior. The authors assert the following:

Many of the challenges faced in a stepfamily’s development can be understood as a response to attachment insecurity. Both parents and children respond to attachment insecurity in predictable ways including anxious and/or avoidant behaviors, which are informed by a persistent fear of or anticipated loss of an attachment figure.<sup>49</sup>

Dealing with loss is a key component to any curriculum for stepfamilies since each member has suffered loss and faces the real possibility of future loss as the new family forms.

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48. Kathleen M. McInnis, “Bibliotherapy: Adjunct to Traditional Counseling with Children of Stepfamilies,” *Child Welfare* 61, no. 3 (March 1982), Abstract retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=24666204&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

49. James Furrow and Gail Palmer, “EFFT and Blended Families: Building Bonds from the Inside Out,” *Journal of Systemic Therapies* 26, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 46, accessed October 31, 2016, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

### *Theses*

Ronald Lee Beck, author of, “Effective Blended Family Ministry in the 21st Century Church,” provides a lengthy overview of many stepfamily issues.<sup>50</sup> Common concerns such as finances, marital stress, and child discipline are included in this thesis project. The article is helpful in that it provides information on the affect stepfamily formation has on birth order issues and the challenges facing the area of co-parenting with the estranged spouse. The bibliography also provides some additional resources for future study.

William J. Perry, “Blended Families in Conflict: Essentials a Pastor Must Know,” focuses on the edification of clergy. Written from the perspective of a youth pastor, the article covers roles within a stepfamily, co-parenting challenges, birth order, and offers statistical data gleaned from several credible sources. The research reveals, in part, a major premise of this current Thesis Project, that forty percent of stepparents find it difficult to communicate their struggles to their pastor.<sup>51</sup>

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50. Ronald L. Beck, “Effective Blended Family Ministry in the 21st Century Church,” *Thesis Project: Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary* (December 2009), accessed October 31, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/do/search/?q=The%20church%20and%20the%20stepfamily&start=0&context=234296>.

51. William J. Perry, “Blended Families in Conflict: Essentials a Pastor Should Know,” *Thesis Project: Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary* (October 2013), accessed October 29, 2016, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

### ***Bible Passages***

Genesis 2:24 (cf. Matt 19:5): The divine institution of Marriage has not changed and is formed when a husband and women leave their mother and father and cleave to one another for life. Though this institution of marriage is challenged at every front in modern culture, marriage is still defined this way by God; that is, the holy union between one man and one woman, until death do they part.

Genesis 3:15-16: This verse defines the reason for such brokenness in every sphere of the marital relationship. God decrees a curse on both man and woman due to their rebellion in the Garden of Eden, saying to Adam that there will exist enmity between man and woman. To Eve, God said that all the desires of women would be contrary to man's desire, but man would rule over the woman.

Genesis 21: 8-11: This passage depicts the tension created when Abraham begins a cycle of familial favoritism when the patriarch rejects the first-born Ishmael of Hagar for biological son Isaac, born of his wife, Sarah. The Bible reads, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac (v. 10)."

Genesis 37:8: The passage that reads, "His brothers said to him, 'Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?'" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words," documents the ongoing curse of favoritism. Joseph's half-brothers hated the patriarch due to internal family strife and jealousy.

1 Samuel 1: 1-16: This passage tells the story of the faithful stepmother, Hannah. In the context of this story, Hannah is ridiculed for not having children of her own. However, even in the face of such conflict and heartache, Hannah models a great example of a godly stepmother. Later God blesses Hannah with a son who would become one of the greatest prophets of the biblical record.

Malachi 2:16 (NIV): In the last book of the Old Covenant God reveals His heart about divorce. ““I hate divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel, “and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,” says the LORD Almighty,” is an intriguing verse that connects divorce with violence. If one simply takes the converse as true then one can arguably reason that a man who is violent toward his wife has in some way already divorced his wife.

Luke 1:35; 2:33: These two verses show that though Joseph did not become Jesus’ stepfather due to the divorce or death of a previous spouse of Mary, Joseph was not Jesus’ biological father. The Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and she conceived a son. Later, the faithful Jewish couple, Mary and Joseph, are biblically referred to as the Messiah’s parents, “And his father [Joseph] and his mother marveled at what was said about him.”

Matthew 5: 28, 32: Jesus preached about divorce during His Sermon on the Mount. Verse 28 decrees that anyone who looks at another in lust has committed adultery or has been unfaithful to their spouse. In the latter verse, Jesus says, “But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness . . . commits adultery. . .,” which creates a conundrum for those prone to a legalistic view of divorce and remarriage. When a person places these two verses side by side it appears that adultery does not require the physical act of intercourse but includes the sin of lust in a man’s heart which Jesus says is grounds for divorce if pursued by the spouse.

1 Corinthians 7:15: This verse reads, “But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.” Abandonment of the spouse for any reason does not necessarily mean the physical vacating of a physical structure, rather, a spouse can abandon the wedding vows through emotional, physical, and spiritual abuse, as indicated by the reference to living in peace.

Romans 14:19: This verse exhorts all believers to mutually build one another up rather than tear each other down. Since there is redemption available in every area of life, remarried couples should look forward constructively.

Philippians 3:4: Like Romans 14 above, Paul admonishes believers in another first-century church to not only look after their interests but the interests of others. In effect, this verse means that people should take care of themselves but focus on others as a priority.

Ephesians 6:1-4: This passage is highly instructive on proper family dynamics. Paul says that while children should obey parents and other appropriate authority figures, fathers should take care not to exasperate their children and by extension, stepchildren.

1 Timothy 3:4: Paul, in writing to his young protégé, instructs that men are called to run their households in a godly manner while commanding respect from their children.

1 Timothy 5:4: Paul gives further instruction to the young church in exhorting Christians to take care of their parents in their old age.

1 Timothy 5:8: Again, the head of household, or husband is required to provide for his family or he is no better than an unbeliever. Whether the parent is a biological father or a new stepfather, they are biblically required to provide for all members of their household.

## Chapter 2 – Foundations

Man, cannot and therefore does not exist in a vacuum. That is, mankind by its very nature is relational and flourishes only in the context of a relationship. However, Scripture reveals the devastating event that deleteriously altered man's ability to relate to his world, namely, the Fall of Man.<sup>52</sup> The advent of the Fall profoundly affected man's relationships with God, other human beings, one's self, and creation. Though each of these four bonds is broken in distinct ways, it is man's broken relationship with God that does violence to the others. The stepfamily thesis project in view considers the primary human relationship in the context of family life in the home and family life in the church.

The primary human relationship targeted in the Fall was God's divinely instituted covenant of marriage. In perfect relationship, the triune God of the Bible created man and fittingly declared that it was not good that man be alone.<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, God created Eve, the first woman and the first wife of the first man, Adam. God's Creation narrative then turns to the ophidian temptation that would nefariously insert enmity between God and man, and man and woman.<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, it is this relational brokenness that would require an eternal solution, reconciling God and man, and in turn man's harmonious existence with others.

Human analogies and metaphorical language are woefully inadequate in explaining the mystery of the Trinity. However, God's concept of relational accord is demonstrated in two human relationships. The doctrine of tri-unity reveals the God of the Bible as three distinct but coequal persons who are one God. Disparately, marriage consists of two distinct people coming together as one entity or flesh, while the body of Christ consists of many distinct people or parts

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52. See Genesis 3:1-24.

53. See Genesis 2:18.

54. See Genesis 3:1-6.

coming together as one body.<sup>55</sup> In this light, the realities of both the domestic family and the church family inevitably come together as an integral part of God's great redemptive plan. Correspondingly, as broken people come together out of broken relationships opportunities for redemptory ministry abound.

### Ministry Setting

As an outreach pastor, ministry in the arena of pastoral care persisted both inside and beyond the walls of the physical church building. Much of pastoral care ministry is not individual in nature but involves a myriad of challenging relational issues. Marital trouble, fatherless homes, motherhood concerns, and parenting idiosyncrasy were the most common areas of significant ministry. The most complex ministry by far involved relational issues stemming from divorce, remarriage, and the combining of two domestic families while navigating the various sensitivities of the local church.

The world of the stepfamily is founded on personal loss. Loss always involves pain and pain rarely exists in purdah. The stepfamilies that long for healing and the life abundant promised in Scripture assay wholeness in the context of church life. However, real or perceived condemnation emanating from the church and the body of Christ relegates many of these newly formed families to a religion of secrecy and anonymity. Therefore, many of God's children do not receive the level of care and resultant freedom associated with the Christocentric life.

Families, of course, begin with a marriage whether that marriage is legally binding through state mechanisms or one related to common law. Regardless of how the union of a man and a woman originates, when this marital relationship forms in the context of a second marriage for one or both partners, social dispossession and spiritual deprivation is not the coveted result.

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55. See Genesis 2:24 and 1 Corinthians 12:12 respectively.

Authors Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher aptly describe the prevailing zeitgeist of modern-day marriage, asserting:

Americans think about marriage as an intimate, deeply personal relationship. And of course, it is. But marriage, unlike other sorts of personal relationships, has an inherently public side. Marriage is what lovers do when they want to bring their love out of the merely private, internal realm of emotion and make it a social fact, something visible to and acknowledged by everybody from parents to bank clerks.<sup>56</sup>

Unfortunately, this desire for recognition and universal acceptance for stepcouples is illusive at best and unobtainable at worst. Rather than a celebration of love and togetherness, stepfamilies live lives in obscurity that are often very guarded. This undesirable reality of the stepfamily then becomes a liability for the local church rather than a vibrant example of God's redemption and grace.

As a stepfather to two daughters and a half-brother of two much younger brothers arising from the remarriage of this author's father, this author has felt the sting of judgment and less than loving scrutiny by members of a local church and its leadership. As a pastor who is also a stepfather, this author has also witnessed a myriad of faulty hermeneutics and demeaning application of the various scriptural references involving family life and church service.

So, rather than the church being a safe place for stepfamilies to heal and eventually prosper for the sake of Christ and God's glory, the church, as an institution, has fostered legalism, "judgementalism," and hypocrisy. In turn, the local church, perhaps unwittingly, has nonetheless contributed to the cycle of divorce and remarriage. This trend in which the church has unintentionally but increasingly become part of the problem rather than salt and light as it relates to contemporary family life has made it necessary to develop research and a subsequent curriculum for stepfamilies. This thesis project desires in part that Christ's church is equipped to better intervene and curtail the phenomenon of Christian divorce and remarriage.

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<sup>56</sup> Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better off Financially* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000), 18.



### Origins of a Stepfamily Study

The word “minister” can simply be defined as “a servant.” Whether ordained, employed by a church, or working in the laity, a minister’s chief task is to attend to those who need to be cared for regardless of their personal status. All people in this fallen world will face various trials and temptations which requires wisdom.<sup>57</sup> One of the greatest sources of wisdom from God resides with God’s people. As families struggle with day to day life the church is positioned to be a haven where God’s word is given and explained, fellowship with other believers is celebrated, prayer is attended to and the Gospel is lived out in community.

Stepfamilies carry with them a vast array of complexities stemming from past hurts, unresolved guilt, and confusion about what the future holds. Of all the institutions on earth, God’s faith family should be an institution of hope, mercy, and grace. The church should be a place in which God’s people can grow in Christlikeness, connect with other believers, and advance and serve His kingdom. Serving, after all, is what Christians do.

Gary Chapman contends, “Individuals have an internal desire to serve and an emotional sense of satisfaction with a job done for others. In a highly functional family, there develops the sense that service to others is one of life’s highest callings.”<sup>58</sup> Hence, the role of the Church is to provide opportunities for God given service and to equip fellow saints for good works so they can realize a high functioning life for God.

Stepfamilies have the same calling as every family, to serve and grow in Christ as they experience a life of fulfillment. However, stepfamilies hide their family dysfunction from the local church for fear of reprisal. This self-inflicted namelessness and facelessness prevent these stepfamilies from realizing the victorious life Christ so desires for them. In turn, these fragile

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57. See James 1:2,5.

58. Gary Chapman, *Five Signs of a Functional Family* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 1997), 25.

marriages suffer and often end silently, far removed from the tangible presence of Christ in His church. Regrettably, this tragic fate of newly formed families is preventable but mostly ignored.

Complexities aside, the American stepfamily is indeed an authentic family. That said, good stepcouples and their resulting stepfamilies should be founded and guided by an equivalent sapience, on which, all marriages and families thrive. Congruently, healthy and supported unions often yield healthier approaches to parenting. Households that possess healthy marriages and flourishing children can in part produce fulfilled families. However, it is only in the context of fellowship within the body of Christ that any family realizes wholeness. But success begins with the spousal relationship; the marriage, after all, is the heart of all family life.

### A Heart for Marriage

Marriage in a fallen and broken world defined as two sinners coming together in the name of love to live under one roof to ultimately raise additional sinners sets the stage. The fact that all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God necessitates that Christians must understand what marriage is according to the Bible.<sup>59</sup> In short, marriage is more about commitment than love, requiring a large amount of trust and grace. Trust in one another, yes, but a trust in God that one's marriage will persistently and progressively lead them toward Christlikeness.

Timothy Keller asserts that “The merged life of marriage brings you into the closest, most inescapable contact with another person possible. And that means not only that you see each other close up, but that you are forced to deal with the flaws and sins of one another.”<sup>60</sup>

Assuming Keller is correct, it makes sense that new couples blinded by romantic delusion while

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59. See Romans 3:23.

60. Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2011), 151.

dating and during the early stages of marriage will become disheartened about their spouse and the relationship as a whole when their expectations are not met by the other. Henry Cloud and John Townsend point out:

All of us will fall short of the demands of life. This is a difficult concept for some people to understand. Most people get married totally unaware of their spouse's shortcomings. In fact, part of "falling in love" is idealizing and imperfect person, not even seeing where he or she falls short of that ideal. But in every relationship, reality eventually surfaces.<sup>61</sup>

Understanding that true marital love demands an acceptance of their spouse for who they really are, shortcomings included, allows the couple to commit to the other's well-being and growth for a life time. Thus, an abiding commitment to marriage constrains a heart for mutual submission and relational work.

### ***Marital Submission***

The very word "submission" is the cause of complex reactions stemming from husbands who use it to intimidate and control their wives to others who have resigned to a life of passivity and or oppression. Tragically this concept of mutual submission is misunderstood by many in the American church leading to a misappropriation in more legalistic assemblies and Christian households. Marital submission is about a spouse's mutual commitment to the other arising from a deepening sense of humility and growing life of grace.

John MacArthur captures the essence of the submissive spirit writing, "Scripture frequently calls Christians to be humble and submissive people. . . The Spirit-filled life is not a fight for the top; it's a fight for the bottom."<sup>62</sup> The author continues by asserting that it is submission that is central to being a spirit filled person, demonstrating the Spirit's work in their

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61. Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries in Marriage: Understanding the Choices That Make or Break Loving Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 176.

62. John MacArthur Jr., *The Fulfilled Family*, Moody press ed., John MacArthur's Bible studies (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 9.

heart.<sup>63</sup> Submission is the natural response to a heart that is growing in grace and humility, cornerstones of Christlikeness. In other words, walk in the spirit.<sup>64</sup> If the Christian wife and the Christian husband are first submitting to the Holy Spirit, then the Spirit will control and guide every facet of their lives, most importantly, their marriage.

When a Christian earnestly seeks God and the filling of His Spirit as a priority in their lives and the life of their marriage, then every relationship flows from that relationship with the creator and divine author of marriage. Francis Chan contends, “When two people are right with Him, they will be right with each other. . . . most marriage problems are not really marriage problems. They are God problems.”<sup>65</sup> For any marriage to work, not to mention, flourish, God must be at the center of the couple’s lives and in turn, central to the marriage relationship. This dynamic fosters a humility and a submission to God’s will in the life of the holy union.

The bottom line for marital submission is found in Ephesians five.<sup>66</sup> Men have been called by God to lead their marriages and family with humility and to serve their brides sacrificially, while women are called to follow their husbands, encouraging him as they pursue Jesus in their Christian walk. As both move closer to Christ in obedience to His will the couple’s relationship will be strengthened as they move closer to one another. In this light, contributor George W. Knight points out, “The motivation for submission to one another is to [have] reverence for Christ.”<sup>67</sup>

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63. MacArthur, *The Fulfilled Family*, 9.

64. See Galatians 5:25.

65. Francis Chan and Lisa Chan, *You and Me Forever: Marriage in Light of Eternity* (San Francisco, CA: Claire Love Publishing, 2014), 20.

66. See vv. 21-33.

67. George W. Knight, “Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church: Ephesians 5:21-33 and Colossians 3:18-19,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 167.

Correctly and biblically understood, submission is not something that is done to another but is something one decides to do to one's self. Knight explains succinctly that mutual submission is a, "Submission in the sense of voluntary yielding in love."<sup>68</sup> Voluntary yielding is not dissimilar to the Apostle Paul's admonition to Christians to have the mind of Christ, describing this posture as esteeming others as better than themselves and putting the interests of others first, over and above the self-life.<sup>69</sup> Sacrificial submission in any relationship including marriage stands in stark contrast to today's zeitgeist.

Marital submission is a spiritual endeavor and requires the spirit filled life available only to Christ followers. However, merely understanding this biblical truth can be a rather nebulous concept to many married couples who face very real challenges in their context. Emerson Eggerichs points to Ephesians five making a connection between the love for a woman and respect for the man as a vital part of a thriving marriage. Eggerichs takes the concept of marital submission further by asserting that "A husband is even called to love a disrespectful wife, and a wife is called to respect an unloving husband."<sup>70</sup> Unconditional love such as this goes beyond understanding and wishful thinking; it requires mutual effort.

### ***Marital Work***

Most couples in the West who choose to make their love public by entering the institution of marriage do so idolizing romance and adventure. Arguably, the phrase, "marriage is work," is one that is disheartening to those engaged or who are newlyweds. However, the truth is that marriage is as much about commitment as it is about love, in whatever way either spouse defines love. That is, responsibility, accountability, humility, and mercy are not typically words used

68. Knight, "Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church, 166.

69. See Philippians 2:3-4.

70. Emerson Eggerichs, *Love and Respect: The Love She Most Desires, the Respect He Desperately Needs* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 16.

during a marriage proposal. Even so, these words or concepts among others are critical to a healthy marital relationship, each requiring work from both husband and wife.

When two profoundly broken people and all people, in similar and divergent ways, are deeply broken, come together in holy matrimony it is only a matter of time before personal issues arise, conflict results, and maladaptive strategies are employed. In this cyclical scenario, love now seems to be a tenuous concept, supplanted by bewilderment. In turn, the required work of marital commitment shows itself as a necessity for growth. Humility is crucial at this point as Cloud and Townsend remark, “If we can see that the problem is our problem and that we are responsible for it, then we are in the driver’s seat of change. For the first time, we are empowered.”<sup>71</sup>

Commitment to and in a marriage is, in reality, an obligation to another person that requires a selflessness that defies natural proclivities. In this way, commitment and submission share the same space in the marital relationship. That is, the participants must lovingly commit to a healthy submission to one another for the sake of spiritual formation and Christlikeness in the spouse. Of course, this type of marital work benefits both partners mutually. Chan points out:

... after the moment of salvation comes a lifetime of sanctification (the process of becoming holy). Your righteous position is gained in and instant of true belief, but your righteousness, your Christlikeness, grows in depth over a lifetime of pursuing the things of God.<sup>72</sup>

The author elucidates the true meaning of marital work. That is, marriage is ultimately built on Christ’s work on the cross, while the pursuit of God’s will is the work of both the husband and the wife.

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71. Cloud and Townsend, *Boundaries in Marriage*, 20.

72. Chan and Chan, *You and Me Forever: Marriage in Light of Eternity*, 34.

Since Christ is central to an authentic marriage, spirituality in the marriage becomes central to every aspect of the married couple. Even secular psychiatry professor Froma Walsh asserts, “Spirituality is at the heart of our earliest, longest-lasting, and most intimate bonds.”<sup>73</sup> However, non-Christian voices such as Walsh miss an essential truth of Scripture. Scripture commands this imperative, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?”<sup>74</sup>

The imagery of a yoke, associated with strenuous work, provides a starting point for any God-honoring marriage. Everyone brings to the marriage his or her burdens and blessings, but each must be on equal footing as it relates to all aspects of the marriage. An equal footing does not necessarily involve an equal level of maturity or spirituality; rather, it speaks to a humble willingness to submit and commit to following Christ in every area of their marital milieu.

John M. Gottman captures this idea when the author asserts, “In the Strongest marriages, husband and wife share a deep sense of meaning. They don’t just ‘get along,’ they also support each other’s hopes and aspirations and build a sense of purpose into their lives together.”<sup>75</sup> In this light, stable marriages must be spiritually strong and each participant must be emotionally healthy. Conflict, as discussed in various ways, is inevitable in a relationship between two fallen people. However, conflict does not have to be a path to marital dysfunction or something to be avoided.

Peter Scazzero contends:

Jesus shows us that healthy Christians do not avoid conflict. His life was filled with it! He was in regular conflict with the religious leaders, the crowds, the disciples, even his

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73. Froma Walsh, “The Spiritual Dimension of Family Life,” in *Normal Family Processes: Growing Diversity and Complexity*, ed. Froma Walsh, 4th ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2012), 354.

74. 2 Corinthians 6:14.

75. John M. Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making a Marriage Work*, rev. and updated ed. (New York: Harmony Books, 2015), 28.

own family. Out of a desire to bring peace, Jesus disrupted the false peace all around him. He refused to ‘spiritualize away’ conflict.<sup>76</sup>

Far too many couples allow the inevitable conflict associated with all relationships to interrupt and damage the emotional and spiritual growth that previous marital work had produced. Rather than allowing differences and disagreements on various aspects and approaches in life to enrich their marriage, husbands and wives move away from one another rather than toward one another in Christ’s name. The polarization of the spouses is a pattern repeated when Christians move away from God in their trials, severing one’s intimacy with God. In other words, couples sacrifice marital intimacy on the altar of pride. It is a lamentable forfeiture, as relational intimacy is the glorious by-product of a joyful work.

### ***Marital Intimacy***

The perfect intimacy that described the first married couple in the Garden of Eden and their intimate relationship with their Creator ended in what theologians call the Fall of man. Because of the Fall, the man would rule tyrannically, and Eve’s ambition would be to overturn Adam’s unloving headship. Even so, there is a remedy for the tragic loss of intimacy suffered in Adam and Eve’s rebellion. Ronald E. Hawkins rightly advises, “As males and females draw closer to the Creator they draw closer to each other. Chaos results from the abandonment of this divine plan.”<sup>77</sup>

Christ can and does heal and restore broken relationships with God, others, and self through His people’s mutual submission and passionate work. Confrontation, conflict, and rather painful realities of a mutual brokenness shared by both spouses are inescapable in a marriage

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76. Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: Unleash a Revolution in Your Life in Christ* (Nashville, TN: Integrity, 2006), 33. "Help to experience a faith charged with authenticity, contemplation, and a hunger for God"--Provided by publisher.

77. Ronald Hawkins, *Strengthening Marital Intimacy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House Publishing, 1991), 15.



relationship. Keller explains that though conflict seems to stem from the brokenness and shortcomings of the spouse as they judge the other spouse for their inadequacies, it is not ultimately the spouse who exposes the sinfulness of the other but the marital relationship itself.

If a husband and wife understand the freedom gained from this type of pruning and healing they can turn conflict into deeper intimacy. Keller postulates,

Marriage does not so much bring you into confrontation with your spouse as confront you with yourself. Marriage shows you a realistic, unflattering picture of who you are and then takes you by the scruff of the neck and forces you to pay attention to it. That might sound discouraging, but it is really the road to liberation.<sup>78</sup>

The real “you” is the most attractive part of anyone who seeks intimacy in a relationship. Understanding and seeing one’s flaws in humility is the only way to realize hope, hope in attaining a marriage that overcomes obstacles while perpetually drawing the couple closer together. Self-awareness is the freedom to know one’s spouse more deeply while healing the relationships so essential to mental, physical, and spiritual health; the fulfilled life.

Hawkins asserts, “Freedom in Christ and the equality of believers can carry them on to provide equal opportunity in the marriage for the expression of each partner’s full personhood.”<sup>79</sup>

An expression of full personhood that includes both brokenness and love. That is, if both members of the marriage are seeking to be more like Christ, find their identity in the Christ they are seeking, and mutually acknowledge a love for Christ, then there is nothing that cannot be worked out between the two. Congruently, a flourishing intimacy will be the result in a Christocentric marriage.

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78. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*, 154.

79. Hawkins, *Strengthening Marital Intimacy*, 17.

“God’s love is delivered to us and through us,” exclaims E. Glenn Wagner, “without demanding readiness or reciprocity on our part.”<sup>80</sup> A Christian husband and wife must understand and live in the truth that there is nothing a child of God can do to arrest God’s love for them. God’s love is the biblical and Greek concept of agape love. Possession of this love compels a spouse to love in the same way, loving one another without pretense or condition.<sup>81</sup> A husband or wife that leans in rather than moving away when the other stumbles are seeking to demonstrate an understanding and acceptance of who the other is.

Spirit filled and Christ-like empathy buoys a spiritually and soulfully healthy relationship which will necessarily overflow into a more robust physical relationship. Affection in a marriage must begin with attention. Ultimately, one’s sexuality, a person’s maleness or femaleness, requires an understanding of the unique ways men and women communicate. One’s attentiveness to the other outside of the marriage bed will inform the intimacy of the marriage bed.

Loving touch, spending time with one another in the otherwise mundane parts of life, and compassionate speech will communicate a healthy sexuality before ever participating in the physical act of sex. Keller points out that a mutual and satisfying sexual relationship must be a significant part of their life together and that sex should be a frequent and mutual act, never denied by the other.<sup>82</sup> The key to a healthy and satisfying sexual relationship is that this important part of marriage demonstrates the selfless nature of Christianity. That is, sex in marriage is about always giving and never focusing on getting.

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80. E. Glenn Wagner, *Strategies for a Successful Marriage: A Study Guide for Men* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing Group, 1994), 67.

81. See 1 John 4:10,19.

82. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 267.

Intimacy is the emotional side of the marital relationship. Truly knowing the other person in the marriage is the fuel that provides for the fire in the union in which both partners become one flesh. Les and Leslie Parrott contend that “Intimacy fills our heart’s deepest longings for closeness and acceptance.”<sup>83</sup> The fulfilling physical act of sex is the product of a relationship built on humility, selflessness, and a love for Christ before all. Intimacy finds itself between the heat of passionate romance and the cognitive labor of commitment.

The Parrotts contest, “The fulfillment of love hinges on closeness, sharing, communication, honesty, and support. As one heart given in exchange for another, marriage provides the deepest and most radical expression of intimacy.”<sup>84</sup> Mature human affection spoken of outside of marriage is merely an illusion. The intimacy that is only associated with the end goal of sex is reduced to merely a selfish physical act.

Godly affection within the confines of a marriage that seeks to honor and glorify God is set apart from any worldly definition and or expectation of intimacy. Godly intimacy transcends physical sensation. Gary Thomas explains, “This means that while physical pleasure is good and acceptable, we mustn’t reduce sex to a merely physical experience. It is about more, much more, than that. Sex speaks of spiritual realities far more profound than mere pleasure.”<sup>85</sup> In this way, a couple’s sex life is not merely an event scheduled in frequency for physical gratification, but the fruit of a healthy, passionate, intimate, and committed relationship.

An environment of love centered on Christ creates and fosters an environment in which two people can grow in Christlikeness. A couple who is spiritually and physically intimate with one another are also intimate with Christ and vice versa. Naturally, in such a God honoring and

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83. Les & Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage before It Starts: Seven Questions to Ask Before--and After-- You Marry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 38.

84. Ibid., 39.

85. Thomas, *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy*, 209.

loving setting, the physical reality of an intimate relationship becomes the original genesis of the family unit. The love and commitment the married couple enjoys extend to its next generation, blessing the marriage with sons and daughters. The progeny realized from a godly marriage offer a fantastic opportunity to train up the next generation in spreading the supremacy of Christ in all things for the joy of all people.

### A Heart for Children

Scripture proclaims, “Behold; children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!”<sup>86</sup> According to the almighty Creator, children are a blessing and are the fruit of an intimate sexual relationship between a husband and a wife. However, the Bible also teaches that adopted children are also a blessing and maintain the same status of naturally born children. If Christ is the proper center of marriage, and the husband and wife are the foundations of the family, the children are at the heart of a family.

Children portrayed as a blessing to family life seems contradictory to the reality faced by many households. Children of all ages are more of a challenge than an enhancement in many homes. A child seemingly requires a disproportionate amount of work and time in relation to any apparent success and reward. In a phrase, children are not born with a desire to obey, but to rebel and so the biblical work of parenting begins. In the words of John MacArthur, “Teaching children is no easy task. It is a full-time, years-long duty for parents, often frustrating and always requiring diligence.”<sup>87</sup> This experience is due to what theologians call the doctrine of original sin.

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86. Psalm 127:3-5.

87. John MacArthur, *The Fulfilled Family: God's design for Your Family* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 2005), 87.

Raising children in a healthy God-honoring way requires any parent to appeal to the heart of the child. Certain factors motivate every child. Factors, such as positive guidance, positive reinforcement, positive instruction, and negative reinforcement such as discipline (consequence and punishment), all serve to influence children. Though negative consequences do produce positive changes in a child if administered in love, they are not the starting point. Jesus was taught obedience by his godly parents and learned through positive means, such as witnessing and imitating estimable examples.

MacArthur points out that Jesus as a child through positive instruction grew in four ways, intellectually, physically, socially, and spiritually.<sup>88</sup> The overarching goal for all parents raising their children in a godly manner is to see growth in these four areas of their children's lives, regardless of age, ethnicity, or socio-economic status.<sup>89</sup> But to realize growth in the four areas perfectly achieved by Jesus, parents must understand where motivation and obedience live, the heart. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller teach that "God created the heart to be a person's central processing unit. When working correctly, the heart enables children to mature and respond to life in productive ways."<sup>90</sup>

A heart for children necessarily requires reaching the child's heart. Temptations come about in children in basically the same way temptations arise in the hearts of adults. When a child misbehaves, doing the wrong thing, it is because the child's emotions and wants overtake the convictions and character of the child. This struggle is fought on the battlefield of the child's heart. Turansky and Miller argue, "Much of the work of parenting is identifying what heart

88. MacArthur, *The Fulfilled Family*, 95.

89. See Luke 2:52.

90. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller, *Parenting Is Heart Work* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 2006), 37.

quality needs development and then practicing it to increase internal strength.”<sup>91</sup> The parent’s role here is to avoid merely listing rules and drawing lines, but to gain the child’s understanding of the biblical convictions behind the rules and boundaries.

Paul David Tripp identifies two lies that every child believes. The author asserts that children, especially those who are not yet born again believers, believe that they are autonomous and self-sufficient.<sup>92</sup> Tripp writes, “We all, including our children, resist being ruled. We all, including our children, want our own way.”<sup>93</sup> The lie of autonomy necessarily results in happiness when the child gets their way and anger when anyone gets in the way of their happiness. Like autonomy, self-sufficiency, or the belief they do not need the wisdom or counsel of others, is a lie that affects people of all ages. For children, the myths of autonomy and self-sufficiency result in rebellion at every stage of development.

To love a child, a parent must avoid merely setting rules, pronouncing punishment, and ensuring adverse consequences for offenses; rather, as custodians of these image bearers, a parent must strive at every point to address the heart issues of the child. All people want peace, love, and joy, as well as acceptance. Arguably, these desires are part of what it means to bear the image of God. Rick Horne refers to these felt needs along with others, such as, truthfulness, loyalty, beauty, and freedom as, “Wise wants.”<sup>94</sup> In other words, underneath the rebellious heart clearly ascertained in a child’s behavior, is a heart that is virtuous. It is the noble heart of a child that God knows, and parents must cultivate.

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91. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller, *Motivate Your Child: A Christian Parent's guide to Raising Kids Who Do What They Need to Do without Being Told* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015), 56.

92. Paul Tripp, *Parenting: The 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 106–8.

93. *Ibid.*, 107.

94. Rick Horne, *Get Outta My Face: How to Reach Angry, Unmotivated Teens with Biblical Counsel* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2009), 33.

The heart issues of children transcend peculiar circumstances. That is, regardless of what type of family is raising a child, the child's heart is the target. Whether part of a middle-class intact family, single parent home or a blended family, it is through the heart that a child can be reached. Contemporary homes are no longer homogeneous units, but complicated systems that create the fabric of a diverse society. Marriage then is the catalyst in forming a family, and the family is at the heart of establishing an intertwining social network, namely the village.

### A Heart for the Village

As a couple adds other imperfect humans to the marital relationship such as their children, extended family members, other couples, old friends from previous eras, church family, and workplace peers, a marriage's flaws are exponentially magnified. Marriage is never truly between just two people, but it is a divine institution and therefore includes a sacred bond. Only God should ever be positioned between a husband and a wife regardless of the particular circumstances surrounding the formation of the marriage.

Unlike bad habits, people cannot be miraculously eliminated, will powered away, or minimized with therapy. Friends, co-workers, and extended family members will at times affect the marital relationship in negative ways. If a couples' marriage is founded on something other than a deep commitment it has little chance of surviving, let alone flourishing. That is, the only means of ridding oneself from these people is by ridding one's self of the marriage through divorce. However, when children are part of the family the individuals in the children's life will continue to be a presence in either of the ex-spouses lives and therefore part of any ex-spouses' remarriage.

The truth is that a family's village, though somewhat malleable, is inescapable. Therefore, it is imperative that a marriage and family be undergirded by grace and mercy and be an active part of a wider family of faith. The body of Christ, when functioning as a healthy

spiritual organism, is uniquely equipped to minister to its own. In this light, it matters not what a person's past holds; there remains nothing beyond resolving if Jesus is at the center of a person's life. In this sense, the family becomes the heart of not only the village but the heart of God's church.

### A Heart for the Church

In the West, most family's lives exist in places. For most Westerners, one's "first place" is the family's home, while one's "second place" is usually one's school or place of employment. The concept of a person's "third place" however, is an elective for most Westerners and is typically centered around a person's hobbies or their pursuit of leisure and in many ways, forms a community of like-minded people. Arguably, the local Christian church has been regarded as an essential "third place" for believers, offering a community that is based on biblical truths and theistic worship.

The church as a "place" notwithstanding, faithful Christians know of no artificial distinction between secular and sacred. Family life, work and academic life, and the recreational life are all expressions of who they are as Christ followers. The gathering together on certain days sets apart a time to praise and worship corporately in a common place to celebrate what God is doing in the lives of His people and the world.<sup>95</sup> This fellowship of believers is indispensable to the life of any Christ follower, regardless of their past, present, or future.

The body of Christ as the local church extends beyond the meaning of community or merely a place to meet on Sundays because the local church is an actual spiritual family. In this way, families of origin supernaturally belong to a larger family who shares a common heavenly Father and the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit. The healthy expression of the local church

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95. See Hebrews 10:24-25.



imitates Christ and so exists incarnationally. Peter Scazzero rightly points out, “The incarnation calls us out of our literal, physical comfort zones to meet people where they are.”<sup>96</sup> Meeting people where they are requires acceptance and fosters a place of belonging.

Belonging to a local church body means spiritually connecting to a forgiven and redeemed people. The redemption that Christ offers is not subject to boundaries of any kind. Therefore, Christ’s body and His local Christian church are called to receive all His people regardless of past sins and hurts including those who have divorced and remarried. At the heart of His church is healing and restoration; a place of security and love in which broken people can love other broken people.

Tragically, however, rather than demonstrating the love of Christ the church is often a place of judgment and condemnation, especially for those grappling with the realities of new familial relationships in the aftermath of a failed marriage and broken family. Perceptibly, a significant paradigm shift is called for in the way churches respond to this ever-growing population of stepfamilies and the complexities associated with the formation of a new family after death or divorce.

A church-based curriculum that educates stepfamily members, congregants and ministers on the unique challenges related to stepfamily life will benefit the local church in all spheres of ministry and mission. It is the stepfamily actively living out life in the church that will ultimately see the end of serial divorce and remarriage in the life of the local church. After all, Christ’s church should be the “first place” for acceptance and healing.

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96. Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 187.

## The Stepfamily and the Church

In examining stepfamily life and their experiences in the church, the researcher will discover stories of hope together with a mind field of regrettable but not insurmountable obstructions to their growth and usefulness in the church. If disapproving and suspicious perceptions toward stepfamilies in the church transform into experiences of grace and love, then the local church will realize its full potential of redemptive power.

To realize its redemptive possibilities those who make up God's church must take a new look at the mind fields that have relegated Christian stepfamilies to a second-class status in the church. These minefields include legalistic approaches to Scripture as it relates to divorce and remarriage, the impact that marital loss has on disillusioned children, neglecting the healing powers of fellowship, and ultimately denying access to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

All people are relational beings regardless of the setting. How the Christian lives out their life in the context of their stepfamily will have a lasting and far-reaching impact on everyone in their growing circle of influence. "Stop looking back," says Moe and Paige Becnel, "because it will defeat [you], and instead look toward the new goals, the new plans, and the new relationships that God has brought into [your] life."<sup>97</sup> God is the God of second chances.

### ***The Underlying Issue -- Divorce and Remarriage***

Much of the confusion surrounding the stepfamily's lesser status in the church, whether perceived or concrete, flows out of one's view of divorce and remarriage. Christians involved with a stepfamily who wish to participate in church life hold various views on the legitimacy of their new marriage and family disposition. Many of these stepfamilies carefully guard the nature of their relationships to their spouse and the children that make up their stepfamily for fear of discrimination and or persecutory judgment by those they worship with on Sundays. This tragic

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97. Becnel and Becnel, *God Breathes on Blended Families*, 121.

ambiguity and even misrepresentation force many stepfamilies into the periphery of the church, marginalizing those whose spiritual gifts are vital for the health of the local church.

Divorce is one of the greatest losses a husband and wife can suffer. Divorce is death. The ending of a marital relationship is the end of a primary and divinely established relationship. For the children of divorce, it is a tremendous loss deepened by the remarriage of one or both parents. Children do not ask for divorce nor do they ask for a new parent or new siblings in the event of the formation of a stepfamily. With perhaps over half of the population of the United States involved in stepfamily life in some way; that is, a family built in part on the pain of loss, the church along with its leadership must respond in love and truth.

Longtime pastor and author John Piper in discussing a difficult marriage asserts:

Our culture has made divorce acceptable and therefore easier to justify on the basis of emotional pain. Historically, the misery of painful emotions was not a sanction for divorce in most cultures. Marriage durability – with or without emotional pain – was valued above emotional tranquility for the glory of Christ.<sup>98</sup>

Marriage for Christians, after all, has been a picture of God's enduring marriage to His rebellious people regardless of how widespread and constant their insurrection was.<sup>99</sup> And though there is merit to Piper's contention, as many pastors would agree, it does not resolve the problem of emotional pain at its source. What is more, merely standing against divorce in a sanctimonious religious posture does not assuage a resolution for those whose marriage terminated for reasons other than the conventional biblical view.

Irrespective of what point on the relational continuum a person finds themselves, the end goal for members of the clergy is always reconciliation. In other words, the church is pro-marriage and should seek reconciliation instead of divorce no matter the source of relational

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98. John Piper, *A Godward Life: Seeing the Supremacy of God in All of Life: 120 Daily Meditations*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2015), 33.

99. See Isaiah 54:5-7.

pain. Whether the reason for separation is adultery, impassiveness, or even abuse, healing is always the goal for all people concerned. Therefore, when Christians divorce and remarry, those in the church with any influence in the couple's life should seek to support them in the context of repentance and restoration.

Merely ignoring the emotional pain in a new marriage or worse, judging the participants as unworthy of God's calling, serves only to exacerbate the crisis of divorce in the contemporary church. Therefore, it is helpful to understand the biblical record on divorce and remarriage. Against all vitiated viewpoints on marriage in the current age, Jesus' teaching postulates that the marriage between one man and one woman is a wondrous work of God's creation and therefore a sacred covenant that can only be dissipated by death. Jesus' standard is always higher than that of man's.

When confronted with the issue of divorce and remarriage by the ruling religious class of His day, Jesus roots the meaning of marriage in God's original design rather than with the Mosaic Law and its view on sin.<sup>100</sup> When questioned on why Moses issued certificates of divorce for many different reasons, Jesus points to the sin nature of man and the hardening of their hearts against God's original intent, that marriage was instituted to last a human lifetime.<sup>101</sup> In this light, Jesus has raised the bar on man's low and self-serving view of the law, and in effect religiosity, stating that whoever divorces his wife for any reason other than sexual immorality and remarries has committed adultery.<sup>102</sup>

Though there is no biblical consensus on whether Jesus made provisions for divorce and remarriage many of those in the church miss the point of Jesus' teaching and the reasons God

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100. See Matthew 19:3-6.

101. See Matthew 19:7-8.

102. See Matthew 19:9.

issues laws in the first place. God's way is the best way. The best way is the way that should be pursued by Christians and espoused by those who would teach them and or counsel them. The truth is, Jesus, in considering the institution of marriage dissolvable only by death, connected marriage to creation, and in doing so disallowed remarriage while the estranged spouse still lived. Congruously, Jesus categorized the sin of divorce and remarriage just as He did with murder, hypocrisy, theft, and every other sin. Jesus rightly localized the source of sin in a man's heart.

Because divorce is a sin that arises from a variety of sins, it is painful and carries with it perpetuating anguish and disillusionment. Divorce and its various attributes are often more emotionally painful than the death of a loved one. The dissolution of a marriage can include years of agony before coming to fruition, and a long time to adjudicate and accept. Friends and family seem to withdraw, work performance suffers, financial hardships can ensue, the uncertainty of the future crushes the will, loneliness can seem unending, and the judicial process intensifies the misery.

Then there is the agony of the children and the relational scarring that combines with disappointment and loss as they try to make sense of the anger, rage, and sadness brought on by two adults they love and trust. It is no wonder God hates divorce; it does violence to his creation. In addition to the personal anguish divorce causes, the Christian can suddenly feel unqualified for the church, and worse, unwelcome to attend worship with the body of Christ.

Add to the immense personal and familial pain of divorce the advent of a new marriage and the formation of a stepfamily, Christians, if they choose to remain in the church, are often hesitant to reveal their family status. Feeling ostracized by God's church stepfamily members feel unworthy in the pursuit of serving and leadership opportunities, and unable to connect with others spiritually. Hence, the immense challenge for followers of Jesus when confronted with

divorce and remarriage is to respond empathetically and to love them biblically as ministers of reconciliation. There is forgiveness for all confessed sin. There is grace for every repentant sinner.

The Old Covenant speaks to divorce and remarriage as a sin but also prohibits a woman from returning to the first spouse once remarried.<sup>103</sup> Given the scriptural record, one can argue that though divorce and defilement from a second or third marriage fall short of God's standard and is an act of disobedience, another broken covenant is not God's will. In other words, forgiveness is available if there is a confession of the sins that caused divorce as rebellion, the divorce itself as disobedience, and the remarriage as further disobedience. God's sanctification of the new marriage and family is available purely by His grace and mercy.<sup>104</sup> Redemption is the juncture at which the body of Christ is uniquely equipped and empowered to position themselves as a spiritual resource of support and love for the newly redeemed marriage and family.

The underlying issue of divorce and remarriage as it relates to the modern stepfamily is not an issue of whether a couple divorced under the so-called biblical exception clause of adultery, sexual immorality, or abandonment by an unbelieving spouse.<sup>105</sup> Most churchman who sit in judgment of stepfamilies do not allow room for this discussion. However, there is evidence that Jesus, and later Paul, do provide a scriptural basis for divorce and remarriage when a spouse has either been sexually immoral or deserts their marriage.

Sexual immorality can involve sexual acts outside of marriage, prostitution, homosexual behavior, and other acts (πορνεία), or adultery (μοιχεία). When Jesus declares that sexually immoral acts and even lust for another woman are the equivalents of committing adultery, then

103. See Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

104. See 2 Corinthians 5:17.

105. See Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18; Matthew 5:31-32; 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:13.

one can argue that viewing pornography, and other acts of lust constitute grounds for divorce.<sup>106</sup> In this way, Jesus uses an example of lust and adultery in the context of divorce and remarriage as merely one illustration of how mankind falls short of God's perfect standard, holding it up against the hardhearted and self-justifying ways of man. In truth, all divorce falls short of God's glory, as does an emotionally scurrilous marriage.

God's church is God's vehicle for healing and the soulful restoration of the sanctity of marriage. Where there is repentance there is complete forgiveness; the stains are gone, the marriage is as white as snow.<sup>107</sup> Divorce followed by remarriage is not the unforgivable sin. Forgiveness for the sins of divorce and subsequent remarriage are available based solely on the shed blood of Jesus, as are the sins of murder, stealing, homosexuality, adultery, and all sin.<sup>108</sup> It is through repentance and forgiveness based on the work of Jesus on the cross that will take what is sinfully entered into and sanctify it, purify it from sin, and turn it to a means of grace and blessing. In this light, the demonstration of Christ-like love presents both challenges and opportunities for the body of Christ as it interacts and engages the American stepfamily and its most vulnerable members, the children.

### ***The Overarching Issue – Bereaved Children***

The Bible declares that children are a blessing directly from God, "Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them."<sup>109</sup> Arguably, God's high regard for children is not obviated or even discounted because a

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106. See Matthew 5:27–28, which uses *μοιχεία*, the word "adultery," twice connecting unfaithfulness and lust together in a man's heart.

107. See Psalm 51:7; Isaiah 1:18.

108. See Matthew 26:28.

109. See Psalm 127:4-5a.

child has entered into a new family dynamic. Children of all ages are blessings in all families including the faith family that comes together in the local church.

Though all children benefit from specific age-related ministry, it is the stepchild who is in need of grace and encouragement as they navigate the forming of a new family. The Becnals point out that many children suffering from the loss of a parent due to death or divorce have a challenging time with adversity, including their negative feelings.<sup>110</sup> The authors postulate that these children can suffer alone for years. Stepchildren find it difficult to communicate their negative feelings to parents or other family members to avoid angering, hurting, or alienating their parents.<sup>111</sup> The church family and its leadership, if equipped to minister to this grieving population, can provide the healthy and safe conduit needed for these children to express themselves therapeutically.

Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller contend, “God is interested in hearts because that’s where real and lasting change takes place.”<sup>112</sup> When energies focus on a child’s heart, rather than their emotion or intellect, healing and flourishing will result. Often the parents in a stepfamily and other leaders in the home find it difficult to impel a healthy dynamic in their stepfamily using a cognitive approach. Perhaps superficial behavior modification can be coerced, but not the transformation in a child’s heart.

The Body of Christ is uniquely equipped to reach a child’s heart through the love and empathy of Christ. Unfortunately, the local church has either ignored or been agnostic toward the plight of stepchildren and in doing so have missed opportunities for transformational ministry and spiritual healing. New marriages, particularly those that arise after a divorce, form complex

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110. Becnal and Becnal, *God Breathes on Blended Families*, 187.

111. Ibid.

112. Turansky and Miller, *Parenting Is Heart Work*, 13.



relationships burdened with guilt, resentment, grief, and deep anger. God's church embodies spiritual relationships founded on reconciliation, redemption, restoration, hope, and most of all, love.

### ***Ecclesiastical Considerations – The Body of Christ***

The Body of Christ has been defined throughout the ages by the glorious act of forgiveness. Ultimately, forgiveness stems from divine mercy and grace. In this current dispensation people who are weighed down by bitterness or guilt find divine mercy and grace from Christ through His presence in the church and the application of His gospel. Tim Clinton and John Trent rightly state that “God can use the offense [such as betrayal or marital failure] to promote personal and spiritual growth and dependence on Him for His plan and glory.”<sup>113</sup> However, spiritual growth and healing rarely if ever can occur in isolation from the visible church.

Many stepfamilies are comprised of people who look to the future with hope while remaining chained to a past of pain, disappointment, and disillusionment. As these families strive for cohesiveness and happiness, they often attempt to achieve these goals without the power of the Holy Spirit and in fear of judgment rather than acceptance by God's people. Indeed, the Body of Christ, rather than functioning as a body of health and restoration, has in its manifestation as the local church neglected or actively shunned families resulting from a divorce and subsequent remarriage.

Scott Browning and Elise Artelt contend, “Establishing a stepfamily involves numerous changes and adjustments. Stress is created by the increased complexity of the family, conflicting

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113. Tim Clinton and John Trent, *The Quick-reference Guide to Marriage & Family Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 167.

loyalties, and the assumption of immediate love.”<sup>114</sup> The authors like many others in the field of family therapy acknowledge that the practical approaches to treatment for first-marriage families and stepfamilies differ in significant ways. And though there is much wisdom available from so-called secular studies and methodologies to counseling, such modalities lack the redemptive and healing power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

### ***Redemptive Power – The Gospel***

Stepcouples and stepfamilies come together with many of the same dreams, hopes, and plans for which first marriage couples pray. However, it is the stepfamily that strives for wholeness and fulfillment while at the same time trying to reconcile the hurt and failed dreams of the past. Often these families are so mired in the negative realities of the past and present that they lose their way forward. In other words, they attempt to possess the freedom of the Gospel while not experiencing the presence of Christ Himself.

God’s word promises that His love is the beginning and the end of all things and that includes healthy and broken relationships:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger of sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.<sup>115</sup>

Gary and Greg Smalley acknowledge, “Death of a dream is the common thread weaving through a blended marriage. Most people do not grow up with a wish to be married more than once.”<sup>116</sup> The truth is, for a stepfamily to survive the many unforeseen realities that arise in day to day life they must place and keep Christ at the center of their relationships.

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114. Browning and Artelt, *Stepfamily Therapy: A 10-step Clinical Approach*, 19.

115. See Romans 8:35,37.

116. Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, *The Blended Marriage: Learn How to Cultivate a Fruitful Life Together* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2014), 13.

The Lord's gathered church scattered throughout America and the world possesses the greatest message of truth ever known in the universe. These words of powerful healing and reconciliation are available to everyone who seeks answers to life's difficulties and pain. No family should ever be denied access to Jesus, or be forced to represent themselves based on man's expectations of who they should be.

The Gospel sets sinners free to be who they are. In this Gospel God's mission of seeking and saving the lost is heralded through every word. God's mission has a church who makes available the redemptive power of Christ. Beyond denominational considerations, religiosity, religious endeavors, sacerdotal requirements, and orthopraxis, is the finished work of Christ and His good news, available to all who seek Him. Necessarily, the church must be able to minister to the members of a stepfamily in ways that address their unique felt needs and ultimately their spiritual requirements. However, the local church lacks any organized blueprint and church-based curriculum for an active stepfamily outreach and enduring stepfamily ministry.

#### Academic and Applied Research

The academic and applied research process for building a church-based curriculum for stepfamilies includes synthesizing existing research and theory with original research including both an online survey and a participatory learning activity focus group. The academic research process seeks to understand current best practices in stepfamily therapy, family counseling theory, and contemporary perspectives on remarriage and stepfamily formation.

The academic portion of the research includes predominately later tomes with older, yet foundational work in the sphere of stepfamily research. As expected there is a paucity of academic writing on the realities of stepfamily life compared to the volumes written on family life in general. Nonetheless, Christian family therapy is included in the research as many of the

realities of a first marriage and the biblical doctrines foundational to marriage apply to all families.

And though some of the academic research materials address the predicament of the stepfamily as it relates to the American Christian church, the research process revealed a greater dearth of work in this area. Consequently, the lack of academic material on the stepfamily and the church necessitated original ground level applied and qualitative research.

The applied research process consisted of two instruments. First, a survey of one hundred and fifty-nine questions surrounding family dynamics, religious preferences, and church experiences captured data from adult participants that were either adult stepchildren, biological parents, or stepparents. The survey intuitively allowed contributors to pass over parts that did not apply to their milieu but also offered a chance for participants to express their view on the stepfamily's experiences in the local church.

Perspectives on child behavior and parental discipline were also captured to determine whether parenting was considered a major challenge within the stepfamily context. Contributors, Jan Nelson, Cheryl Erwin, and H. Stephen Glenn point out that as a stepparent, "You still need to learn to understand and respond effectively to children's behavior and misbehavior."<sup>117</sup> Finally, a critical component of this applied research instrument addressed the realities of the stepfamily's church milieu. Judgment, persecution, training, and church leadership featured prominently in this section of the survey.

Secondly, a focus group designed to build consensus from local churchgoers provided significant insight on the issues affecting stepfamilies. The process included brainstorming on specific topics associated with stepfamilies and the local American church. The participants included adult stepchildren, stepparents, and biological parents, all of whom profess to be born

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117. Jane Nelsen, Cheryl Erwin, and H. Stephen Glenn, *Positive Discipline for Blended Families: Nurturing Harmony, Respect, and Unity in Your New Stepfamily* (Rocklin, CA: Prima Pub., 1997).

again Christians. Subsequent chapters discuss the details of this process and its findings. That said, the instruments were designed to capture the extant perspectives of those involved with a stepfamily cohort while identifying the primary themes associated with stepfamily life and the church. This data will provide the outline and future content for a church- based stepfamily curriculum.

While the academic and applied research is catching up with the realities of stepfamily life, Christian resources on the subject are left wanting. Ministering to this significant population in America's churches is paramount for the health of the local church and the passionate promulgation of the supremacy of Christ in all things.

A thesis project that develops a church-based stepfamily curriculum requires both academic and applied research. This project's research will lay the foundation for the process of understanding the specific needs of today's Christian stepfamily while setting the bar at the appropriate height for the redemptive power of Christ's church.

### Chapter 3 -- Applied Research

#### Applied Research – Stepfamily Curriculum

Research that is considered “pure” research is research that does not apply to a real-world situation but merely informs or further informs a particular group of researchers in each area of study. In contrast, “applied” research will lead to consequences that are practical and applicable to the real world in some way.

Editors Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams point out that in answering the question of research significance, one must only determine if it is a matter of knowing or doing.<sup>118</sup> In other words, the applied research conducted to develop a stepfamily curriculum for the local church yields practical significance not just further understanding of the issues surrounding the formation of a new blended family.

In building a church based stepfamily curriculum, stepfamilies, church leaders, and congregants are equipped and empowered to fully live their lives within the context of the local church and in light of the redemptive and healing powers of the Gospel. This statement implies that there is a need to teach and train various members of a church on the realities, challenges, and struggles inherent to stepfamily life and the real or perceived judgment they experience by others in the church.

As a topic, this thesis project offers a study of stepfamily life from different perspectives and the perceptions of various members of a stepfamily regarding their experience in the local church. The reason for this study or applied research is to determine or answer the questions relating to the quality of life experienced by stepfamily members (adults) in general and as Christians navigating the different facets of church life.

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118. *The Craft of Research*, ed. Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 59.

Aspects of church life might include, serving, leading, worshipping, and fellowship. Furthermore, the research answers the question as to a stepfamily member's perceptions of adequacy, biblical and social qualification, and general acceptance by church members and leaders. Finally, the practical significance of this applied research will provide information that will allow a church facilitator to address the struggles associated with the formation of a new family due to death or divorce, while also equipping church goers to minister to this significant and growing population in the local American church.

In formulating a useful applied research problem, one must show that the indirect question of conflict in stepfamily life and perceived adverse judgment in the local church plausibly determines the practical significance presented in the research question/topic. To do this, Booth et al. recommend asking:

If [stepfamilies and church members] want to achieve the goal of [a fulfilling stepfamily life and effective ministry to stepfamilies, respectively] would they think they could do it if they found out [that stepfamilies face many complex challenges in family life and church life while desiring acceptance, love, and purpose in the context of the local church?]<sup>119</sup>

The answer to the above question would seem to be yes. Yes, if a church that loves Jesus and His people, understood the plight of today's stepfamilies and the regrettable perception that they are second class Christians, that church would aspire to minister and love those families.

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119. Booth et al. *The Craft of Research*, 60.

## Qualitative Research

Tim Sensing describes qualitative research this way:

... Qualitative research systematically seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings. Qualitative research is grounded in the social world of experience and seeks to make sense of lived experience. Qualitative researchers, then, are most interested in how humans arrange themselves and their settings and how inhabitants of these settings make sense of their surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles, and so forth.<sup>120</sup>

In seeking answers that would eventually formulate a training curriculum that serves the Christian or seeking stepfamily, the research for this thesis project intentionally explores the social setting of the stepfamily and the stepfamily's experience in the local church. The individuals who inhabit this environment are the various members of a stepfamily.

Arguably, the family setting and the church family setting are two of the most primary social settings in Western culture today. Each includes various symbols, rituals, structures, and roles. Within the stepfamily, each of these social entities become more involved as each manifests themselves in the home and the church setting. That is, as two families come together to form a new family dynamic, different family and religious symbols, family roles, and rituals either combine or collide. Likewise, social structures are altered in the home and at times hidden from the church, while individual functions can become confounded and or obscured.

According to Sensing, "The D. Min projects are ministry interventions designed to address particular problems for specific contexts."<sup>121</sup> The church based stepfamily curriculum is built on research that seeks to understand contemporary issues facing stepfamilies and their place in the local church.

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120. Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 57.

121. *Ibid.*, 60.



The interventions arising from the applied and quantitative research are based on various survey models and a participatory learning activity that allows for non-homogenous groups to gain consensus on the main issues facing stepfamilies in the church as well as explore the typical stepfamily's narrative. The particular context addressed in this thesis project is that of the local Christian church and can, therefore, be generalized to include any region a local Western church exists.

Generalizability is the measure to which conclusions obtained from one context or under one set of circumstances may be assumed to apply to other contexts or under other circumstances. In building a curriculum that ministers to and trains stepfamilies and those who find themselves in a context that includes stepfamilies, the complete curriculum should demonstrate an appropriate degree of flexibility while remaining true to the research outcomes. Such a church curricula are then able to cross denominational and sub-culture boundaries with minimal adjustment to its application.

The nature of the Doctor of Ministry thesis project is that it is not based on general data, but is decidedly practicable. Practical significance necessitates that the findings of the applied and qualitative research of a thesis project include natural settings and circumstances that are recognizable and shared by real people in real places. In this way, research participants were encouraged to contribute who desired healthy stepfamilies and fruitful lives centered around the local church.

### Research Participation

The phrasal idiom, "Perception is reality," is often attributed to political strategist Lee Atwater. Albert Einstein has been quoted, contending, "Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one." For many in today's Western Christian church, the perception of how church members view them deeply affects their worship and serving experience. The fleeting

reality of being accepted in God's house for stepfamilies navigating the profound complexities of joining two families together after great personal loss and disillusionment are particularly painful.

Loren L. Townsend in addressing stepfamilies formed through a remarriage after divorce remarks, "From multiple sources, the message to remarrying couples is that their commitment is not as valid or worthy as a first marriage. This explains why family investment, community involvement, and celebration are so easily withheld."<sup>122</sup> The research participants who contributed to the thesis project, "A Church Based Curriculum Providing Marriage and Family Education for Stepfamilies and Ministers," were invited to respond to an anonymous online survey of over one-hundred questions and to participate in a local specialized focus group.

### ***Stepfamily Survey Participation***

Anonymous online survey participants were contacted through social media, personal invitation, flyer postings, and email requests. Each participant was a legal adult, eighteen years of age or older. Participants included stepfamily members and or friends of stepfamily members and church attendees who were associated with a stepfamily member in some way in the context of the local church in their region of the United States.

Each survey responder was asked to identify their relationship to a stepfamily scenario along with general demographic information. Participants could skip sections that were not applicable to their context and situation, but each participant did respond to the local church experience part of the survey. Participants, though similar in socio-economic factors were not chosen based on cultural, racial, ethnicity, or denominational realities or preferences.

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122. Loren L. Townsend, *Pastoral Care with Stepfamilies: Mapping the Wilderness* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2000), 82.

What is more, participants were also asked questions about their beliefs on marriage, remarriage, biblical understanding of family life, and ecclesial matters involving leadership and attitudes toward stepfamily realities. Though all the participants were adults, the survey captured stepfamily participant perspectives from adult stepchildren who were raised in a stepfamily, became a member of a stepfamily due to parents remarrying after they were adults, and from the standpoint of a stepfather, stepmother, stepspouse, stepsibling, halfsibling, and stepgrandparents.

Adult participants who were raised in stepfamily homes and attended church could reflect on their realities both from the perspective of a former stepchild and an adult stepchild. These views are unique but helpful. H. Norman Wright rightly points out that “We never completely eliminate our childhood experiences or the child within us. . .”<sup>123</sup> While children are potentially a useful cohort to include in a survey such as a stepfamily survey the adults who grew up in a stepfamily who contribute from their understanding of the past do so after years of reflection and understanding. These observations and insights stem from personal stories which are important, requiring a format that encourages storytelling, and in turn, complementing the anonymous data from the survey.

### ***Participatory Learning Activity (PLA) Focus Group Participation***

Adult members of local congregations were invited to participate in a participatory learning activity (PLA) to gain an understanding of the main issues facing stepfamilies in today’s local expression of the Christian church. The PLA is a specialized tool for a focus group setting that allows non-homogenous groups of six or seven to gain consensus on the most important issues of stepfamily life that require intervention and further training. The groups were

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123. H. Norman Wright, *Making Peace with Your Past* (Grand Rapids, MI: F.H. Revell, 1985), 17.

encouraged to share stories, exchange ideas, and respectfully debate the most important factors of stepfamily life in the church.

Marcia L. Michaels shares the benefit to participants who engaged in this type of research. Michaels reports:

Group discussions and the outcomes resulting from those discussions were considered a helpful aspect of the program. Participants stated that the group discussions “initiated closeness with the group.” Listening to the experiences of others made participants aware of how similar the stepfamily experience was across families. Thus, there was a feeling of comradery because participants had similar experiences (‘eg., hearing somebody else is going through it too makes you feel a little better’). In addition, the expected acceptance and understanding of their experience from other couples in the group, so it was easier to talk about personal issues.<sup>124</sup>

Those who participated in the Stepfamily PLA for this thesis project experienced the same cathartic environment that complemented the information learned from the surveys. Personal narratives, discussions of challenges in stepfamily life, and their experiences in engaging with the body of Christ and the local church helped complete the picture of stepfamily life.

Capturing the story is a critical piece to a more comprehensive applied and qualitative research approach. Sensing asserts, “Stories accommodate ambiguity and inconsistency found in everyday experience.”<sup>125</sup> In building a curriculum for stepfamilies and the churches, they attend research must transcend mere data and statistics by incorporating the emotional and spiritual perceptions of the participants. In participating in this type of high energy focus group and storytelling format a community is formed that avoids group-think.

Contributors consisted of millennials who were products of both a stepfamily dynamic and church life, stepparents, biological parents married to a stepparent, older stepchildren and older remarried couples who raised non-biological children. Each participant possessed a history

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124. Marcia L. Michaels, “Stepfamily Enrichment Program: A Preventive Intervention for Remarried Couples,” *Journal of Specialists in Group Work*, 2006, 137, accessed December 11, 2015, EBSCOhost.

125. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 162.

that included church and who were currently attending church at least three times a month. The groups consisted of men, women, adult children, and grandparents. What is more, the PLA participants were raised in or attended several different Christian Evangelical traditions, including non-denominational Bible churches, Baptist churches, Church of Christ, and Methodist churches.

Of the twenty-seven participants who contributed to the stepfamily PLA focus group, all of them have had some biblical training and could discuss with some effectiveness, the topics of marriage, remarriage, divorce, and parenting from a biblical framework at some level. Each participant had experienced both positive and negative interactions with church leadership and laity. Many of the participants could and were willing to communicate vivid accounts of judgment, and condemnation from fellow church-goers, as well as stories of redemption, forgiveness, and healing.

Every participant was currently active in a church at some level, whether serving in some capacity or attending worship on a regular basis. Some participants also attended mid-week services, bible studies, and or extra-curricular church events. These participants claimed to be born again Christians or saved Christians and spent some time in personal devotional practices. Participants ranged from being new to the faith to having attended church somewhere for decades. All those responding consider the church as an important part of their lives in general and were actively supporting a local church.

Finally, participants were not asked about their political leanings nor their social ideologies, but most partakers maintained a conservative approach to marriage and family issues even after experiencing the pain of divorce themselves. Both research instruments were designed to capture two aspects of stepfamily life and the church. The survey was designed to identify areas of common struggle associated with blending two families, while the focus group

attempted to capture not only the stories of stepfamily members in the church but to narrow down the critical issues facing Christian stepfamilies to help create a relevant curriculum for families and ministers. After all, it is the people and their experiences that ultimately inform the rationale.

### Research Rationale

The growing population of stepfamilies in America is mirrored in the American church. Ironically, most stepfamilies in the church avoid conversations about their family and remarriage status due to their fears of reprisal. It is ironic because as these families become the majority in the churches across this nation, one would think that the church would endeavor to shed light on the issue of serial divorce and remarriage. Shedding light on a matter considered taboo in the church is the only way healing can occur, but the church figuratively turns away from the problem, if not attacking the families outright as the scourge of God's church.

Weldon Hardenbrook in speaking of Generation X asserts that "Today's children are the first generation in this country's history who think divorce and separation are a normal part of family life."<sup>126</sup> Understandably, this current generation of millennials not only see divorce as normative but remarriage and stepfamily life as socially traditional. Stepfamilies are indeed a reality in the current zeitgeist; however, the church is largely absent if not irrelevant to those who struggle in their marriages and remarriages. So, the cycle continues while Christians either stand impotently by or in adversarial judgment toward members of stepfamilies.

To determine the prevailing attitude toward divorce and remarriage, along with the understanding of the contemporary stepfamily, and how these stepfamilies relate to the typical local church, two research instruments were employed. First, a general online survey was applied to capture the participant's personal status, their biblical understanding of the issues,

<sup>126</sup>. Hardenbrook, *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, 379.

their experiences and opinions regarding the church's role in ministering to stepfamilies, and their difficulties navigating through life in the context of a stepfamily. Second, a Participatory Learning Activity (PLA) was used to conduct a focus group. This focus group was used to determine the top five factors or issues facing stepfamilies due to their family status in a local church setting.

### ***Online Survey***

The saga of the stepfamily and church life by its nature fails to tell the story. In other words, since most stepfamilies are relatively silent about their position and their struggles in realizing a healthy and productive life it was necessary to gather information anonymously from a cross section of people with some experience in local church life. After all, the local church is a family comprised mostly of families. As Reggie Joiner and Carey Nieuwhof contend, "We should understand that the primary purpose of the family is to show them God's love through that relationship and invite them to embrace their part in His story."<sup>127</sup>

The online survey was a start in exploring the Christian stepfamily's story in the context of a wider community, namely, God's church family. After collecting general information about the participant and their households the survey consisting of one-hundred and fourteen questions was designed to uncover a prevailing view of stepfamily and church life. Sections included questions on family challenges, personal theology on remarriage, parenting issues, church experience and the need for training on stepfamily issues.

In this way, topics and themes could be extrapolated from the data to build a relevant curriculum that would prepare and guide stepfamilies toward a more fulfilling home life, while training ministers and congregations how to best come alongside these families in their time of

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127. Reggie Joiner and Carey Nieuwhof, *Parenting Beyond Your Capacity: Connect Your Family to a Wider Community* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010), 188.

need. All families experience anxious and troubled times throughout its life. However, stepfamilies often experience these troubled times or storms on less than sound footing. The more challenging context of the typical stepfamily is due to the vast array of personal past issues that are brought to bear on the different relationships formed when two, once separate families, come together as one.

Once uncovered by the questionnaire, these complicated past issues and current stepfamily struggles become the framework on which a curriculum is built. Peter Scazzero rightly points out that, “In emotionally healthy churches, people live and lead out of brokenness and vulnerability.”<sup>128</sup> The stepfamily online survey attempts to bring the general themes of brokenness and vulnerability of stepfamily life as it relates to the local church to the surface, while a focus group setting captures the most prevalent themes associated with stepfamily life through stories and dialogue.

### ***Participatory Learning Activity (PLA)– Focus Group***

The rationale behind complementing an anonymous online survey with a specialized focus group (PLA) is to enter the local narrative of the stepfamily perspective and their experience within the context of church life. A prominent premise of this study and resulting project is that a stepfamily comes together in the wake of personal loss. No loss is insignificant. Scazzero remarks, “Stuffed down and denied, they gather in our souls like heavy stones that weigh us down. Unattended to over time, they prevent us from entering into walking freely and honestly with God and others.”<sup>129</sup>

In this light, an instrument that provides a platform for these families to share their stories, and realize their vulnerability in a safe arena, like the PLA, allows researchers to

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128. Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, 114.

129. *Ibid.*, 161.



understand the intricacies of the stepfamily at a deeper and more nuanced level. In building a church-based curriculum for stepfamilies, the PLA allows the adult members of a church to identify the top five factors that confront the stepfamily in the context of their local church. Each PLA can be designed based on a common challenge facing the families in their locale and even denomination.

For this thesis project the general question, “What are the top 5 factors or challenges for stepfamilies in relation to church life?” will assist in developing a generalized stepfamily curriculum that is based on both church experience and biblical foundations. Working in several small groups, adults of all ages, origin, and experience will share their stories and struggles while hearing from others.

As the members of each group catalog the various aspects of their challenges and experiences they will be guided to a consensus to determine the top five factors or issues the group has experienced as stepfamily members in the local church. The group then enters a non-threatening debate to rank the top five factors in order of significance or prevalence. Subsequently, each group will discuss their findings in a general focus group session. The major points that surface during the general focus group session will be used to develop relevant themes that will in part formulate the content of the curriculum.

The precise and practical nature of the PLA lends itself to many uses. As a research instrument for this thesis project, it assists in framing the general stepfamily curriculum by generalizing the information and perspectives gathered from a sample of church-based stepfamily members. However, the PLA is also of value as part of a customized stepfamily curriculum itself. Once the PLA is completed in a church program, the information can be used to arrange various modules of the stepfamily curriculum for any given congregation based on their felt needs.

Though common motifs exist in the lives of most American stepfamilies, including their experiences in the church, the regional differences associated with various regions, sub-cultures, and denominations, necessitate that the curriculum maintains a certain amount of flexibility as it relates to its application. What is more, the PLA serves to fill in the gaps left by the sheer paucity of academic research on stepfamilies and their experiences in the church. This lack of applied research on the topic is what makes such a curriculum so vital to the life of the church and its growing population of stepfamilies.

#### Related Academic Studies

Though research and literature abound in family life, marriage, parenting, and church realities in general, the stepfamily in the local church has been largely ignored or lost in the extensive study of family life. Tragically, the stepfamily, though very similar in its external appearances, strives to endure multitudinous challenges foreign to traditional families. Nevertheless, research on the realities of the stepfamily are beginning to emerge, albeit in a trickle, and primarily deal with general stepfamily enrichment and or therapy outside a church or religious setting.

Not surprisingly, past studies have shown that effective counseling will help stepcouples communicate better. Michaels, who conducted a focus group after a pilot enrichment program geared toward stepfamilies, concludes that normalizing the stepfamily experience, and teaching the families about the developmental process of stepfamily formation are keys to successful treatment. Further, addressing issues to strengthen the new marital relationship, delineating the stepparent and stepchild relationship, and the maintenance of a healthy relationship with the non-custodial parent are critical components to a successful therapeutic result.<sup>130</sup>

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130. Marcia L. Michaels, "The Stepfamily Enrichment Program: A Preliminary Evaluation Using Focus Groups," *The American Journal of Family Therapy* 28 (2000): 72, accessed December 15, 2016, EbscoHost.

In the light of this research, Michaels reveals:

Research has provided us with extensive evidence that interventions designed specifically for stepfamilies are needed because the challenges they face are somewhat unique. But while there is a need for interventions designed specifically for stepfamilies, there is a dearth of actual treatment programs for this segment of the population.<sup>131</sup>

Noteworthy is that this sector of the population now accounts for more than half of the families in the United States and arguably the typical American church. In another article, Michaels discusses the upward trend of divorce and particularly the frequency of divorce among couples in a second marriage. The researcher includes the increasing trend of having children in non-marital relationships as further evidence of instability for the family. Michaels contends:

Multiple marital transitions lead to various mental health, academic, family, and work-related problems. In particular, there is evidence that children and adolescents in stepfamilies are at risk for various mental health problems such as conduct disorder, depression, substance abuse, academic difficulties, and negative self-concept.<sup>132</sup>

Family issues notwithstanding, remarried couples experience different sources of marital conflict that include unhealthy boundaries, conflicting loyalties, complicated parental relationships, and disciplinary role confusion.<sup>133</sup> Obviously, intervention is not only helpful but necessary as stepfamilies languish in society and the church.

Though the evidence showed that therapeutic intervention offers value for stepfamilies, many stepfamilies are reluctant to seek help, especially in the church, because of perceived and real retributions. Another study conducted in Australia confirms the great need for stepfamily intervention, “Despite the increasing prevalence of stepfamilies, and the widely-acknowledged problems these families experience; there has been surprisingly little research into interventions

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131. Michaels, “The Stepfamily Enrichment Program,” 62.

132. Michaels, “Stepfamily Enrichment Program: a preventive intervention for remarried couples,” 136.

133. Ibid.

for stepfamilies.”<sup>134</sup> As of 2007, the authors report that only twenty studies have been conducted on stepfamily interventions, half of them dating before 1994.<sup>135</sup>

The Australian study, like Michaels’ results, indicated that the stepcouples benefited from meeting other stepcouples because it normalized their experience of stepfamily life. The participants noted that in meeting others they realized they were “doing ok” and that it was good to receive encouragement and support from couples like themselves.<sup>136</sup> It is important to note that these studies were done in either a focus group setting or interview to understand the issues stepfamilies faced and are not necessarily applied research. In fact, the most current studies available addressed clinical or counseling interventions apart from a community such as church; rather, the interventions discussed were performed in a counseling setting.

Another article listed the common areas of interpersonal stress unique to stepfamilies and remarried couples. Greta W. Stanton identifies the following stressors:

The following are among the causes of stress identified: (1) discontinuities in children's socialization experiences and in parent-child bonding processes; (2) conflicting lifestyles of biological families and stepfamilies (3) power and authority issues; (4) distribution of material and emotional resources; (5) different phases of family members' life cycles; and (6) changes in children's ordinal position in the family. In addition, incongruity of expectations and ambiguity regarding appropriate behavior for steprelationships seem to be underlying themes of troubled stepfamilies. Some clients liken the situation of the stepfamily to that of an immigrant in a strange land. Bewilderment about new family roles is noted not only by family members, but frequently by professionals who work with them.<sup>137</sup>

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134. Jan M. Nicholson, “Promoting Healthy Stepfamilies: Couples' Reasons for Seeking Help and Perceived Benefits from Intervention,” *Family Matters*, Winter 2007, 49, accessed December 11, 2015, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

135. Ibid.

136. Ibid., 52.

137. Greta W. Stanton, “Preventive Intervention with Stepfamilies,” *Social Work*, May, 1986, 201, accessed October 31, 2016, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

Apparently, the multitude of unique stressors experienced by stepfamilies warrants specific interventions, but also the understanding of these challenges by those closest to them. That is if a person's support network and extended community were educated on these unique problems and seemingly insurmountable obstacles, healing and wholeness would be obtainable.

Exacerbating the stressors inherent to stepfamilies is the fact that stepfamilies are born out of the losses endured by the members of the new family. Every member has experienced loss and in most cases, is struggling with more than one loss. Per Stanton, one of the greatest losses, especially for children in the stepfamily, is the loss of their extended relatives and community. Stanton asserts, "The withdrawal of important support systems, of significant others at the point of crisis, represents a serious loss for children."<sup>138</sup> Another premise of this thesis project is that though loss is unavoidable in the formation of a stepfamily, a properly equipped biblical community is uniquely qualified to minister to these families who are overwhelmed with stress and loss.

James Furrow and Gail Palmer concur. Agreeing with the various lists of challenges, trials, and pain associated with stepfamily life, Furrow and Palmer rightly point out that "Therapy focused on processing the past and present emotional experience of family members is necessary for promoting middle ground and fostering a new family identity."<sup>139</sup> In applying the modality of Emotionally Focused Family Therapy (EFFT) in the context of the stepfamily, counselors can identify opportunities that stem from attachment theory.

Since research reveals that members of a stepfamily have experienced loss the authors assert that the ". . . Underlying and unmet emotional needs function to organize relational patterns in a stepfamily," which trigger the anxiety and or avoidant issues common to attachment

138. Stanton, "Preventive Intervention with Stepfamilies," 202.

139. James Furrow and Gail Palmer, "EFFT AND BLENDED FAMILIES: BUILDING BONDS FROM THE INSIDE OUT," *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, Winter 2007, 45, accessed December 11, 2015, EBSCOhost.

disorders.<sup>140</sup> Again, clinical intervention is in view here and is recommended by the researchers. However, the Australian study, by Nicholson, Phillips, Whitton, Halford and Sanders, point out that over half those stepfamily members who sought and found counseling unhelpful proffered the counselor's or therapist's lack of knowledge and training in stepfamily issues as the central problem.<sup>141</sup>

Certain tenets of EFFT seem promising. As Furrow and Palmer suggest, "The first goal of EFFT with stepfamilies is to build a therapeutic alliance with the family that is characterized by a 'felt sense' of safety."<sup>142</sup> Furrow and Palmer describe the EFFT intervention as follows:

The common intervention used in EFFT with stepfamilies includes: validating and normalizing family members' emotional experience without alienating others; reframing the presenting problem within the context of common adjustment issues faced by stepfamilies; identifying and deescalating the negative interactional cycle both within and between the biological and stepfamily subsystems; facilitating the expression of attachment needs in strengthening the bonds between biological parents and child(ren); and clarifying the relationship between stepparent and child(ren) as this relates to expectations of intimacy and discipline.<sup>143</sup>

Clearly, there is value in each of these interventions as possible themes in developing a church-based training and ministry curriculum geared toward helping congregants belonging to stepfamilies. In other words, a program that assists the participating stepfamilies in normalizing their experience, identifying negative cycles, and developing appropriate strategies for closeness and authoritative correction would promote a healthier family system.

Children who join a new family are particularly vulnerable. The newly married adults see the new relationship as an improvement in their lives if not an answer to past problems.

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140. Furrow and Palmer, "EFFT and Blended Families," 47.

141. Nichols et al., "Promoting healthy stepfamilies: Couples' reasons for seeking help and perceived benefits from intervention.," 54.

142. Furrow and Palmer, "EFFT and Blended Families," 48.

143. Ibid., 51.

Whether that is true or not, children do not have this perspective. Rather, children suffer a further loss when a parent remarries as the hope of reconciliation of the original parents is suddenly gone. One study examines the adjunct therapy known as bibliotherapy.

Kathleen M. McInnis defines bibliotherapy in part as a curriculum of activity grounded in the interactive mental processes of media and those who experience it.<sup>144</sup> McInnis instructs:

Most frequently, bibliotherapy with children uses fiction that portrays children in a situation similar to that which the child is experiencing. The story and characters are discussed by the therapist and child in the process of finding solutions to problems. The bibliotherapeutic process consists of four distinct phases: identification, projection, abreaction and catharsis, and insight and integration.<sup>145</sup>

Apparently, McInnis' article was written before the advent of the Internet. However, the heart of bibliotherapy could incorporate more contemporary forms of media. A therapist could use electronic books or appropriate video games to apply the same four distinct phases. Furthermore, the church could incorporate this modality using biblical stories to reach the same destination, while grounding the child in the word of God.

Though children are the most vulnerable members of a stepfamily, it is the couple that is central to the family and their level of relational health is the best determinant of stepfamily success or failure. Counselor and Christian expert on stepfamilies, Ron Deal, conducted a study of over fifty-thousand couples that revealed a list of the top strengths associated with healthy stepcouples. Self-described happy couples rated high in the areas of personality, communication, conflict resolution, leisure activities and couple flexibility.<sup>146</sup>

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144. McInnis, "Bibliotherapy: Adjunct to Traditional Counseling with Children of Stepfamilies.," 154.

145. Ibid., 155.

146. Deal and Olson, *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage: Keys to Success in the Blended Family*, 31.

Embedded in these five areas, researchers found some common attributes among stepcouples who were healthy and happy. Functioning stepcouples had a realistic understanding of their family of origin issues, self-awareness of their positive traits as well as their shortcomings, similar views on finances, would spend ample down time together, and were emotionally safe with one another, demonstrating an equal ability to communicate their feelings and expectations.

There is abundant opportunity for the local church to come alongside this burgeoning population of stepfamilies. The few studies that exist on the realities of stepfamily life agree that there are unique and complex issues common to all stepfamilies. Studies of all types and the literature that supports them consistently promote intervention as a critical component of helping these families end the cycle of divorce and remarriage.

However, very little is written on the role of the local church as it relates to healthy remarriages and the crucial position the church occupies in the life of its stepfamilies. A proper review of the existing literature and the original research provided by this thesis project reveals that there are consistent and relevant themes that support an effective church-based curriculum. This church-based curriculum would be designed specifically for stepfamilies who desire to live their lives on mission for God while in community with His people.

#### Relevant Project Themes

The relative dearth of studies and related literature addressing the stepfamily and the local church aside, quite a few themes begin to surface from the materials that do exist. Coupled with original research that directly speaks to stepfamily life in the context of the local church, the past and current wisdom on stepfamily issues serves as a thematic starting point for the evolution of an active church-based program. Though much of the writing is academic in nature,



identifying the motifs common to the stepfamily will allow for the ontogenesis of a decidedly real-world prospectus.

Doctoral candidate Ronald L. Beck provides a few broad categories that can help in shaping an initial outline for a stepfamily curriculum. The student suggests stepfamily topics such as the primacy of the stepcouple relationship, birth order issues with the children, extended family matters such as holiday travel plans, and the difficulties with ex-spousal relationships.<sup>147</sup> Though Beck attempts to ground his thesis project in Scripture, the project does not necessarily provide new insights into the stepfamily's experience in and with the church.

Similarly, another Doctor of Ministry candidate, William J. Perry, attempts to give advice to pastors on co-parenting, birth order issues, and the roles of the various members of the new stepfamily. The theme that arises from Perry's work is one of normalizing the experiences of the stepfamily. Perry writes, "This thesis project presents the blended family as a family. As the blended family learns what it means to be a new family, it will learn to develop a broader definition of what it means to be a family."<sup>148</sup> How the pastoral staff, congregation, and the stepfamily achieve this normalcy, however, is not addressed.

The question remains as to how a stepfamily, desiring to flourish as a family and as a vital part of the church, can realize this fulfillment. A curriculum designed to educate the church and its stepfamilies will consist of several entities. The curriculum will necessarily bear a resemblance to group counseling, a marriage and family workshop, a parenting class, and a theological seminar. However, the underlying warrant to any strong church-based stepfamily program must be one of grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

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147. Beck, "Effective Blended Family Ministry in the 21st Century Church."

148. Perry, "Blended Families in Conflict: Essentials A Pastor Should Know," 58.

Beyond the biblical underpinnings of redemption one topic that is indispensable is to develop a theology of divorce and remarriage, that includes a personal theology of suffering and loss. Stepparents and those married to them must come to an understanding of where their new marriage stands before God. So, one theme that stands out is allowing stepfamilies to develop a moral vision for their family. Loren L. Townsend contends:

God forgives, liberates, and restores. God's love seeks to find that which was lost and restore that which was forfeited. . . . An adequate moral vision for families will seek to guard families against divorce and cultural erosion, but will also interpret the liberating and restoring activity of God for divorced and remarried people.<sup>149</sup>

Given Townsend's insightful perspective on pastoral care, any effective church-based curriculum must demonstrate the central theme of liberation or freedom in Christ.

In establishing a moral vision, a secondary biblical theme will arise from the biblical narrative on family dysfunction and restoration. As a tool, a genogram can be helpful in identifying patterns of maladaptive relational behavior. Applying the genogram to biblical families showcased in Scripture can often normalize the difficulties that stepfamilies face so that they can begin seeing past the negative and focus on the hope set before them.

In reminding stepcouples and families that forgiveness applies to them like any other family another theme quickly emerges. Ron L. Deal remarks, "We cannot help but have expectations of what lies ahead. And because love and romance are natural blinders, expectations are often filled with unrealistic visions for how stepfamily life will proceed."<sup>150</sup> It is right to have hope, but hope must be tempered by reality, or unmet expectations will shipwreck the marriage.

Another possible theme, then, is dispelling the myths of a second marriage and or forming a stepfamily. Of course, understanding the complexities and challenges of developing

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149. Townsend, *Pastoral Care with Stepfamilies: Mapping the Wilderness*, 22–23.

150. Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family*, 62.

and growing a healthy and well-adjusted stepfamily would be more helpful before the wedding. However, understanding the pitfalls and myths associated with stepfamily formation at any point after the wedding can serve to reset the relationship and begin the healing process. Deal rightly states:

When unrealistic expectations meet reality, disappointment sets in and becomes a huge relational obstacle for many couples. Once disillusionment is felt, persons tend to blame the relationship itself or their spouse instead of their own unrealistic expectations. When this happens, partners posture themselves against each other, not beside each other.<sup>151</sup>

There is bondage associated with shattered dreams and unmet expectations; any effective treatment must include a thorough discussion of the confrontation between reality and personal desire related to the new relationships formed in a stepfamily. Naturally, these new relationship expectations include the parent-child dynamic.

As stated in several different ways previously, children are the most vulnerable to the losses they suffer since they did not choose divorce or a remarriage. A stepfamily curriculum based in the local church must include strategies on raising stepchildren with stepsiblings and half-siblings. These strategies would include addressing parenting roles, boundaries, and disciplinary approaches.

The right footing is necessary here. Jane Nelsen, Cheryl Erwin, and H. Stephen Glenn postulate:

People generally do better when they feel better, and they often feel better when they believe they are appreciated for who they are, as well as for the things they do. The healthiest families are those in which people express gratitude to each other, encourage each other, and celebrate positive things about each other.<sup>152</sup>

Understandably, positive relations with newly acquired unsought family members does not just happen because it is addressed in a seminar. Stratagems that include transformational prayer,

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151. Deal and Olson, *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage: Keys to Success in the Blended Family*, 89.

152. Jane Nelsen, Cheryl Erwin, and H. Stephen Glenn, *Positive Discipline for Your Stepfamily: Nurturing Harmony, Respect, and Joy in Your New Family* (Rocklin, CA: Prima, 1997), 15.

effective communication, a new understanding of childhood and adolescent motivation, along with counseling will be needed in this area to get unstuck, move forward and dispel wrong thinking.

Truisms can be defined as unhelpful or wrong beliefs. Scott Browning and Elise Artelt point out that “Culturally sanctioned truisms can be most insidious.”<sup>153</sup> One such truism, per Browning and Artelt, is that a stepmother must always love their stepchild. Though loving a stepchild certainly makes life easier, a stepmother can still desire the best for a stepchild without possessing a maternal love for the child.<sup>154</sup> Avoiding labels and unhelpful beliefs is another key theme in developing the stepfamily curriculum.

Another idea that arises from existing studies and materials on stepfamily life is that of creating a new family identity while not dismissing existing identities in other relationships. Froma Walsh points out that stepparents can tend to feel like strangers in the new home which causes loneliness and isolation leading to resentment as they address the needs of their children and the needs of their new spouse.<sup>155</sup>

Walsh contends that early in the formation of a stepfamily, relationship building is best done within the couple’s relationship, but as common ground is formed, “. . . Building a sense of ‘we-ness’ or stepfamily identity is important.”<sup>156</sup> Stepfamily identity speaks thematically to developing new family rituals and fostering an environment of “belonging” to each member.

Family status notwithstanding, the process of terminating a marriage is often very costly. Seldom does a marriage end that does not take its toll emotionally, spiritually, and even physically. What is more, divorcing a person has a financial cost, and it is almost always

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153. Browning and Artelt, *Stepfamily Therapy: A 10-step Clinical Approach*, 89.

154. Ibid.

155. *Normal Family Processes: Growing Diversity and Complexity*, 162.

156. Ibid.

expensive. The theme of money and finances is usually secondary to all the other issues associated with forming a new family. However, financial compatibility is critical to a successful stepfamily. Separate checking accounts, views on money, investments, and employment all come into view when remarriage occurs. A proper curriculum designed toward the stepfamily in the local church must address material stewardship issues.

Patricia Schiff Estess posits:

Clearly, remarrieds will not have identical value systems, but each of their highest priorities should be meshable if there's to be a possibility of planning and living a life together. Values are different from style. Values are the conscious or unconscious beliefs you feel in your gut; style is the expressions of those values.<sup>157</sup>

Coming together as a new family after the dissolution of a previous marriage will undoubtedly cause some financial tension. The tension inherent to money matters, however, does not have to be a negative part of the relationship. That said, tackling economic issues will require humility and teamwork on the part of the stepcouple.

Socio-economic status does play a role in the formation of a new family, but it does not have to be part of the new family's identity. Les and Leslie Parrott elucidate, "Higher incomes can reduce stress, but they don't stop the fighting. Most couples, regardless of income, have conflicting spending and saving styles."<sup>158</sup> Identifying the stepcouple's financial tendencies and developing financial strategies that accentuate the positives is a critical theme for a church-based stepfamily curriculum.

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157. Estess, *Money Advice for Your Successful Remarriage: Handling Delicate Financial Issues with Love and Understanding*, 9.

158. Les , and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Second Marriage before It Starts: Nine Questions to Ask before (and After) You Remarry : Workbook for Women*, expanded and updated ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2015), 162.

In sum, the formation of a stepfamily arising from a divorce will always mean dealing with financial considerations. It is a stepfamily's household finances that lead to some of the most contentious battles in the home. Maggie Scarf sheds light on the issue:

One or both of them will typically have come to the remarriage with some resources and/or obligations from the past, and they must collaborate to work out a viable, fair system when it comes to the running of the household, as well as a plan for whatever unknowns may occur in the future.<sup>159</sup>

The theme of money and how to handle it for the benefit of the new family will require a biblically based worldview in which money is secondary to godliness and spiritual leadership in the stepfamily home that promotes selflessness.<sup>160</sup>

The very nature of forming a stepfamily means compromise. There are clearly legal and moral lines that should never be crossed, but beyond those, a stepcouple must understand they are part of a new team that will rise and fall depending on the humility of the stepcouple. Judy A. Hall, a family court judge, asserts:

Compromise is not a dirty word. Sometimes the path of least resistance is the best path. ... If you draw a line, find an alternate solution. The stepfamily must necessarily be give and take. If you stand firm on one position, then you may need to bend on another.<sup>161</sup>

The unique complexities facing American stepfamilies require an additional measure of flexibility from those who lead them. The local church should be the catalyst for healing the remarried among the local congregations while restoring the dignity of the divine institution of marriage.

While celebrating the grace offered to all those who remarry and come to Jesus in trust, it is ending the cycle of divorce and remarriage in the church that is truly the goal of a church-based curriculum developed for the stepfamily. The many themes that arise from past studies

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159. Scarf, *The Remarriage Blueprint: How Remarried Couples and Their Families Succeed or Fail*, 182.

160. See Matthew 6:33.

161. Hall, *When Elephants Fight: A Guide to Effective Stepparenting*, 218,220.

and written materials can be used to begin shaping the content of a comprehensive program to bring the stepfamily out of the darkness and back into the light of God's grace in the local church. The original research garnered from the two research instruments used in this thesis project will specifically provide the necessary data and real-life narrative that will be used to build a relevant and applicable curriculum for the education and training of today's stepfamily and those who minister to them in the church.

#### **Chapter 4 -- Marriage and Family Education for Stepfamilies and Ministers**

The intent of this thesis project's applied research was to gather information from a cross section of church attendees who were in some way associated with both stepfamily members and the local church. The Information gleaned from an online survey, and a specialized focus group would provide the framework for building a relevant and impactful curriculum based in the church. Further, the church-based stepfamily curriculum provides a necessary platform to educate families on common challenges while providing potential strategies that lead to a more fulfilled family life. At the same time, the curriculum offers an opportunity for local church leaders to understand and minister to this growing population of blended families.

The research results presented below provide the reader with valid information as it relates to the realities of stepfamily life in general as well as in the context of local church experiences. Therefore, the applied research presented in this thesis project is qualitative in nature rather than quantitative in many aspects. That is, the study seeks answers from the participant's perspective that is trustworthy and applicable to the lives of those experiencing similar challenges and who seek solutions to everyday struggles in stepfamily life.

Qualitative research is generally concerned with realities in social settings. That said, qualitative research cannot rightly be judged by the same criteria as quantitative research, which is described in terms more familiar to the natural sciences. Tim Sensing elaborates, "Issues of generalizability, validity, and reliability are essential to ensure the credibility of the project and the understanding of the experiences being studied. The umbrella term for these issues in qualitative research is "trustworthiness."<sup>162</sup> In this way, qualitative research is as valid as any other method of research as its validity is determined by its usefulness to the reader and user of its information.

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162. Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Project for Doctor of Ministry Theses* [English] (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 214.



By definition, a thesis project is highly applicable to its audience. Sensing continues, “Researchers and readers of qualitative research will engage in a dialectical process that will establish the value of the qualitative research product. If those to whom it was presented judge the research useful, relevant, and significant, then the research is deemed valid.”<sup>163</sup> The research conducted for this thesis project and church-based stepfamily curriculum captures useful information from its participants using two distinct instruments of qualitative and applied research.

From these instruments, the survey and focus group, trustworthy information will be used to create an outline of an educational curriculum to assist stepfamilies in living fulfilled lives inside and outside of the church. Ministers and other leaders within the context of the local church will gain an understanding of stepfamily life to more effectively reach this growing, but neglected population of the United States, and in turn, a significant population in the various expressions of the local Christian church.

### **Applied Research Results**

#### **Anonymous Online Survey**

Designed to capture a broad range of perspectives, thoughts, experiences, and biblical understanding, the online survey secured the responses of one-hundred and ten participants. The survey participants consisted of various members of an American stepfamily who were eighteen years of age or older. The study assumes that many of the desires associated with first-time marriages are shared, at least in part, with the stepcouple. Stepouples and the families they form want and need the same sense of purpose, love, respect, and fulfillment that all couples and families wish for and set out to achieve.

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163. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 215.

First-time marriages usually have a time in which the couples establish a measure of relational strength or cohesiveness before children enter the family system. Patricia L. Papernow elucidates the following:

In family systems language, stepfamilies begin their lives together with a weak couple subsystem, a tightly bounded biological parent-child alliance, and “interference” in family functioning from a variety of people outside the nuclear subsystem (particularly the ex-spouse).<sup>164</sup>

Evidently, inherent disadvantages are built into the formation of the average stepfamily, to the extent they are pathological phenomena.<sup>165</sup> Therefore these difficulties are a major premise in conducting this thesis project’s research. Likewise, another major premise of this investigation is that stepfamilies in the context of a local church endure a real or perceived anonymity or they are judged to be lesser Christians because of various views on divorce and remarriage.

Disadvantages and negative dispersions notwithstanding, the changes in the family’s social reality is overwhelming for many stepfamilies. Emily and John Visher point out that the typical nuclear first-time marriage with children produces a possibility of twenty-eight pairs of relationships that can produce 247 possible interactions.

However, if the couple divorces and one of the spouses remarries, the possible pairs in the family would increase from twenty-eight pairs with 247 interactions to 136 pairs, with 131,054 possible interactions. If both spouses remarry, the number of possible interactions jumps to nearly nine-million.<sup>166</sup> For some newly formed families, the magnitude of social pressure produces an unmanageable situation. Consequently, if the stepfamily under this type of

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164. Patricia L. Papernow, *Becoming a Stepfamily: Patterns of Development in Remarried Families* (Cleveland, OH: GIC-Press, 1998), 45.

165. Ibid.

166. Emily B. Visher and John S. Visher, *How to Win as a Stepfamily*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 198–99.

relational pressure cannot find solace in a healthy support community, its chances of survival will decrease exponentially.

### ***Results – The Participant***

The anonymous online survey participants, consisting of 110 men and women over the age of eighteen, answered an assortment of one-hundred and fourteen questions. Each participant could choose to skip over certain sections that did not apply to them personally. That is, a participant who was a stepchild but never a stepparent could bypass questions specifically targeting parents. 72 percent of the participants were women, while 28 percent of the participants were male (79:31). The clear majority of participants were over the age of thirty, with nearly 40 percent in the forty-one to fifty age bracket.

Since the survey was designed to capture general perceptions of stepfamily life, and then specifically the stepfamily dynamic as it exists in today's Christian local church, every conceivable member of a stepfamily was invited to participate. That said, 41 percent (45) of the participants were stepchildren themselves, while nearly 35 percent of the participants were stepparents (38).

Other participants consisted of adult biological children in a stepfamily, such as stepsiblings, or half-brothers or sisters, along with biological parents who had remarried a person who did not have children from a previous relationship. A small portion of the survey participants was part of the stepfamily's extended family such as grandparents or aunts and uncles. In this light, 57 percent (63) of the participants were biological parents who had remarried forming a stepfamily.

Nearly all the survey participants reported regular church attendance with most of them reporting weekly church attendance; that is, 75 percent (82) answered that they attend church services at least one time per week. Nearly 85 percent of those who attended church regularly

either attended with their spouse or their entire family. Most those who chose to divulge their denominational preference identified themselves as “Christian” or “non-denominational.” The remaining participants identified with mainline evangelical denominations such as Methodist or Baptist. A church-based stepfamily curriculum is built on the real and or perceived experiences of the step-family as it relates to their experiences in life and their life in the local church.

### ***Results – Stepfamily Perceptions***

Jimmy Evans and Frank Martin point out that step-families, which comprise roughly 50 percent of all families in America, deal with unique challenges that traditional nuclear families do not have to navigate.<sup>167</sup> The authors rightly state:

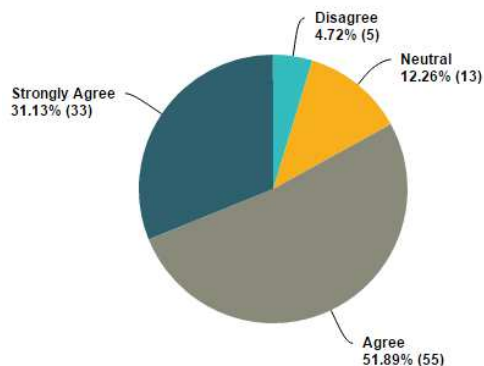
Most often there is a history of pain and disappointment to deal with. There are likely feelings of guilt, shame, or regret. There are ex-spouses in the picture, and financial obligations already in place. And most often there are precious children caught in the middle of it all, struggling with a lot of the same emotions that their parents are fighting to overcome. The dynamics can feel overwhelming, especially to those who go into the relationship unequipped and unprepared.<sup>168</sup>

Congregations of all types are comprised of families struggling to make it because of these unique challenges. This project’s survey reveals that the average church goer is aware that these problems are real for stepfamilies. When asked if they believe remarried couples bring emotional baggage into the new relationship from previous relationships, 85 percent of the participants agreed. Likewise, nearly all agreed that children must heal from the loss of their original family whether due to the divorce of their parents or the death of a parent (Figures 1 and 2).

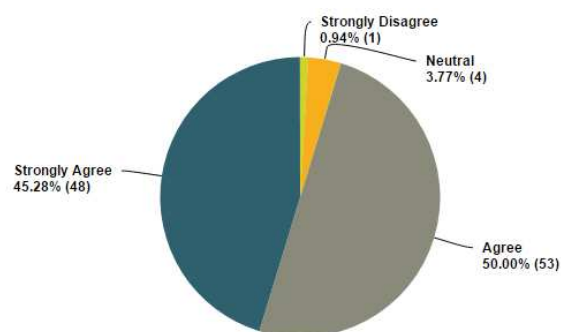
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167. Jimmy Evans and Frank Martin, *Blending Families: 18 Successful Stepfamilies Share Their Secrets to Growing a Healthy Marriage and Family* (Dallas, TX: MarriageToday, 2015), 6.

168. *Ibid.*, 6–7.



*Figure 1. Most remarried couples bring some “emotional baggage” into the new relationship from a previous relationship that can get in the way of creating a healthy stepfamily.*



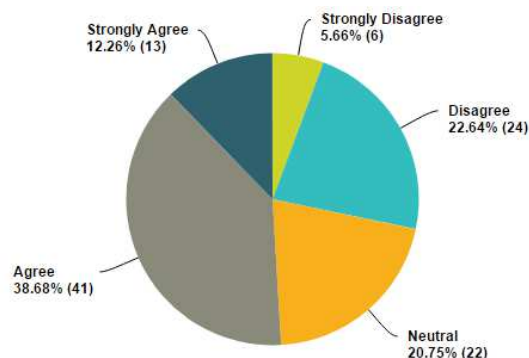
*Figure 2. Children in a step-family need to heal from their losses suffered when the original family broke apart, whether through divorce or death.*

Another major challenge that arises when a stepfamily is formed through remarriage is the issue of child discipline. Not surprisingly, discipline issues are often confused with punishment and consequences for wrong behavior. Determining which adult disciplines the biological and or step children can be an emotional and challenging reality for most stepfamilies due to boundaries and existing parent-child bonds. The stepparent’s intent is the essence of successfully navigating the delicate issue of discipline in the home.

Nelsen, Erwin, and Glenn explain, “Almost anything can be effective discipline when it is done with respect and a genuine desire to teach—and almost anything can be punishment if the desire is to shame or humiliate. Your attitude is key. . .”<sup>169</sup> Achieving a balanced approach to this critical part of effective parenting and stepparenting can be difficult but is necessary. The

169. Nelson, Erwin, and Glenn, *Positive Discipline for Your Stepfamily*, 141–42.

participants agreed that discipline was not only critical, just over 50 percent believe that establishing the disciplinary role early in the relationship was important (Figure 3).



*Figure 3. Stepparents must be willing to discipline their stepchildren from the start of the relationship, or they will not be taken seriously.*

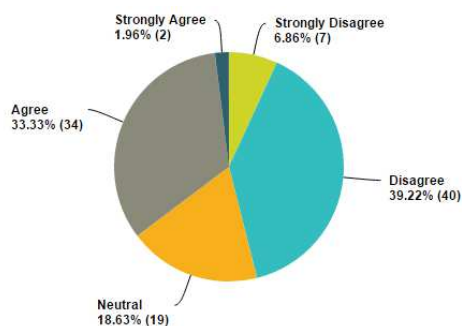
The question of teaching children in a stepfamily and the appropriate time in which to employ disciplinary strategies in a new family relationship is far from being a settled issue. Forty-nine percent of survey participants either disagreed that a disciplinary role must be established quickly by the stepparent or they were undecided on the topic of the stepparent's involvement in this part of parenting.

George S. Glass proposes a different approach altogether in that this author suggests indirectly disciplining a stepchild by going through the biological parent. The author advises, "Once there is a level of trust, you can say what you think, but that is best done in a mentoring or coaching manner rather than in the role of the child's primary disciplinarian."<sup>170</sup> Obviously, the issue of child discipline is a complicated one and will take some time to establish. Over 71 percent of the survey participants believe that becoming a healthy and functioning stepfamily could take more than a year and most believe, nearly 60 percent, that a child does not necessarily have to adapt to the rituals and traditions in their new stepfamily.

170. George S. Glass, *Blending Families Successfully: Helping Parents and Kids Navigate the Challenges so That Everyone Ends Up Happy* (New York: SkyHorse Publishing, 2014), 91.

Though the participants of the survey seem to understand that establishing a healthy stepfamily takes time and work, the participants overwhelmingly agree that the couple is the primary relationship in the stepfamily (90 percent). Trevor Crow Mullineaux and Maryann Karinch assert that the intimate relationship between the married couple must come first. The authors contend that in reality, “The kids get worked into the couple’s scenario rather than the couple getting worked into the kid’s scenario. . . . The two of you are the core unit in this evolving family. Your choice to team up laid the emotional foundation for the merger of the two households.”<sup>171</sup>

Similarly, most of the survey participants agreed that communication between the members of the stepfamily should be open and honest. When asked if the parents in a stepfamily should acknowledge their struggles and difficulties to the children, 72 percent agreed that they should have an honest dialogue while another 10 percent were unsure. However, questions involving the relationship between biological parents and their children and stepparent relationships with their stepchildren revealed a divide between the participants (Figures 4 and 5).



*Figure 4. The strongest connection in a step-family is between the parent and his or her biological child.*

171. Trevor C. Mullineaux and Maryann Karinch, *Blending Families: Merging Households with Kids 8-18* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 34.

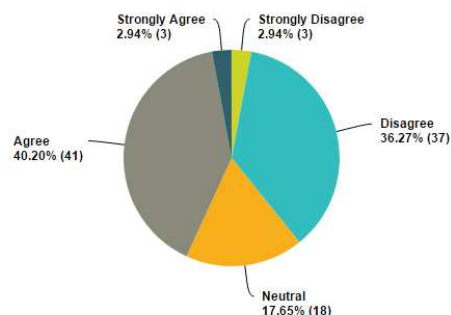


Figure 5. The love between a parent and stepchild usually takes a long time to cultivate.

Participants were strongly divided as to whether the strongest relationship or bond in a stepfamily was between the biological members of the family and whether love between stepfamily members requires an ample amount of time to cultivate. In fact, the same group of respondents were also split on the question as to whether it is important that a stepchild ever loves the stepparent if the child demonstrates respect for the new parent (Figure 6).

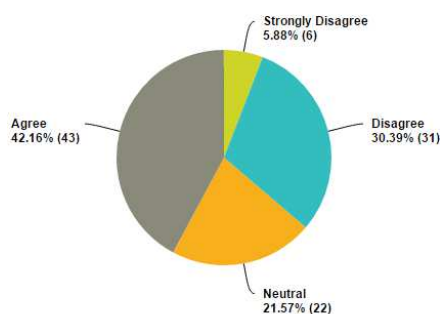


Figure 6. It is acceptable if stepchildren never love their stepparents as long as the stepchild respects them.

The stepfamily survey also revealed that those responding to questions involving family communications, such as family meetings, conflict resolution, open discussions about family rituals and rules were imperative and helpful. For instance, 90 percent of those responding to whether family meetings are useful to the stepfamily were for having regular family meetings. Kathie M. Thomson concurs:



In fact, it is best to have family meetings on a regular basis. Most times, once a month is adequate. But during especially stressful times including the transition period of becoming a blended family, you can have routine meetings as often as once a week.<sup>172</sup>

Regardless of how a family comes together or how the different relationships begin to come together, the step couples active and loving involvement in addressing the challenges inherent to forming and growing a stepfamily rests on the stepcouple.

Ninety-seven percent of the survey participants agreed that the commitment of both the biological and stepparent is equally important to stepfamily success. Seventy percent of those answering this question agreed strongly that both parents in the stepcouple share the responsibility of creating and maintaining a flourishing family dynamic. Both parents should be involved in raising all the children while nurturing their adult relationship and marriage.

Questions regarding the dynamic between parents and stepparents in the home and the children living with them were encouraging. Most participants reported that their biological or stepchildren communicated to them in normal ways. Children and stepchildren demanded appropriate levels of attention, were respectful, confident, and expressed anger in appropriate ways with everyone in the home. However, stepchildren interacted less with the stepparent than they tended to with their biological parent (Figure 7).

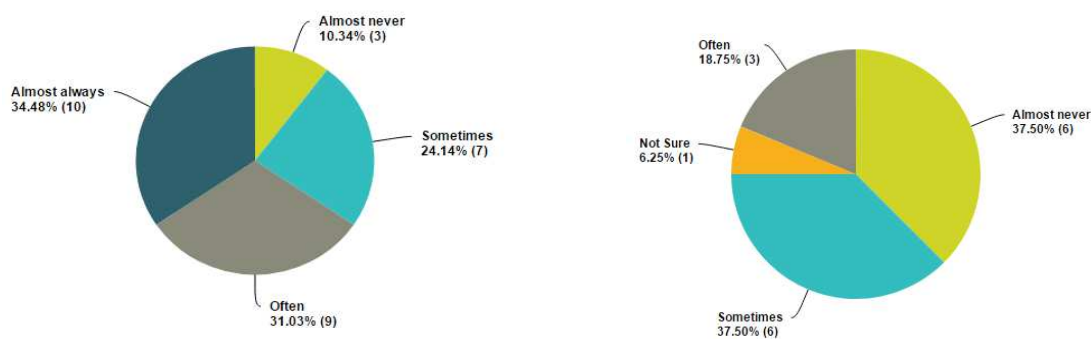


Figure 7. My biological child/stepchild openly communicates his/her concerns with me and asks questions.

172. Kathie M. Thomson, *Managing the Blended Family: Steps to Create a Stronger, Healthier Stepfamily and Succeed at Step Parenting* (Canada, 2015), 30.

The survey shows that biological children were three to four times more likely to openly communicate and ask questions of their biological parents than a stepchild to their stepparent. Interestingly, nearly 35 percent of the biological parents answering this question reported their children always engaged in open dialogue with them, while not one stepparent reported this type of consistent engagement with a stepchild. That said, the survey did indicate that the parents in a stepfamily did initiate conversations on relevant topics with the children in their home.

Eighty percent of the parents participating in the online survey indicated that they held family meetings at least once per year. A third of these parents participated in a family meeting at least once per month to once per week. It seems, however, that adult members engaged in meaningful conversation in an informal manner more consistently and frequently, whether in groups or individually with the children in their home.

Sixty-eight percent reported discussing their family values with the children once every couple of weeks to a week, while approximately 87 percent discuss their religious beliefs with the same frequency. Finally, 53 percent acknowledged that they discuss the negative effects of sexual promiscuity, alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs with the children in the home. Communication of this type helps the stepfamily set expectations and boundaries for the couple and their children.

Boundaries might be tested and crossed by children and stepchildren but it is important they know where “right” is. Half of the parents who participated in the survey admit that they struggle with maintaining consistency in their consequences and boundary setting. Daren Carstens, a pastor, and stepfather, contends, “Agree on the boundaries and the behavioral guidelines as much as possible. Understand this: your children are prone to test your

boundaries.”<sup>173</sup> Children and stepchildren alike naturally manipulate others using the situations they find themselves in. Open dialogue and setting firm expectations about relationships and behavior can create a strong alliance for the stepcouple and minimize the temptation for the child to divide and conquer.

### ***Results – Biblical Understanding of Marriage and Family***

There is perhaps no more emotional topic in the Christian church today than that of divorce and remarriage. Early stances in the church were black and white, and divorce carried a far-reaching stigma. Today, divorce is still rightly seen as a tragedy, the death of a covenant relationship. However, those who have terminated one marriage are increasingly beginning a new relationship, most of them forming another legal marriage that includes children from a previous relationship.

The phenomenon of the stepfamily has replaced divorce as the new stigma of the church. Those responding to this thesis project’s online survey have reported attending church regularly and engaging their families in value and faith-based conversation. That said, it is important to capture the current thoughts on what the Bible and the church say about this rather delicate topic. One of the central premises of this project is that stepfamilies remain anonymous to avoid judgmentalism or they participate on the fringes of the church due to a perceived lower class status in the church.

Research around stepfamily formation and life, though relatively modest in scope and content, reveals many reasons why people remarry. Topping the list is the need for people to satisfy their natural desires for love, purpose, belonging, and security. Even for the children who unwittingly suffered the loss of their family as they knew it would long for acceptance and

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173. Daren Carstens, *The Secret to Blended Families: Marriage and Parenting Success* (St. Louis, MO: Carwayne Publishing, 2013), 101.

security in their new setting. Diana Weiss-Wisdom propagates, “While many stepchildren don’t need another parent, most can benefit from another committed and caring adult in their lives.”<sup>174</sup>

Interestingly, the online survey revealed that nearly 100 percent of the biological parent participants demonstrated daily acts of affection toward their biological children, while only 37 percent of stepparent participants recorded that they always show affection toward their stepchildren. The question of affirmation and affection toward the children in the home uncovers a gap in the stepcouples’ understanding of parenting roles and the critical role they have in demonstrating love and caring for the most vulnerable in the stepfamily system.

This thesis project would argue that parenting is a calling regardless of where the children originated from. Like one’s marriage, a divine institution, the heart of the issue in forming a stepfamily lies in one’s understanding of God’s default position through Jesus Christ, grace. With grace comes redemptive power and God’s desire to see healing and restoration in both the marriage and the home. The participants overwhelmingly agreed that marriage is an institution established by God between one woman and one man (Figure 8).

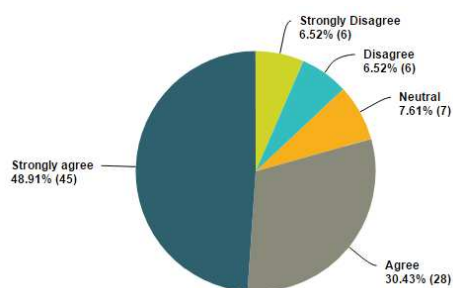
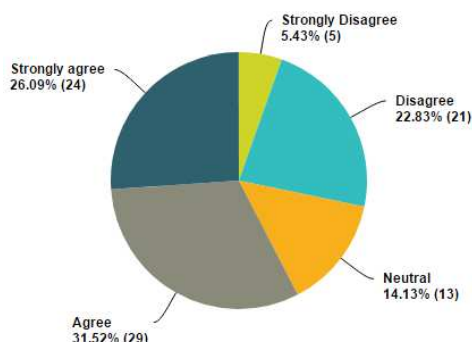


Figure 8. I believe that marriage is a covenant relationship between one man and one woman until the death of a spouse.

So, it appears that both traditional and stepfamily spouses as well as those in their lives still maintain a high opinion of marriage in general. The responder’s doctrine aligns with the

174. Diana Weiss-Wisdom, *Wisdom on Stepparenting: How to Succeed Where Others Fail* (North Charleston, SC: Createspace, 2012), 175.

teachings of conservative and biblically based local churches. Differences and resultant controversies began when the same participants were asked about their views on divorce as it is traditionally presented by the church's interpretation of the so-called biblical acceptance clauses (Figure 9).<sup>175</sup>



*Figure 9. Divorce is wrong except in the case of adultery committed by a spouse or the abandonment of an unbelieving spouse.*

Although 57 percent of the participants either agree or strongly agree that divorce is only permitted based on the acceptance clauses, nearly half of the participants are either unsure or disagree with this belief or more specifically this interpretation of Scripture.

Regardless of the survey participant's views on acceptable reasons for terminating a marriage, approximately 90 percent of those reporting indicated that there is grace available for those who have divorced and remarried. Additionally, of those who have been divorced and remarried, 83 percent believe they have been forgiven for their divorce and that their new marriage is redeemed.

Most of the participants are divided as to whether the Bible depicts stepfamilies in Scripture, or if the Bible addresses the challenges inherent to stepfamilies at all. That said, just over 79 percent believe that their stepfamilies honor God and 88 percent of the same participants believe they have a responsibility to raise every child in the home with Christian values. In this

<sup>175</sup>. See Matthew 5:32; 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:15 Respectively.

light, the question arises as to how stepfamilies navigate the tenets of their local church while living out every aspect of their lives with biblical conviction.

### ***Results – Life in the Church***

Another major premise of this thesis project is that a stepfamily is often, whether overtly or in more subtle ways, received and treated as second class Christians in their local church. The survey reported that 84 percent of respondents strongly disagreed that they were, in fact, second class Christians, while another 10 percent disagreed. Ron Deal explicates that Satan desires to thwart stepfamilies from building godly homes, distracting, discouraging, and eventually defeating them, yet they find little if no support from their church.<sup>176</sup>

Well over half of those stepfamilies surveyed reported that they had been approached by leaders of the church inquiring about their stepfamily status. When asked as to whether they thought church leaders held a lower opinion of them due to their stepfamily status, only 34 percent disagreed with that assessment. Clearly, most families participating in this study think of themselves as real Christians but believe they are judged negatively or are at least marginalized by the institutional church.

Though nearly 74 percent of survey responders indicated that they were comfortable sharing their marital and stepfamily status with church members and leaders, they were somewhat divided on their level of comfort in introducing their stepchildren as children from their spouse's previous marriage. The Becnells share, "We have met remarried men and women who still carry a sense of failure and guilt because of their divorce, and who are hesitant to admit they are now in a blended family."<sup>177</sup> Many who answered this project's survey report that the church is largely a place where they can serve and safely worship.

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176. Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 52.

177. Becnal and Becnal, *God Breathes on Blended Families*, 4.

However, feeling like the church is safe and that they can serve in their God-given ministries does not align with a perceived understanding of the churches authority in relation to marriage. When asked about the church's authority to inquire on their family status, the respondents were broadly divided (Figure 10).

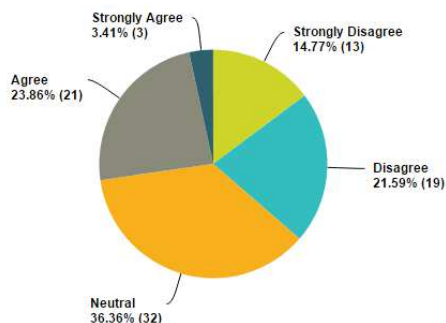


Figure 10. *The Evangelical church has the right to know my family dynamic.*

Seventy-three percent either offered no opinion or disagreed that the church has the right to know of a person's marital or family status. Depending on whether one is approaching the survey question from a general experience or their current experience in church informs their answers. That is, some if not many of the study's participants could have found a church that openly or otherwise accepts their status entirely in the present, but has experienced the negative attitudes toward their status in the past.

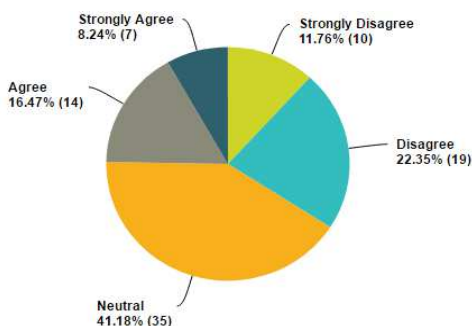


Figure 11. *I feel as if I have been negatively judged by members or leaders in the evangelical church due to my step-family dynamic.*

The neutral answer to the above question should not be discounted as a not-applicable response (Figure 11). Neutral answers merely indicate that the question does not provoke a strong

response either way. Considering that the church is heralded as an institution of grace and restoration including the neutral response with those answers affirming judgment could indicate that 76 percent of the survey participants have not realized fulfillment in their church context due to prevailing attitudes about divorce and remarriage. At the very least the study points to a need for a church-based curriculum to bring these issues to light.

The clear majority of those responding to the stepfamily survey, nearly 80 percent believe that sermons and church-based training on family matters and marriage should include material and content that addresses the step-family dynamic. The desire for stepfamily training makes sense since the survey shows that only 27 percent of those responding believe that the church is up to date on current family trends.

Over half of the participants of the online survey acknowledged that specific marriage and family training geared toward stepfamilies would be beneficial, while nearly 90 percent expressed the need for church leaders to obtain training on the various challenges facing stepfamilies in the life and the church. Furthermore, most agreed that churches should specifically reach out to stepfamilies and most would attend a Bible study specifically directed toward the stepfamily.

Though many of the results thus far offer few surprises as it relates to prevailing attitudes about stepfamily life and the dynamics associated with forming and growing a stepfamily from the stepfamilies perspective, there is something amiss. The research has exposed a potential reason as to why some of the positive outcomes on the questionnaire do not align with the stepfamilies negative perceptions about their status in the local church. This likely reason stems from a minor but consistent presence of participants who hold strong convictions against the reality of stepfamilies.



These minority disparagers draw their power from exploiting the guilt that is already present in the hearts and minds of the stepfamily member. Deal points out, “. . .the message divorced and remarried persons sometimes receive from the church is only half the problem. Stepfamily adults often become spiritually marginalized due their own sense of guilt and unworthiness.”<sup>178</sup> Those who do not want stepfamilies in their church will begin to erode the quality of life for these families through various means of discord.

Many of the results thus far have demonstrated that stepfamilies have strong opinions about the value of their new families. Further, much of the research has revealed a general, if not thorough, understanding of forgiveness, healing, and grace. One might then conclude that stepfamilies are widely accepted in the local church and therefore have vibrant fellowship and service in their Christian walk. However, a trend appeared. Though statistically small, nearly every question of the survey revealed that a small number or percentage of the participants had strong convictions against those who have experienced divorce and remarriage and the subsequent forming of a stepfamily.

In the life of the local church, it takes only a few detractors and those willing to sow seeds of discord to relegate stepfamilies to the shadows and fringes of the church. In this light, this thesis project understands that it is the stories along with the statistics that uncover the realities of stepfamily life in the church. The participatory learning activity focus group is designed to facilitate an environment that is conducive to storytelling and consensus building at it relates to the church and the stepfamily.

#### The Participatory Learning Activity (PLA) Focus Group

“Different fields use different kinds of evidence,” says Wayne C. Booth et al., “. . . so before you start collecting data, you must know the particular kinds of evidence your readers

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178. Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 53.

expect.”<sup>179</sup> In collecting qualitative and applied research data graphs and tables can be useful to identify general trends in attitudes, beliefs, and understanding of a particular issue. However, it is the story or narrative that can uncover the heart issues of a problem or opportunity.

Personal or anecdotal evidence can shed light on raw numbers, while the statistical survey information can speak to the experiences of the local individual, either confirming their beliefs or challenging their perspective. Tim Sensing is once again helpful in explaining the value of one’s story:

What we tell and how we tell it is a revelation of what we believe and what we do. People construct their narratives. They decide what is included and what is excluded in their stories. They plot their stories and add interpretive clues. People tell narratives in such a way as to make sense of life and experience.<sup>180</sup>

This being true, the participatory learning activity as a tool allows a group of people to share their stories while collectively determining and then prioritizing central issues surrounding a problem or opportunity. That is, a question is asked, and a non-homogenous group of people who share some life experience engage one another to solve a problem of determining the most central issue facing them in their context.

In the case of building a church-based curriculum to educate stepfamilies and those who minister to them, a broad question is asked involving those in stepfamily life who have stories involving life in the context of the local church. The PLA question asked of the participants involved with this thesis project focus group was, “What are the top five factors or challenges for stepfamilies in relation to church life?”<sup>181</sup>

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179. *The Craft of Research*, 85.

180. Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Project for Doctor of Ministry Theses* [English] (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 162–63.

181. See Appendix A, PLA Instructions.

Each of four groups then participates in a brainstorming session recording as many issues as the team can produce in a relatively short time frame, namely seven minutes. Once the team has listed numerous potential factors or challenges, the group identifies the top five by voting for each factor. Each participant has a total of ten votes and can vote for any given factor using zero to three votes per item until their votes are gone.

The top five factors identified by the four separate groups working on the same question will then be ranked in priority order from one to five using a matrix that places each element against another. The group must then come to a consensus through discussion as to which item is the number one factor or challenge for stepfamilies as it relates to the church. Each of the four groups at this point has identified a number one issue. The facilitator then opened the floor for discussion in which each of the groups and their members was invited to share their reasons, thoughts, and stories involving their experiences as stepfamily members as it relates to the local church.

### ***Results – Brainstorming Session***

Brainstorming is a concept that allows a group of people to offer ideas connected to an issue or question freely. The first part of the PLA about building a stepfamily curriculum is designed to solicit as many challenges or factors as it relates to the stepfamily and church life. In the seven minutes provided, participants offered a myriad of issues facing stepfamilies as it related to the church. The focus group PLA in view here consisted of four groups of six or seven people of different genders, race, age, and ethnicity.

The rather short period of seven minutes is intentional as it fosters an environment in which the participants must freely offer their thoughts without the benefit of wordsmithing or debate. The answers are recorded on a large sheet of paper by one volunteer member. Since the question, *what are the top five factors or challenges for stepfamilies in relation to church life* is a

broad question, the answers addressed a wide range of categories and issues that stepfamilies face in and out of the context of the church. However, most of the answers or issues still tied back to the church in some way.

Space prohibits a full exposition of every issue or challenge captured during the brainstorming portion of the PLA. However, several trends did start to emerge from the four groups. Perhaps the most prominent of themes woven into much of the brainstorming data recorded during this exercise was that of persecution, judgment, not being accepted, and exclusion because of their status as a stepfamily. Within this theme were sub-topics of negative interactions with cliquish church groups, disappointment with their life and the church, and feelings of inferiority that were either nurtured by those in the church or left unaddressed by ministries claiming to help all peoples.

Remarkably, though the surveys did indicate a certain level of negative interaction, judgment, and mistrust by members of stepfamilies as they experienced church life, the focus group reveals these negative trends as pronounced. In this light, stories are important whether based on proven evidence or perceived by a group based on unresolved tensions.

This brand of confusion emanating from both sides of the stepfamily issue can distort and divide what is really happening. On this troubling issue, author Scazzero remarks, “When we leave reality for a mental creation of own doing (hidden assumptions), we create a counterfeit world.”<sup>182</sup> In creating a reality from assumptions, whether by the church toward stepfamilies or by stepfamily members toward others in the church, miscommunication and misunderstanding will result.

Woven into many of the issues recorded was the matter of forgiveness. Forgiveness, or the lack thereof, seemed to be foundational to many of the thoughts captured during the

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182. Scazzero Peter, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: Unleash a Revolution in Your Life in Christ* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 189.

brainstorming session. That is, whether the topic recorded dealt with familial conflicts, such as parental roles and discipline, or biblical beliefs about family the groups collectively sought to find ways forward while interacting. With the desire to move on is the desire to experience forgiveness from God and others. This desire for freedom from one's past informs the second theme; that is, biblical confusion by the participants and church leaders on the topic of divorce and remarriage and the inception of a new family life.

Issues of shame, serving in the church, one's overall role in the body of Christ, and personal spiritual formation were all listed as challenges relating to the participant's stepfamily status and their place in the local church. A prevailing thought was that since remarriages and stepfamilies arise from past failures, there is always a stigma attached to the new family, especially when it comes to religion. George S. Glass asserts:

Regardless of whether you are the leaver or the person left behind, it is hard not to accept some, if not all, of your part in the failure of your marriage. The acceptance may also lead you to consider yourself a personal failure as well.<sup>183</sup>

Feelings of failure naturally feed a deep want of relief. This coveted relief from the haunting guilt of failure and the shame associated with it can only come from a biblical understanding and acceptance of grace and forgiveness.

When a church and its people misunderstand the relationship between grace and restoration, stepfamilies can become marginalized or driven into obscurity. Once alienated the stepfamily recedes from public church life and attempts to navigate the complex issues of family formation after remarriage without the critical support available only through the biblical community. Now undistinguished as a family with special needs or having left the church altogether, the stepfamily on its own faces the daunting statistics of another marital failure.

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183. Glass, *Blending Families Successfully*, 18.

Apparently, the two most dominant motifs that emerged from the brainstorming session of the PLA revealed that the participants were challenged by a subtle but real ostracizing from the church due to legalistic views and the church's deficiency in a biblical understanding of redemption. It is as if the stepfamily is attempting to pilot a boat without the benefit of a sail; their church community, or the guidance of a rudder; biblical understanding, while trying to build a fruitful life inside the boat. Their life inside the boat as it were, represents the third major theme that surfaced during the brainstorming session.

Life for the stepfamily according to the focus group research included issues that are perhaps present in all types of families such as discipline, marital conflict, and interference from those outside the home, etc. However, for the stepfamily, these sources of conflict are magnified due to the unique challenges a newly formed family produces. The brainstorming session attested to frustration in the stepparent-stepchild relationship which centered around the issue of effective discipline. The participants revealed that family unity was an ever-present challenge because of the difficulties surrounding ex-spouses, stepsibling rivalry, and maintaining appropriate boundaries as it related to the marriage.

To address the complexities inherent to the stepfamily and their daily reality, creative solutions will be needed. Jan Pryor in discussing the thorny issue of ex-spouse relationships postulates the following:

Overall, managing relationships among the key adult figures, all of whom are potentially or actually in a parenting role with the children, is vital for the well-being of children and stepfamilies as a whole. The nature of separation and re-partnering means that negative emotions such as guilt, competitiveness, and resentment will be very likely to occur.<sup>184</sup>

In the same light, stepsibling relationships present major challenges as the children try to fit into an entirely new paradigm. Some step or halfsiblings live with each other most of the time, and

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184. Jan Pryor, *Stepfamilies: A Global Perspective on Research, Policy, and Practice*, Textbooks in family studies series (New York: Routledge, 2014), 79.

others on a very part time basis. Either way, the children in the context of a stepfamily arrangement must adjust to new relationships, worldviews, parenting philosophies, schedules, and even birth order issues.

Each of the four groups participating in the PLA activity included family relationship issues that addressed the issues of relationship dynamics. All first marriages include separation from their family of origin and the good and bad lessons by which they have been raised. The stepcouple, however, have not only separated from their family of origin but the previous marriage as well. James H. Bray and John Kelly refer to this challenge as ghosts from the marriage past.

Bray and Kelly elucidate:

There are ghosts at the table in every stepfamily home. The ghosts can manifest themselves in money difficulties, in legal conflicts, in the behavior of a child toward a new stepfamily and stepfather, in habits of the heart and mind, and in fears and defenses formed in the old dead civilization of the first marriage. . . . ghostbusting would represent a major challenge in a second marriage. . . .<sup>185</sup>

In fact, marital satisfaction in the new marriage will be the main determinate in stepfamily success, which includes harmony and fulfillment.<sup>186</sup> When a united front exists for the stepcouple, then the remaining forces at work in the family are amenable to problem-solving strategies. One of the primary forces at work in a stepfamily that surfaced during the brainstorming session were custody issues.

According to Stan Wenck and Connie J. Hansen, there are four basic types of custody, with variations depending on the legal decisions and agreements attached to the previous marriage. These four basic types of custody are primary custody, full or sole custody, joint

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185. James Bray and John Kelly, *Stepfamilies: Love, Marriage, and Parenting in the First Decade* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 37.

186. Ibid.

custody, and split custody.<sup>187</sup> Regardless of the type of custody a stepfamily is incorporating into home life, each presents unique challenges to the unity of the new family and with those challenges, new and unanticipated tensions.

Two of the four groups included specific relational problems from the perspective of the stepparent. That is, negotiating the tenuous relationships with the ex-spouse and their new relationships with someone else's children were listed as significant challenges that the church seemed inept in addressing. The pressures between the new spouse and the ex-wife or ex-husband are real. Jennifer Newcomb-Marine and Carol Marine posit that "Both parties have something to grieve, and those feelings can run deep, deep, deep."<sup>188</sup> There is a real loss that must be dealt with and understood by the stepparent. For the former spouse the failure of marriage is very painful and for the new spouse, preparing to join an existing family is almost impossible.

There was a strong sense that the stepfamily members participating in the PLA truly wanted cohesion between every member of the household and peace with those outside the home that maintained some influence over the family. One mother who preferred the term blended family admitted that her frustrations and disappointments with her stepfamily stemmed from a rather confrontational relationship between her new husband and a biological child.

Ron L. Deal points out that a parent in this situation should, "Temper your expectations for the relationship between your child and husband. They will grow their attachment at a pace that is comfortable for them. No amount of will on your part will speed that up."<sup>189</sup> The reality

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187. Stan Wenck and Connie J. Hansen, *Love Him, Love His Kids: The Stepmother's Guide to Surviving and Thriving in a Blended Family* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2009), 75.

188. Jennifer N. Marine and Carol Marine, *No One's the Bitch: A Ten-step Plan for the Mother and Stepmother Relationship* (Guilford, CT: GPP Life, 2009), 9.

189. Ron L. Deal, *The Smart Stepdad: Tools to Help You Succeed* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2011), 107.



that stepchildren must grow in their love for the new parent is an opportunity for learning grace, according to the participants, that is missed by those in the church whom they expected to help. In the light of the gospel, challenges and problems transform into grace events, the assumed product of a loving church.

The online survey indicated that about half of the survey participants preferred the term blended family, while another 30 percent were neutral on the topic. Charles Fay in studying the plight of the stepfamily believes metaphorical images of stepfamily life are powerful. Fay in addressing this concept of blending a family together from previously broken home is not helpful. Fay reasons:

The term “blended family” can be problematic for two reasons. First, it may create an unrealistic picture of what a healthy stepfamily should look like. It gives the impression that effective stepparents and their spouses simply need to employ right skills, and the result will be something as nice and sweet as a milkshake.<sup>190</sup>

Fay likens the real experience to a stew, in which each member of the stepfamily maintains their individual and developing flavor while contributing to the flavor of the whole.<sup>191</sup>

The practical themes of home and family life for the stepfamily arising from the brainstorming session of the PLA also revealed an underlying leitmotif, a desire for respect. Many of the issues captured on the four lists of those participating in the PLA exposed a collective yearning for respect not only from their new family members but those inside the local church and those speaking into the stepfamily from the outside.

In discussing the issue of respect, Rachelle Katz affirms this basic need, “Experiencing respect, honor and a sense of self-worth are basic human needs that are essential to our well-

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190. Charles Fay, *Stepparenting: Keeping It Sane* (Golden, CO: Love and Logic, 2015), 106.

191. Ibid.

being.”<sup>192</sup> In the world of the stepfamily, respect is still a strong want by all involved, but it must be earned in an environment that begins after failure, loss, and judgment. Churches and others involved in the lives of stepfamilies have either contributed to the erosion of respect or have operated on the periphery of the stepfamily’s journey toward reclamation.

The top five factors from each of the four groups participating in the PLA rise to the top carried by the group member’s longing for forgiveness, acceptance, and respect (Figure 12).

Rank	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
1	Receiving forgiveness	Church persecution	Church persecution	Acceptance by church
2	Acceptance by the church	Non-custodial Parent	Communication	Exclusion from church roles/ministry
3	Family conflict	Disciplining stepchildren	Acceptance from outsiders	Prejudged in church
4	Boundary issues	Church does not address all Issues of divorce	Parental role confusion	Biblical beliefs on The topic of stepfamilies
5	Disciplining Stepchildren	Finding a role in the church	Biblical Understanding of Divorce/remarriage	Disappointment at home and in the church

Figure 12. The top five factors associated with stepfamilies relating to church life by vote from the four PLA groups participating in the PLA stepfamily focus group.

The items depicted above arose from each group by vote and were ranked by how many votes each item received from a list that averaged seventeen items per group. The groups were then asked to place their five items on a matrix and decide which item or issue was more important as the issue related against the other five. In this way, the issues could be ranked against each other to determine which of the top five factors from each group was the most important to address in any stepfamily curriculum.

192. Rachele Katz, *The Happy Stepmother: Stay Sane, Empower Yourself, Thrive in Your New Family* (Don Mills, Ontario: Harlequin, 2010), 183.

### ***Results – Priority Matrix***

Many who are not members of stepfamilies experience legalism, judgmentalism, and family conflict amid a passive or toxic church setting. That is, members of traditional families, and other people groups, unfortunately, experience this scornful phenomenon as well. That said, Patricia L. Papernow proffers that any group who desires to live well will necessarily need to relinquish fantasies, explore the needs of others rather than blame, attend the needs of others, find common ground, and remain teachable.<sup>193</sup> In this light, however, the stepfamily cannot expect that this social wellness is at all automatic or that these traits come easily by nature of a loving home environment. Papernow continues, “Stepfamily living, . . . requires doing with greater awareness things that a first-time family may get away with taking for granted.”<sup>194</sup>

The comparison matrix, the second part of the PLA, facilitated an open discussion between the members of each group as to the significance of each challenge, as each challenge compared in significance or prominence to the other four of the five issues captured. As consensus was reached by the groups in ranking their top five factors, each of the group members shared stories and experiences.

Merely ranking the items against the others was considered a useful exercise in and of itself because it caused the participants to grapple with the realities of stepfamily life in the church. The groups reported the following results in ranking their top five factors in shorthand descriptions (Figure 13).

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193. Papernow, *Becoming a Stepfamily: Patterns of Development in Remarried Families*, 376–77.

194. *Ibid.*

Rank	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
1	Family conflict	Church does not address all issues of divorce	Acceptance from outsiders	Biblical beliefs on the topic of stepfamilies
2	Receiving forgiveness	Church persecution	Biblical understanding of divorce/remarriage	Acceptance by church
3	Boundary issues	Disciplining stepchildren	Communication	Exclusion from church roles/ministry
4	Disciplining stepchildren	Non-custodial parent	Church persecution	Prejudged in church
5	Acceptance by the church	Finding a role in the church	Parental role confusion	Disappointment in the home and in church

Figure 13. Results from the comparison matrix.

Interestingly, once the items were compared to one another by the groups and ranked by importance or prominence by the members of each group persecution and judgment issues were replaced by family issues and biblical understanding as the most important challenges or factors facing stepfamilies in the context of their local church. All five items are significant, but as the group debated the importance of each issue, the participants began to focus on solving the issues of persecution and the lack of acceptance by eliminating the ignorance surrounding their status.

By addressing family issues in the home and seeking an augmented understanding of the biblical record on redemption, forgiveness, and reconciliation, church leadership and stepfamilies can come together to reverse the trends of ignorance, judgment, and persecution. Whether the judgment is explicit or passive in nature, God's people are either being harmed emotionally and or spiritually by the church or at the very least they feel as if they are no longer of any use to the church.

The tragedy is not that stepfamilies do not attend church services, as unfortunate as that is, but that those stepfamilies who do attend church services on Sunday morning feel as if they are no longer acceptable. Moreover, members of stepfamilies can also feel as if their gifts of the Holy Spirit have deactivated. In this way, entire families with members representing every life stage and key milestone live out their lives in relative anonymity. Arguably, education is the answer to this challenge.

A stepfamily curriculum designed to teach, train, and minister to stepfamilies in their church as well as those who minister to them can address the various issues and challenges that face them. Once the church understands and accepts the realities and concerns of this growing stepfamily population, families of all types can experience peace, usefulness, spiritual formation, and the opportunity to enter a fulfilling worship experience. Each of the four groups was encouraged to discuss their most significant issue regarding church life as a stepfamily member and unit.

### ***Results – Focus Group Discussion***

Froma Walsh contends, “The family has been regarded as the linchpin of the social order. Fears of the demise of the family escalate in periods of social turbulence, as in recent decades when the very survival of the family has been questioned.”<sup>195</sup> As the American family faces the contemporary challenges confronting them today, the face of the family has changed. The images of the family from the preindustrial past and the nuclear family of the 1950s has not only caused a pseudo-nostalgia in the church it fails to address the reality of the modern American family, for good or bad.

Stepfamilies, as the reader of this thesis project must now accept, want nothing more than to be healthy and “normal” families. The new normal of family life continues to eclipse the old structures of the family that are widely, if not naively, accepted in the church. Those in stepfamilies and churches that serve them must find creative ways to address biblical dogma, unwarranted judgment, and widespread ignorance of the plight of the stepfamily in the church. The final portion of the participatory learning activity focus group consisted of an open discussion, similar to a “town hall meeting.” During the closing dialogue, participants shared their thoughts on the struggles and challenges so prevalent in the church today.

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195. Walsh, *Normal Family Processes: Growing Diversity and Complexity*, 9.

The groups openly shared stories from their personal experiences to clarify their choice of the most significant challenge they faced in the church as a stepfamily. Conflict in the home that seemed to creep into their church life was one issue. When asked in what ways does conflict affect their church life, the group responded that the conflict negatively affected their church experience in all ways. Specifically, this group had experienced partiality in the church due to their stepfamily status. The group felt that they had been omitted from leadership positions and excluded from service opportunities. Further, the group said that connecting in the church was difficult overall and they felt like outsiders in the body of Christ.

A second group felt that their beliefs of divorce, remarriage, and redemption did not match the views held by those leading their churches. In other words, there was a disconnect between what they thought the Bible taught about marriage and what the leadership in the church espoused as correct doctrine. This disconnect presents an enormous opportunity to train a church on a proper and more useful approach to the topic of divorce and remarriage. In sum, this second group felt God, but not His Church forgave them for their broken relationships in the past.

Thirdly, another group seemed resigned to the fact that they would never be considered a real family by those in the church. Phrases such as, “We are not regarded as a real family,” and “The Church has made it clear that we are not an actual family,” tragically seemed to define their church experience. The one word that prominently described their overall experience in the church was the word, “embarrassed.” To feel shamed by members in a church without the benefit of a real loving relationship is counter to everything the gospel teaches.

Sandra D. Wilson affirms, “People don’t just have relationships; they are relational. This reality explains our intense need to be accepted and found eligible for relationships; in a word, love.”<sup>196</sup> The stepfamily in America is an institution that is founded on past hurts. The final and

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196. Sandra D. Wilson, *Hurt People Hurt People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 2001), 77.

fourth group landed on scriptural confusion as their most salient issue arising from the focus group on stepfamily challenges in the church. The confusion according to this group stems from an inability on the part of the church leaders and members to biblically expound on the full scope of divorce. The group explained that this often leads to exclusion from leadership positions, ministry jobs, and a sense that though permitted to attend Sunday services they were in effect, “damaged goods.”

For most stepfamilies, there exists in the church environment an atmosphere of judgment, shame, ignorance, criticism, and confusion relating to a family born from a divorce and remarriage. It is a toxic setting that hardly sounds like the institution of sacrificial and committed love that Jesus taught, yet this is the reality for thousands of families across America. Though stepfamilies also form after the death of a previous spouse, many if not all the issues in the church stem from a terminated marriage of one or both partners followed by a new marriage. Regardless of the route, a couple has taken to arrive at this new relationship with one another and another’s children, love in all its forms is at stake. The church must learn how to minister to the new family as an authentic family, albeit a family with exceptional needs. The family must stand on solid ground in their biblical and practical understanding of what it is to be a family.

Timothy Keller defines true love as the following:

When the Bible speaks of love, it measures it primarily not by how much you want to receive but by how much you are willing to give of yourself to someone. How much are you willing to lose for the sake of this person? How much of your freedom are you willing to forsake? How much of your precious time, emotion, and resources are you willing to invest in this person?<sup>197</sup>

Love defined in this way can be extrapolated to include the love that Christians are to demonstrate to one another without preconceptions or levels of acceptance base on one’s past or

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197. Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 82.

present. The stepfamily curriculum for the church follows a simple outline based on this principle of unconditional love.

### Stepfamily Church Based Curriculum Outline

Opening Session: The stepfamily church facilitator will conduct a Participatory Learning Activity (PLA) based on the question, “What are the top 5 factors or challenges for stepfamilies in relation to church life?” The result of this PLA will inform the facilitator as to what modules (described below) will be emphasized to ensure the curriculum can address the specific needs of a congregation.

#### 1. Module One: What the Bible Teaches About Marriage

- a. Husband and wife
  - i. Biblical Marriage
  - ii. Practical and spiritual roles of the husband and wife
- b. Children
  - i. A gift from God
  - ii. Folly
- c. Family matters
  - i. Genogram (Homework if a two-day model is used)
  - ii. Loss timeline (Homework if a two-day model is used)
  - iii. Open group discussion
- d. Divorce
  - i. What the Bible says
  - ii. What the church has said
  - iii. Redemption
- e. Remarriage
  - i. What the Bible Says
  - ii. That the church has said
  - iii. Going forward – the Gospel
  - iv. Open group discussion

#### 2. Module Two: The Foundational Relationship – The Stepcouple

- a. Coping with the past – the realities of a new couple
  - i. The ex-spouse
  - ii. The emotional baggage
  - iii. Establishing boundaries (outside influence and finances)
  - iv. A united front
- b. Looking to the future – the blessings of a new life
  - i. Kingdom life – worship, prayer, and serving together
  - ii. Time with each other



- iii. Finding realistic expectations<sup>198</sup>
      - iv. Humility -- mutual and daily submission
    - c. Your identity in Christ – the reality of the real you
      - i. You are in there somewhere (the real you)
      - ii. Understanding the love of Christ
      - iii. So, broken; So, Loved – a beloved mess
- 3. Module Three: The Structural Relationship – The Stepfamily**
- a. Normalizing the stepfamily experience
    - i. Parent and stepparent roles -- the parenting team<sup>199</sup>
    - ii. Establishing authority and building trust
    - iii. Helping with healing and connecting<sup>200</sup>
    - iv. Dealing with outside influences – non-custodial parent, grandparents, and the extended family
  - b. Positive discipline
    - i. Discipline versus punishment
    - ii. Setting family goals, home rules and consequences
    - iii. The family meeting and other new rituals
    - iv. Parenting from the heart (the inner motivation)<sup>201</sup>
  - c. Special considerations
    - i. Birth order
    - ii. Healthy sexuality and other family values
    - iii. His, mine, ours, and adult stepchildren
    - iv. Stepfathers and stepmothers breakout session
- 4. Module Four: Closing Session**
- a. Optional Church Leader Panel
  - b. General Q&A Session
  - c. Discussion of resources
  - d. Discussion of future local stepfamily ministry

As a curriculum, the stepfamily church-based curriculum is designed to meet the needs of any heterogenous body of local believers. Individual modules can be dropped or delivered in a different order depending on the demographics of those who attend. That is, it is feasible that one group responded to the opening session PLA in such a way that the biblical foundation was

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198. Deal and Olson, *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage: Keys to Success in the Blended Family*.

199. Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family*.

200. Becnal and Becnal, *God Breathes on Blended Families: Twelve Fundamentals to Build Your Family*.

201. Turansky, *Parenting Is Heart Work*.

already in place, but the practical raising of stepchildren stood out as the main issue for this church group. In this case, the biblical portion is deemphasized by placing it later in the program, minimizing its content, or absorbing it into the other modules as part of the discussion.

Material gathered from various sources along with the original research conducted for this thesis project distinctly demonstrate a need for a church-based and biblically grounded curriculum that addresses the unique challenges of stepfamily life in the context of the local church. Persecution, passive ostracizing, and judgementalism have either driven stepfamilies from the church or relegated them to the fringes of church life.

In doing so, many Christians or seekers who belong to this growing population of stepfamilies struggle not only with typical family systems and spiritual formation issues; they also battle enormous difficulties inside and outside of the church. Churches must be ready to stand in the gap for what is now more than 50 percent of their membership to ultimately arrest the cycle of divorce and remarriage.

Local expressions of the Christian church exist in part so that believers receive teaching on the word of God, the Christian life, engage in corporate prayer and worship, and to gather for the fellowship of the saints.<sup>202</sup> Every Christian regardless of their past and present should be able to live out their lives experiencing the abundance of life that only Christ offers. No person seeking hope and answers to their restlessness should ever be denied access to the Savior. The American church stands poised to enter the lives of the modern stepfamily and see them living the fulfilled life.

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202. See Acts 2:42.

## Chapter 5 – Conclusion

### A Case for the Stepfamily

Nancy Jean Vyhmeister simply states, “Research can be defined as a method of study that, through careful investigation of all evidence bearing on a definable problem, arrives at a solution.”<sup>203</sup> The American stepfamily in the context of the local church is this thesis project’s definable problem. The solution, ironically, is also found in the framework of the local church in the form of a flexible yet comprehensive church-based curriculum that educates stepfamilies and those who minister to them.

Today’s expressions of the local church in any given area of the United States will find that their congregations have surpassed the 50 percent mark of their populations. Furthermore, the clear majority of these stepfamilies arise from a divorce and subsequent remarriage that carries with it consequential losses for both husband and wife and the children. The losses experienced by these families are now part of a relationship that begins with new hope that is an admixture of guilt, shame, low self-worth, and a deep sense of failure. Tragically, these painful intuitive feelings are actualized in many churches rather than assuaged.

Many Christians who have survived a divorce and have decided to remarry do not know how to shut the door on the prior marriage emotionally. Regardless of one’s chosen theology on the issue of divorce and remarriage, the previous marriage is over. Rather than continually looking past the current couple and judging their past, the church has a real opportunity to help this couple and their stepfamily move forward and become an integral part of God’s kingdom through their involvement in the local church.

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203. Nancy Jean Vyhmeister, *Your Guide to Writing Quality Research Papers for Students of Religion and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 1.

Genevieve Clapp speaks of moving on as completing an emotional divorce. Clapp recommends that “If you have already remarried without having finished your emotional divorce, it’s not too late to work on it now, so you can completely close the door on your last marriage and get on with your life, unencumbered with the past.”<sup>204</sup> The concept is that each member of a stepfamily has experienced loss, or in some ways part of themselves. Seeing their way forward allows for personal wholeness and relational health so that the families can flourish.

All Christians are made whole through the power and grace of the Gospel. That said, the church is the most suitable medium to ensure that all families experience the freedom and wholeness that only Christ offers. Unfortunately, many churches have abrogated their role as a healing and loving resource for stepfamilies who are often in crises. In nullifying their ministry to these stepfamilies, the church is no longer being the church. Instead, through a short-sighted and one-dimensional approach to Scripture as it relates to divorce and remarriage, the church as the local expression of God’s people have left virtually half of their body of believers languishing in the shadows of the ecclesia.

Moving outside the church in a more missional way and engaging the surrounding culture, a church will encounter a myriad of family systems that do not fit their biblical prejudice on family appearances. Any prejudice is problematic. If a church desires to maintain a congregation that is without scandal or brokenness, then it is either stagnate or is self-deceived, usually both.

Christ’s church is a movement, and as the church moves among real people with a message of redemption, it is present among the marginalized, publicans, and sinners. In this case, the church is following Jesus. The point of this theses project is that these people that Jesus Himself pursued are sitting among the so-called righteous ones in every church in the form of

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204. Genevieve Clapp, *Divorce & New Beginnings: A Complete Guide to Recovery, Solo Parenting, Co-parenting, and Stepfamilies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley, 2000), 281.

stepfamilies. These stepfamilies from every walk of life have been relegated to a church life of anonymity or worse, to a spreadsheet that records membership attrition. A stepfamily curriculum aimed at the church milieu brings the confusion and misgivings out into the light so that healing and growth can occur. Ministering to stepfamilies is not about the church's authority, it is about the church's responsibility to those God has brought to them. It is a responsibility to which the church must be made accountable.

The beautiful story in Genesis two in which God provided a helpmate to Adam is perhaps the first divine institution God implemented. Therefore, Ron L. Deal rightly states the following truth and is deserving of the author's full expression:

The spiritual intimacy is at the heart of Christian marriage and forms the basic divine purpose for marriage for all times, places, and cultures. Healthy, growing marriages seek to build on this foundation. Couples who place God at the center of their existence, whether a second, third, or fourth marriage, put him in charge of their will, their choices, their money, their vocation and their relationship. Such a couple, while never achieving marital perfection, will undoubtedly experience some of God's richest blessings. This holy love triangle has two parts: each partner's relationship to God and their relationship to each other.<sup>205</sup>

Arguably, if those in the church who are uncomfortable with remarriage can accept that there are no limits to God's grace when a couple seeks redemption for their marriage, those once in judgment can now offer acceptance. If this same stepcouple places God at the center of their marital relationship then the church must not only honor the stepcouple and their family, the church should embrace them and seek to walk with them as they navigate the many complexities of stepfamily life.

#### A Case for Redemption

The adage, "What God has brought together, let no man separate," is foundational to understanding the heart of marriage between one man and one woman for life. As a starting

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205. Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family*, 77–78.

point for summarizing a biblical understanding of divorce and remarriage it can be daunting, and at the very least, a bit confusing or even contradictory to a major premise of this project. That is, stepfamilies can live fully redeemed lives and fulfill God's purpose and plan for their lives both inside and outside of their local church. This is the power of redemption.

The very meaning of redemption, atoning for a fault or mistake and or to be repurchased, informs the church as to their role in ministering to stepfamilies in the church. Redemption of one's new marriage is also a powerful concept for the stepfamilies to grasp, since this equates to the freedom to love God and enjoy Him forever. Once forgiveness for a past mistake, divorce, in this case, is sought by individuals forming a new stepcouple they receive God's grace and their relationship is forever redeemed.

Repentance comes when the husband and wife agree with God that they cannot justify a divorce and that it is a sin. If the divorce has occurred, it is not an unforgivable sin that is beyond God's grace. That is impossible. Once forgiven, a couple that remarries does so with a blessing, but with a new understanding and love for God's will for marriage. When the church understands the biblical truth of God's redemption in all things the church then becomes a place of healing, restoration, and power so that the cycle of divorce and remarriage abates.

Since repurchasing something is one way to understand redemption it is helpful to see this principle at work in a remarriage. In other words, if God redeems a marriage or repurchases a remarriage then that marriage now belongs to God. If God is the rightful owner of marriage, regardless of past transgressions, then that marriage is now holy or set apart for God's purposes. God desires to use stepfamilies for His glory and the work He has called his people to accomplish in this one life. Not a partial work, but wholly and pleasing to Him as a spiritual act of worship.<sup>206</sup>

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206. See Romans 12:1.

Without question, the church has a responsibility to uphold the biblical ideal of marriage. In cases where there has been a divorce, the church has an obligation to restrict, for a period, the person's involvement in leadership until it is proven that the individual's lifestyle and current marriage exemplifies godliness, pure consecration, and sacrificial love. However, divorce should never be uniquely categorized as worse than any other sin due to a faulty understanding of sin, redemption, and God's holiness. If one understands the character of God as portrayed in Scripture one can look upon stepfamilies in the same light.

If a remarried couple demonstrates godliness, while placing Jesus and His church at the center of their lives, then they can serve in any capacity that exists in the local church. For stepfamilies, serving the church also includes leading the church in the various offices outlined in Scripture.<sup>207</sup> That is, remarried men and women are not precluded from leading as elders or deacons respectively. In other words, the biblical record does not prohibit previously married men from serving as elders and deacons, which would bar widowers as well as divorced men; this would be a contradiction in Scripture.

In sum, where there has been repentance, confession, and forgiveness from God, a believer's qualifications for ministry and or leadership call for an evaluation based on the qualities which characterize their life, not past forgiven sins. The Holy Scriptures do not view divorce as a transgression that follows someone their entire life or permanently disqualifies them from all spiritual service. So the Church must foster an environment that mobilizes all its people into ministry both inside the local body and as the church reaches out to the community. All repentant sinners are purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ which eliminates any questions as to whether stepfamilies are second class Christians.

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207. See, 1 Timothy 3:2; 1 Corinthians 7:39, Romans 7:1-3 respectively.

### A Case for the Crockpot Family

The thesis project in view captured insights from stepfamily participants who responded to the online survey as well as those who took part in the participatory learning activity (PLA) focus group. Dogmatic biblical confusion and perceived persecution notwithstanding, participants revealed their challenges with issues associated with bringing two households together. Though some of the problems are not exclusive to stepfamilies, common familial challenges exacerbate when the family suddenly includes stepparents, stepsiblings, and outside influences only associated with the stepfamily.

“All marriages,” according to Jimmy Evans and Frank Martin, “have to deal with pain and baggage from past hurts and relationships.”<sup>208</sup> This being true, churches have developed a wide range of ministries and programs to address marital health. Book upon book have been written to inform couples about sexual intimacy, communication strategies, romance, and parenting, so that married couples are girded up against their past disappointments and dysfunctional upbringing.

When the common marital issues present in all marriages arise in a second marriage, the ramifications are profound. Evans and Martin proffer:

Blended families usually have an even greater degree of stress and tension to deal with. By their very nature, remarriages are riddled with much more baggage from past relationships, and wounds that are likely much deeper and more pronounced. That’s why many second marriages end in a second divorce.<sup>209</sup>

As this thesis project has established, stepfamilies are real families with complex relational issues that require guidance and understanding from trusted sources. The church and the biblical community it offers should be that reliable source. However, ministers and the laity need to be

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208. Evans and Martin, *Blending Families: 18 Successful Stepfamilies Share Their Secrets to Growing a Healthy Marriage and Family*, 102.

209. Ibid.



trained and equipped to minister to the families, and the stepfamilies need a platform in which they can learn strategies and solutions in a safe and loving environment.

Both the literature review and the original research conducted for this thesis project disclosed several prominent areas unique to the stepfamily that would naturally be part of a church-based curriculum. The reader must understand that challenging situations and relationships are an opportunity for grace to abound and for all concerned to become more like Christ. Christians learn to see all things in the light of Christ as they trust Him and His church to show them the way.

Though most survey respondents indicated, they prefer the moniker, “blended family,” over other options such as the name, “stepfamily,” a better analogy to describe the nature of a stepfamily is the crockpot. Attempting to blend two families into one in which the members lose their individual personas to become one entity is an artificial and unrealistic goal. A crockpot brings different entities together for the sake of one recipe. The pieces of a stew remain independent as elements, while slowly and intentionally becoming dependent upon the others as they develop into one complete meal.

In this way, the church-based curriculum is designed to educate families and ministers on practical approaches to the challenges facing stepfamilies in the relational spheres of marriage, child discipline, stepparent-stepchild relationships, and external influences such as one’s ex-spouse and other extended family members. Authority and responsibility can be treacherous ground to tread for the stepparents if the couple does not fully understand the pitfalls associated with trying to parent someone else’s child, especially when the child’s biological parent is still in the picture.

A church-based and biblically founded curriculum will place God first, the marriage second and the children third with everyone else in a distant but useful fourth place. The order

of priority is what the couple must understand, and the children in the stepfamily will need time to organize in their minds and hearts properly. That said, the parents in the home are the spiritual leaders but would benefit from training on how to teach their children and stepchildren. An overarching goal of parenting is not behavioral modification, but discipleship. Daren Carstens asserts:

Our motivation should be to shape our children according to God’s word. . . . When we have the priority of teaching our children to obey God and nurture their relationship with God, the result of that is a young person who has the ability to make wise choices. They are able to make wise decisions on their own.<sup>210</sup>

Stepparents can and will be educated on biblical parenting while also being trained on the different strategies that successfully navigate the delicate relationship between stepparent and stepchild.

Disciplining the children in the home is but one example of how complicated stepfamily life can be, yet there are many others. Any truly comprehensive stepfamily curriculum will also need to address the other main topics associated with stepfamily life. For instance, financial considerations are more complicated when two people come together from a previous marriage. There are many useful resources about healthy personal financial practices, but few address the complexities associated with bringing new assets and liabilities into a new marriage after the dissolution of another.

Patricia Schiff Estess warns, “When spouses refuse to address financial issues or pretend they don’t exist when they cloud financial issues or avoid dealing with the real issues, trust erodes, and with it the marriage.”<sup>211</sup> If a couple has been married and has attended regular church training on God’s way of handling home finances, they have certainly benefited. However,

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210. Carstens, *The Secret to Blended Families: Marriage and Parenting Success*, 86–87.

211. Estess, *Money Advice for Your Successful Remarriage: Handling Delicate Financial Issues with Love and Understanding*, 33.

much of what challenges a remarried couple, such as alimony, child support, legal debt, and owning two homes remains unaddressed, and so there remain serious loose ends; in turn, another source of family conflict arises.

Family conflict like disciplinary issues and financial tensions, among other clashes, exist in second marriages that are not as pronounced in first-time marriages. Change can be uncomfortable and can tend to accentuate the negative loss that a divorce produces. Children are especially vulnerable to the overwhelming emotions initiated by new rules, rituals, and conflicting values. Judy A. Hall maintains, “Many discipline problems are rooted in conflicting values. Our value system is the way we perceive and respond to the world. The stepfamily is a primary source of conflicting value systems.”<sup>212</sup> From social awareness to religious values, opposing beliefs have the potential to ignite discord in the stepfamily home.

The church-based curriculum for stepfamilies and those who minister to them must bring light into the darkness that fosters so much confusion, frustration, and disillusionment seemingly inherent to the stepfamily’s world. Therefore, the curriculum must begin and end with loving well or at the very least, loving better.

For example, many stepparents enter the new family relationship with lofty expectations. The stepparent struggles to force love into the relationship with the stepchildren when it has not had time to develop. Sue Patton Thoele rightly points out the following concept, “However, love is not a feeling; it’s something we participate in. With each little decision we make, we can choose to act in loving ways and be kind, caring, and compassionate to those children given into our care.” Arguably, this principle applies to every relationship in the home and potentially to those interactions with players from the outside.

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212. Hall, *When Elephants Fight: A Guide to Effective Stepparenting*, 190.

Both the survey and the focus group revealed the difficulties in bonding when it comes to the nascent relationships inherent to stepfamily formation. Strategies are needed to successfully and consistently navigate the tensions brought on by outside influences. Influences that are often uninvited and unwanted, and certainly unhelpful. Add to this that the stepfamily settling-in period for a remarriage is four to seven years, some taking up to twelve years, before reaching a peaceful stage of family development.<sup>213</sup> This outside interference serves only to diminish the family's chances of becoming a successful crockpot story.

A marriage of any type will increase their odds of success if that marriage operates as a united front. Children, in-laws, extended family members and friends, and even past intimate relationships will not be able to sabotage a marriage that is first, Christ-centered, and secondly, the unified center of the stepfamily. Shirley Cress Dudley explains that if the majority of a stepcouple's time is spent on their children, ex-spouses, and parents, their marriage and stepfamily will slowly dissipate.<sup>214</sup>

Dudley continues, "This type of marriage won't succeed long-term, as the husband and wife slowly put more and more energy into areas that cannot be changed (such as bitter, upset ex-spouses, or trying to compensate for the divorce by giving your kids more and more attention and keeping the focus of the family directly on them.)"<sup>215</sup> The data gleaned from both the survey and focus group informing this thesis project concur. The remarried couple must be a priority in any training curriculum since the health of this relationship shapes the success of the entire family.

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213. Wednesday Martin, *Stepmonster: A New Look at Why Real Stepmothers Think, Feel, and Act the Way We Do* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 131.

214. Shirley C. Dudley, *Blended Family Advice: A Step-By-step Guide to Help Blended and Step Families Become Strong and Successful* (n.p.: Xlibris Corporation, 2009), 15.

215. Ibid.

The participants of the research conducted for this thesis project indicated a desire for the church and its leadership to understand the realities facing today's stepfamilies. The majority of respondents also indicated a willingness to participate in a church based and biblically centered curriculum designed for the stepfamily. The research clearly demonstrated that there exists an undercurrent of shame and spiritual atrophy due to the stigmas attached to remarriage in the church. David A. Thomson promulgates the following:

Because of the ethical problems, the church has with divorce; many remarried couples avoid Christian fellowships for fear of judgment. They know the promarriage stance of the church and its expectation that Christians remain faithful to their spouses. Divorced persons come to a "blackhole" in their spiritual walk. For many, their relationship with God and his people terminated with their decision to divorce and remarry. . . . So, they tend to keep the church at arm's length until a major crisis emerges in their lives that force them to get help.<sup>216</sup>

For Christians, the local expression of their church is a significant part of who they are. For those who have failed in their first marriage and desire another chance to connect with another in marital harmony, there is a real sense of having lost themselves.

The truth is that many couples never learned enough about themselves as individuals during their formative years as young adults let alone during their first marriages. Though the remarried couple is indeed the center of the stepfamily unit, within the couple lives two individual souls. This person brings all their emotional baggage to the new relationship as well as the hurt and confusion from the first marriage. The church-based stepfamily curriculum will necessarily address the individual in the context of belonging to a couple.

### A Case for You

Where and when a person is born, along with their families of origin, religious upbringing, cultural milieu, birth order, ethnicity, and many other unwritten rules and paradigms

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216. David A. Thomson, *Counseling and Divorce*, ed. Gary R. Collins, Resources for Christian Counseling (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1989), 128.

shape who an individual is and who they are to become. Much of the conversations during the focus group portion of the research arose first from who the people in each group thought they were, followed by discussions about their various past and present relationships.

An effective stepfamily curriculum would include different elements that addressed the individual as part of the couple, stepfamily, other influences on the family, and the world. James Robert Bitter and Gerald Corey rightly point out:

Western culture often tells us that we are autonomous individuals, capable of free and independent choice. And yet we are born into families, and most of us live our entire lives attached to one form of family or another. Within these families, we discover who we are; we develop and change; and we give and receive support we need for survival. We create, maintain, and live by often unspoken rules and routines that we hope will keep the family (and each of its members) functional.<sup>217</sup>

Common sense teaches us that a person cannot change their past, but one's past, reconciled before God, can inform one's future and all present and future relationships. That is not to say that any person is consigned or doomed to a future because of their past, but that understanding themselves in the light of their past allows for a level of acceptance of who they are perhaps not experienced before.

With more understanding comes more confidence; with more confidence comes more insight and the ability to adjust to the idiosyncrasies of the other members of the household. In this light, the couple's relationship strengthens, and they can become the family and spiritual leaders God has now called them to be. Personal acceptance of who a person is and what God has called the husband, wife, parent, and stepparent to do gives meaning and purpose to the entire stepfamily.

In an environment lead by a confident and buoyant couple, critical factors of relating, such as, actually listening to one another improves even for the stepparent/child dynamic. "The

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217. James Bitter and Gerald Corey, "Family Systems Therapy," in *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, ed. Gerald Corey, 8th ed. (Mason, OH: Cengage Learning, 2010), 412.

way in which adults listen to children tell the children something about themselves,” contends, Madelyn Burley-Allen.<sup>218</sup> Ignoring, minimizing input, or interrupting communicates to members of a stepfamily, including children that what they are contributing is of no value to the new family. In a larger way, churches have long since stopped listening to those who do not neatly fall into their doctrinal tenets.

The messier the situation, the more shut out nontraditional families are; the more shut out a family is, the less they are heard; the less these families are heard, the more disenfranchised and marginalized they become. Education is the only remedy for this problem. Education based on the realities of stepfamily life, and is biblically based while supported by the church allows each participant involved with the stepfamily curriculum to begin setting attainable goals for themselves, their marriages, and their families.

The all-encompassing goal for all stepfamilies is to aid them in developing their functioning as a symbiotic group while advancing them in their individual and collective spiritual formation. George E. Rekers reminds his readers that “God’s character of love and holiness becomes our ultimate pattern for human relationships.”<sup>219</sup> The natural desire for love and security was significant for the stepfamilies participating in this thesis project’s research. Wanting to be understood, heard, and respected were common threads running through the main issues challenging the stepfamily members.

Understandably, the individuals who make up various components of the stepfamily hope to be an essential and indispensable part of the family, contributing to the overall wellbeing of

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218. Madelyn Burley-Allen, *Listening: The Forgotten Skill: A Self-teaching Guide (2nd Ed.)*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1995), 28.

219. George A. Rekers, “Biblical Perspectives for Goal Setting,” in *Counseling Families*, ed. Gary R. Collins, Resources for Christian Counseling (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1988), 73.

the group. This hope applies to the family's interactions and contributions to their local church as well. For both the individual and the family, self-worth is as important as it is fragile.

Ultimately, the "you" that is a part of the stepfamily needs to understand their self-worth from another perspective. One's true identity is the real message of the church. Robert S. McGee contends, "We crave love, fellowship, and intimacy, and we turn to others to meet those needs. The problem with basing our worth on the approval of others is that God is the only One who loves and appreciates us unconditionally. He has provided a solution to the fear of rejection."<sup>220</sup> One's identity in Christ is so critical to their spiritual formation and ability to contribute to a healthy family and church body that any church-based curriculum must spend ample time on what this identity is. The training must effectively begin the process of stripping away the layers of unrealistic expectations that Christians, family members, friends, and others, place on them.

The church based stepfamily curriculum that educates the stepfamily and those who minister to them consist of several major components. First, the curriculum must teach the whole counsel of God bringing understanding to the power of redemption and Grace. Second, the training must be practical, addressing societal and church issues with a second marriage, the couple relationship, challenges associated with children, and the unique challenges stemming from outside influences.

Third, the church laity and its leadership must be equipped to come alongside the stepfamilies in their congregations so that they begin to flourish in their kingdom service. Finally, the individuals who come together to form a stepfamily must first understand who they are in Christ so that negative patterns from the past will ameliorate. If the church and those who

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220. Robert S. McGee, *The Search for Significance* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 65.



call a local church their home can embrace the large population of stepfamilies in their congregation then the cycle of divorce and remarriage can be halted.

As comprehensive as the stepfamily curriculum is designed to be, beyond the major components of this study and resulting curriculum are topics that provide opportunities for further development of this project. Though this curriculum would benefit existing stepfamilies as well as those thinking about remarrying, a distinctive pre-stepcouple class would be highly beneficial as those remarrying could avoid the pitfalls associated with stepfamily life. Other fields of study that are plausibly related to the church based stepfamily curriculum are attachment theory and the stepfamily, specific stepfamily marital counseling, adoption and foster care considerations, racial and cultural sensitivities, and specific support group ministries for those in their second marriages.

#### Opportunities for Further Development of this Project

##### ***Dating after Divorce***

Ministries abound in the American attractional church model which seeks to grow through active ministries that cater to every walk of life. Adult, youth, senior, women's and men's ministries compete for people and space in nearly every church. Among them is the complicated and often difficult ministry to singles. Bringing two people of the opposite sex together for both social and worship reasons, while advocating for both abstinence and romance can be an inauspicious goal, to say the least.

Now, bring together two single people who have already experienced the devastating loss of a previous marriage and it might seem nearly hopeless. However, in an environment that is safe, loving, and caring, while also having a firm grasp of God's word, provides a venue in which dating after divorce can be a very rewarding and fulfilling experience. The stepfamily

curriculum prepares the congregation and leadership not only to embrace these couples but also to provide a setting of accountability to their entire congregation.

All remarriages and consequent stepfamilies usually begin when meeting another person of interest and then dating them on a regular basis until the couple decides to enter holy matrimony once again. It can be exhilarating, romantic, and seem as if the person in the dating relationship has this time met the one God intended all along. Amidst the feelings of guilt, and fear due to past failures there is now this new hope. Hope that has been absent for months and years now fills the new relationship with what seems never existed in the last relationship.

However, remarriage is a tough enterprise. Edward M. Tauber and Jim Smoke caution the future newlyweds:

The reason remarriage is so difficult is that it follows divorce, a painful event that creates a wide range of problems for everyone. The Post-Divorce syndrome is alive and well. An important challenge for you is getting centered before you marry again. But you face roadblocks to doing that, not the least of which are numbing, debilitating pain and sense of hopelessness that divorce creates. Then there are real problems too.<sup>221</sup>

Undoubtedly, arresting the cyclical nature of divorce and remarriage will require that a church understands the difficulties and pitfalls of stepfamily life so that eventually it can engage the cycle at its earliest progression, the dating relationship. The stepfamily curriculum based in the local church begins with preparing the field. As the congregation and the church's leadership learn how to minister to stepfamilies already filling their pews effectively, they can then come alongside those considering dating again or committing to another marriage.

When a body of believers can embrace any manner of person walking through the doors of their building, then they have at least begun to look like Christ. All believers will at some point enter the wedding supper of the Lamb. In this way, believers are ultimately the bride of Christ. Considering this truth, Deal insists:

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221. Edward M. Tauber and Jim Smoke, *Finding the Right One after Divorce: Avoiding the 13 Common Mistakes People Make in Remarriage* (Eugene, Or: Harvest House Publishers, 2007), 34.

Marriage to a person is not our ultimate destination; being wed to our Lord is. Single people need that perspective, so they won't overvalue getting married, and married people need that perspective, so they won't lose sight of their purpose in being together. And dating people need that perspective so that they will date with the purpose of finding someone who can become their buddy during the field trip of life and ultimately usher them to the arms of the Savior.<sup>222</sup>

The church that understands the power of redemption will understand the power of now. That is, no matter where a person might be in their relational status, God's church can engage their people with love, truth, creativity, and the ultimate power of grace.

### ***Pre-Stepcouple Counseling***

The largest opportunity for further development of this project is first, dating after divorce and pre-marital counseling for those entering a marriage for the second, third, or even fourth time that follows the dating relationship. Helping those stepfamilies and the churches they attend overcome the confusion and misunderstanding while equipping them to function at a higher level as families are one thing; preparing the next generation of stepfamilies before officially joining two families is another. As new couples form before marriage, the church can customize pre-marital counseling to meet the unique needs of the future stepfamily.

A proper perspective should temper the myths associated with stepfamily formation and the idealistic mindset of second chance relationships before setting a wedding date. The use of couple's counseling in conjunction with a workshop format if there are more than one couple in a congregation wanting to marry for the second time or so would be very useful in avoiding further pain and loss.

Regardless of the age of the prospective couple seeking to remarry, proper biblical or pastoral counseling specifically developed for future stepcouples is a powerful tool to prevent yet

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222. Ron Deal, *Dating and the Single Parent* (Minneapolis MN: Bethany House, 2012), 165.

another divorce. The odds are against multiple marriages. Susan Wisdom and Jennifer Green agree when they suggest the following:

At some point, early in a potential stepcouple relationship, engage your brain. You can still fall in love with the wrong person when you're thirty, or forty or fifty. By scrutinizing the quality of your relationships, you discriminate between the ones that merit a lifetime commitment and those that deserve a graceful exit before anyone, including the children, invests more time and emotional energy.<sup>223</sup>

Most people, however, as they fall in love do not have the wherewithal to discriminate between a shallow temporary affection and the deep commitment required for a lifetime commitment that honors God. If a couple is determined to remarry then the church must be prepared to do the work with a couple necessary to assure success for all concerned.

The stepfamily curriculum developed in this project provides a foundation for the development of a pre-stepfamily counseling model. One way of understanding the effectiveness of the stepfamily curriculum is that it sets the marriage firmly in the light of Scripture so that the couple can do the work of repentance before God and move forward from the guilt and shame so many carry with them. Moreover, the church-based stepfamily curriculum ultimately prepares one's biblical community to minister to their stepfamilies in loving and truthful ways. Add to this the curriculum's module on practical stepfamily matters, relational intelligence, and self-awareness, and you truly have a program that is solid in its praxis and spiritual underpinnings.

Having this foundation in place for the development of a pre stepcouple model of ministry is significant. Les and Leslie Parrot advise that any couple wanting to know the most important qualities their next spouse needs to possess will end up with two; that is, “. . . a healthy

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<sup>223</sup>. Wisdom and Green, *Stepcoupling: Creating and Sustaining a Strong Marriage in Today's blended Family*, 11.

self-concept and independence from your first marriage.”<sup>224</sup> That is, the person qualified to remarry must know who they are, whose they are, and like who they are. Whose they are, refers to their relationship with Jesus Christ, while independence from their first marriage relates to receiving forgiveness for the past divorce and emotionally separating from the previous marriage. Forward thinking makes room for their new and redeemed marriage and acts as a means to avoid the painful mistakes of the past. So far, this project has considered the stepfamily in light of complexities, church dysfunction, biblical ignorance, and the other main issues. Nonetheless, subjects that grip family life, in general, are magnified in stepfamily life.

### ***The Stepfamily and Attachment Style***

Attachment theory has long been a topic of interest to the field of psychology and counseling fields. Trevor Crow Mullineaux and Maryann Karinch assert;

Knowing the basics of attachment theory will help you figure out why one partner might pursue, fight and even bully a spouse; why he or she might get up and leave the room if a discussion gets uncomfortable; or why your partner seems to be fairly consistent with nurturing behaviors and has a lot of patience with you. Your awareness of attachment styles also lays the foundation for understanding your parenting style and that of your partner.<sup>225</sup>

As valuable as theories are if one does not understand themselves as they seek to understand others, frustration, and regression are the results. Knowledge is powerful because it leads to understanding, which leads to inquiry, which leads to challenging one’s reactions and stances on different ideologies inherited from one’s past.

Another premise of the project in view is that the individual affects the marriage and the marriage affects the family, while the family affects the individual. Attachment theory at its core

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224. Les & Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage before It Starts: Seven Questions to Ask Before--and After-- You Marry*, 29.

225. Mullineaux and Karinch, *Blending Families: Merging Households with Kids 8-18*, 4.

speaks to the person's experience in early childhood based on the family. The family is knit together by people who have good and bad experiences in their families of origin. A stepfamily not only combines different attachments, but they also bring to the family unknown attachment disorders that must be understood. Yes, stepfamilies are complicated, and many other factors can influence the failure or success of a stepfamily that a church must embrace if they truly desire to reach and minister to the world.

### ***Other Opportunities for Study***

Much has been written about the major issues that face stepfamilies in the world and especially in the church. However, many issues will need addressing as the church catches up with the world on the realities of stepfamily life in the church. Ministers need to start asking how the church can engage the foster care system and what the church's obligation is to the orphans and widows of the twenty-first century. Further, the church needs to explore new ways to reach their multi-cultural communities where they will find many different expressions of modern day families.

Today's church is not reaching nor ministering to the stepfamily population that fills their pews each Sunday or those who have walked away from the church altogether. Confronting the church's inadequacies in healing those suffering from divorce and remarriage is a start. It is a start because so many other societal maladies exist. The church, even if unknown to those claiming it as their own, is poised to move into territories forgotten long ago. Territories of race, ethnicity, cross-cultures, and remarriage across the globe are again in play. The church is not obsolete; the church is the place of hope, a place that if equipped can rise to the stepfamily occasion.

### Concluding Comments

A church based stepfamily curriculum designed to educate stepfamilies and those who minister to them must address significant issues and challenges experienced by nearly every stepfamily in America. The challenge this project has addressed concerns those Christian stepfamilies who have been either marginalized by society or shunned by those in the church due to the volatile topic of divorce and remarriage. The research conducted for this project has demonstrated that real challenges stem from the ignorance or short-sightedness of the local church along with the same ignorance on the part of the families themselves.

The church has historically taken a narrow view of divorce and remarriage that has excluded a significant expression of grace and redemption. Historical misgivings can be corrected by the stepfamily curriculum as it addresses the biblical record on marriage. Secondly, unique challenges that confront stepfamilies, such as disciplining stepchildren, family values, and outside influences can be treated in a biblically-based manner. But, the most important part of the curriculum deals with the remarried couple themselves. Everyone in the stepcouple relationship must be treated as a priority so that the relationship itself becomes a priority within the family dynamic.

The colloquialism, “It takes a village to raise a child,” serves well when modified to serve today’s stepfamily. It takes a church to raise a stepfamily, but like most parents, there must be a history, a model, and training. A church based stepfamily curriculum equips those who live among them to finally touch their lives while touching their hearts. In embracing modern day stepfamilies from a biblical perspective, the church can once again represent Jesus Christ to a wandering and restless world ultimately bringing an end to the devastating plague of divorce.

## Appendix A

### Participatory Learning Activity (PLA) Focus Group Instructions

#### Objective:

The participatory learning activity (PLA) is a matrix tool used to determine and rank priorities relating to any given topic. In the case of stepfamilies and the local evangelical church, the PLA will be used to determine and rank in importance the challenges that stepfamilies face as it relates to life in their local church. By determining the top five challenges stepfamilies face as it relates to attending and serving in their church a meaningful curriculum can be designed to minister to stepfamilies and to train church leadership in how to serve this growing population. Though the participants will be known by the facilitator and other participants, personal comments and voting are not recorded by name. This exercise allows a group to arrive at a consensus relating to the question posed and will be used to develop a curriculum that addresses real challenges for a given population. In this case, stepfamilies in the American church.

#### PLA Instrument:

The PLA instrument is used as an alternative method to a traditional focus group as it solicits feedback and contribution from every participant. There are two basic phases to the PLA. Using two pieces of flip chart paper the exercise remains low tech. The first is used to solicit as many answers to the question posed as possible from everyone in a group in no more than seven minutes. This is not the time to wordsmith solutions or debate; rather, this time is used to get as many possible answers to the posed question recorded in the first column of the paper.

After the seven minutes has elapsed each group member has a total of ten votes. Votes will be cast using beans. Each participant can vote for any answer in the left column but is limited to a maximum of three votes for any one item. Each participant can vote from 0-3 beans as each answer is addressed. This task should take no more than three minutes. Once the votes are tallied in the second column, they will be ranked by a total vote in the third column. An assigned scribe should take note of the top five answers that arose from their group of 6-10 people.

**Question: What are the top 5 factors or challenges for stepfamilies in relation to church life?**

<i>Stepfamily Challenges and the Church</i>	<i>Votes</i>	<i>Rank</i>
A	6	C
B	7	H
C	18	F
D	0	B
E	0	A
F	10	G
G	1	D
H	12	E



The second part of the PLA consists of the second piece of flip chart paper. This exercise determines the ranking order of the determined top five factors from the first matrix. The top five factors will be written on a second matrix across the top of the paper from left to right in ranking order as well as from top to bottom in the same order. The same group will now enter discussion comparing each of the top five factors against each other. And determine which of the pairing factors is more critical or prevalent. The group will then total the number of times each one of the factors appears in the matrix and then rank them accordingly. The ranking of the top five factors allows the group to arrive at a consensus as to which challenge is the most prevalent or critical in the life of the church as it relates to stepfamilies.

<i>Factor or Challenge</i>	<i>1-C</i>	<i>2-H</i>	<i>3-F</i>	<i>4-B</i>	<i>5-A</i>	<i>Rank</i>
<i>1-C</i>		<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2-H</i>
<i>2-H</i>			<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1-C</i>
<i>3-F</i>				<i>4</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4-B</i>
<i>4-B</i>					<i>5</i>	<i>3-F</i>
<i>5-A</i>						<i>5-A</i>

In the above example, the letter “2-H” or “1-C” representing a challenge for stepfamilies in the context of the local evangelical church has surfaced as one of the most important factors to be addressed for this group of stepfamilies. The ranking of the items arose from a consensus, and though it does not minimize other factors, the results prioritize the challenges or factors for any given group. Not only does this type of focus group aid in developing a church-based curriculum for stepfamilies it can also be included as part of the curriculum itself.

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## IRB Approval

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# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 20, 2016

Richard C. Helein  
 IRB Exemption 2660.102016: A Church Based Curriculum Providing Marriage and Family  
 Education for Step-Families and Ministers

Dear Richard C. Helein,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46.101(b):

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless  
 (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,