

# Engage



Quarterly comment from the  
**Jubilee** Centre

Theme: **Family**  
sponsored by Family Matters Institute

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# Why family matters

**Jonathan Tame**

**R**eactivating the Extended Family' was the title of Jubilee Centre's first ever research report, on how a biblical social vision could be applied to public policy in Britain. 35 years later, we are revisiting the subject and making it a theme in 2020. It also marks Jubilee Centre's acquisition of the Family Matters Institute (see p4).

Healthy families are central to a Christian understanding of flourishing society. They are the primary institution where commitment, sacrificial love, support and guidance can grow. There is abundant evidence that children growing up in a stable home do better emotionally and educationally and have fewer mental health issues. On the other hand, family breakdown is estimated to cost society around £51 billion annually.

Whilst few people would disagree privately that the best environment for children is to be raised by their own mother and father in a loving home, we cannot say that in public without simultaneously appearing to put

down people whose marriage has broken up, or mums who are raising their children alone, or same sex couples with a child. What was intended to be a positive affirmation comes across as a bigoted, judgmental opinion.

How have we got here? Somehow family has changed from a public good to a private choice. We have elevated the values of personal choice and individual autonomy, decoupling them from any consensus around what is good and right about family life. Today it's more important to promote the right of the person to choose (and choose again) their close relationships for self-fulfilment, than to affirm certain types of family structure which bring long-term flourishing, especially for children.

Yet despite these cultural innovations which seek to maximise personal freedom, an astonishing 89% of 16-29 year-olds in Britain say their life has no overall meaning or purpose. Something seems to be wrong with this narrative.

The Bible's account of creation shows that human beings are endowed with a tremendous sense of purpose. That includes the development of language and culture, cultivating the earth's potential and stewarding the creation. But this 'creation mandate' includes something even more fundamental: God's first instruction to Adam and Eve was the shared project, 'Start a family! Fill the earth with descendants who will bring order to creation and carry on this mandate.

God gives each generation the task of bringing forth the next generation of human beings to take their place on earth. This is so taken for granted now in a world that seems to be overpopulated, and where human life is cheap, that we miss the wonder, privilege and responsibility of this task. Instead there is an insidious tendency to reduce having children to a consumer choice, rather than a sacred trust which future generations need us to fulfil.

This doesn't mean that every woman will be a mother, nor every man a father. But there are possibilities for everyone to have a significant role in nurturing, protecting, teaching and training children – firstly through extended families, then in professional or volunteer capacities via schools, voluntary groups or churches. And

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# Poverty: A family issue

**Matt Williams**

## **t wouldn't be great news if your doctor told you this:**

'Your whole body is in bad condition – pretty much every part of you has a problem. It looks like a few cuts here, a few bruises there, but it's much worse than you think. Bandages alone won't help.'

However, this is the image used to describe Israel by one of its most famous prophets (Isaiah 1:6). Israel is sick, and the opening five chapters of Isaiah's book catalogue all kinds of failings – not only 'religious', but political, military, social, legal, environmental and economic. The most vulnerable in society suffered the most as people scrambled for luxury and generally 'put on a good face' (Isa. 1:10-23). And who were the most vulnerable? Orphans and widows; in other words, those who had been cut off from their family structures.

In such a multi-faceted situation, addressing poverty simply as a 'money issue' obviously would have been nonsense. Relationships at every level had become toxic and Isaiah made it clear that it was all an outworking of a failure to relate rightly to God.

But for these children (the nation of Israel) to turn back to their divine parent was not a 'spiritual' affair. Organising a few extra worship services was branded as hypocrisy. 'Repentance' meant a concrete change of civic behaviour, returning to the God-given social order of Torah. At the heart of this was the household unit, which was supposed to provide care not only for its own members but also for other local people in need.

## **Poverty in the UK today**

Some might say Isaiah's diagnosis works for a tribal society in the 8th century BC, but what about the globalised modern world? Or even just the UK at the beginning of the 3rd millennium?

In reality, the fundamental elements of the situation have not changed at all. What's more, failure to recognise this fact is fast making poverty an incurable disease.

The British public have long known that many suffer desperately from a lack of basic resources. Campaigns in the mould of 'Live Aid' continue to play a significant role in the development of popular conceptions of what it means to be 'poor'. But recently the poverty issue has moved much closer to home.

Last year, a UN investigation claimed that poverty was endemic in the UK. A particularly striking claim was that this condition would describe nearly 40% of the nation's children by 2021. The basic response from Theresa May's government was to reject the whole report and any implication that it had violated human rights.

There are plenty of complexities around the way that poverty is measured, and part of the dispute between the UN and the UK revolves around statistical technicalities. However, what was left unaddressed (but never denied) by the Government was the experience of human suffering, especially lack of food or shelter. Philip Alston, the UN representative, saw much of this first-hand, confirming the concerns of various charities.

Anyone who has seen, been or known somebody forced to use a food bank or sleep rough has a sense of its seriousness. But they also know that injecting cash into the situation is not the answer. Something has gone wrong between people and those relational networks that should ensure they are adequately provided for. One of these networks is the family. Weakness in this key unit exacerbates child poverty, puts a strain on housing and makes state provision for elderly care completely unsustainable.

Our contemporary practice of diagnosing the situation as a 'lack of money' is mistaking a symptom for a cause. Failure to focus on

relationships, especially those of the family (as both the UN and UK do) leaves the root cause of the problem firmly embedded.

## **Christian responses**

It's tempting to jump straight to the New Testament for a Christian response to this. Yet while we should start with Jesus, we need a full biblical perspective, not a partial one.

Jesus' mission is to deal with the fundamental problem at the root of all evils, which is the relationship with God. In doing so, he institutes a new mode of life centred on love for God and others. However, this should not allow theology and ethics to become 'spiritualised'. As Jesus died for sins, economic and political sins were included – not least the material greed and kowtowing to the social power that led to his crucifixion. Likewise, concern for the poor, starting with those within the Christian 'family' is laced through the fabric of the Gospels and Epistles, not only Luke and Paul but also John (1 John 3:16-17).

None of this contradicts Isaiah's original diagnosis; it only affirms it. In fact, Jesus condemns carelessness towards the Jewish Scriptures which shape his own identity and behaviour. When interpreted this way, the prophetic critique still stands. Not only this, but the model of extended family established in the Torah still stands too;

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*Philip Alston Special Rapporteur to the UN - Credit UN Geneva CC BY-NC-ND 2.0*



# Fathers, fatherhood and the Father

Calum Samuelson



**The decline of fatherhood has been lamented for several decades, not just by Christians, but increasingly by all who recognise the profound psychological, emotional and developmental effects it has upon children.**

While more and more people are praising modern trends in fatherhood (such as stay-at-home dads and sharing domestic chores), unfortunately these trends do not compensate for the growing number of children without a permanent father in the home. Intermittent interaction with a divorced father is better than complete absence, but it has still produced a culture where millions of young men attempt to fill fatherly voids with figures like YouTube phenomenon Jordan Peterson.

I recently completed my first year as a father. It's been an unprecedented joy to

watch my child grow, but I've been frustrated by the fogginess and even indifference surrounding modern fatherhood. Western culture increasingly downplays the distinction between fatherhood and parenthood in general. Meanwhile, many Christians seem to uphold traditional ideas about fatherhood that lack both the precision and nuance needed to father in today's world.

What does it mean to be a father in the 21st century? As a Christian, how might my goals differ from those of other fathers? I have organised a few thoughts around three headings.

## Failure

Although human fatherhood derives from God's perfect Fatherhood (Eph. 3:15), we must remember it is subject to the Fall and is characterised by failures. Human fathers influence the way their children understand

failure and how God deals with them.

King David's failures with Bathsheba and Uriah are well known, but his shortcomings as a father are also significant. David's sexual failures should have been communicated to his children as dire warnings, but judging by the activities of Amnon and Absalom (2 Sam 13:14; 16:22), David failed to equip his children to learn from his mistakes. Likewise, David's headstrong and violent failures should have led him to take extra care in steering his children away from those pitfalls. Instead, we read about Absalom's murder of Amnon and David's failure to discipline the actions of both Absalom and Adonijah (1 Kings 1:6).

In some ways fatherhood begins with an inevitable 'distance of fatherhood' (described by various thinkers) which we can see when we contrast it to a newborn's immediate, bodily intimacy with the mother. Ultimately, this 'distance' between father and child must be breached and, like the Heavenly Father, human fathers must be the first to extend themselves across this distance (1 John 4:19). In doing so, they transform the distance into an invaluable space for the child to engage the inevitable difficulties of life. In this space, the father can allow his children to suffer in ways that the mother cannot (Matt. 27:46; Heb. 5:8), but also suffers in new ways himself as he wrestles to preserve the autonomy of his children, even when he is tempted at times to disown them (1 Sam. 8:7; Hos. 11).

## Freedom

Throughout history, fatherhood has presented itself as a nonessential burden. Whereas mothers begin from a position of intimacy and must consciously choose to reject it (Isa. 49:15), fathers begin from a position of distance and must consciously choose to claim their role as father. In order to genuinely promote the freedom of the child, the father must freely accept his role as father.

Claiming this role is paradoxical since it simultaneously limits and extends the father's own existence. Children limit their father by requiring time, energy and commitment; they extend their father's existence by carrying his ideas, beliefs and identity into a future beyond his own lifetime.

This free, conscious claim of fatherhood is first modeled by God in the creation of humankind, but illustrated in more detail in God's calling of Abraham and covenant with him. By these actions, God binds himself to the life and choices of a man who is already his child but also genuinely independent. The sacrificial animals of the covenant symbolise the fate of those who break it and limitation of those who accept it (Gen. 15:17; Jer. 34:18–21), but God also recognises the potential to

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# Family policy



Family Matters Institute

**Michael Trend**

## **It's welcome news that (from July 2019) Jubilee Centre has taken over responsibility for the Family Matters Institute, a Christian-based charity.**

In recent years FMI developed a stream of work around family breakdown with special emphasis on the role of fathers. It won a valuable reputation with primary and secondary research into family relationships and is a particularly good fit for the social reform side of Jubilee Centre. I was delighted to be asked to be a Trustee of FMI in its new guise.

It also seems a good fit for me personally. For some years I ran Jubilee Centre's sister organisation Relationships Foundation where we concentrated on family policy for the best part of a decade. It was uphill work as governments of all political persuasions have a tendency to shy away from areas of public policy which appear controversial – and family policy has recently been seen as such. For a while it seemed that David Cameron might be persuaded to put his weight behind the Family Test we helped develop for the government; we began to feel that there was real potential for progress. But the initiative got bogged down. It's one thing to launch a policy initiative and quite another to put your shoulder to the wheel and get it properly established.

And then, there was Brexit! This added a new layer of difficulty for those of us deeply concerned to see a society which supports families and enables children to thrive. Forget what's going on at Westminster for a moment, Whitehall's immersion in the uncertainties and complexities of Brexit has severely interrupted, right across government, the complex process of policy formation. A good example of this is the Department of Work and Pensions which just a few years ago had a growing policy group concerned with family matters; it was at the heart of the department and led by a senior civil servant. This has now completely disappeared below the waves. In brief, there's no-one to talk to. Business is not 'as usual'.

So, what should we do while we wait for 'normal service' to return? It's very frustrating but we must appreciate that it's not specific to social policy as

it's happening across the board. The Brexit process – however it ends up – is the greatest challenge that the public administration has faced outside of wartime. It will take considerable time to resolve so our watchword must be patience. This is not a surprising position for Christians: we know that we're in it for the long run.

And we must also be prepared for the return of 'normal service' when it comes. Many charities and research institutes have recently chosen to hold back work which, however excellently carried out, will inevitably fall on stony ground at the moment. This is the wise course to follow: it's like parking a favourite vehicle in the garage. You need to keep it fuelled up and in top condition ready for the day it reappears in public. There's no point in flogging it round the track when nobody's paying any attention.

Added to patience and preparedness must be the positivity which we bring to all our work. This is the key for the immediate future: while we keep our powder dry and wait for the right moment to re-engage we must draw strength and determination to care about family policy from the deep certainties that come from our faith.

We know what we stand for. The current all-pervading tendency to try and see all sides of every position has led us into a policy quagmire. To be more specific: we know that all family arrangements are not the same; we know that it does make a difference if children are brought up without fathers; we know that children born to married couples have, on every system you can measure, a much greater chance of leading happy, healthy and productive lives. These things can be, and have been, measured and were gaining traction in the public square.

The progress that has been made in enabling politicians, policy-makers and the media to understand this will not be lost as long as we don't give up and go away. Our arguments will be no less true and no less important if we don't try to kick against the goads. We should bide our time knowing that we shall have the opportunity again to make the family case. As John Stott once wrote: God means us 'to be fulfilled, not frustrated'.

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Christianity's sacralising of the 'nuclear' model of family is a much later invention.

The Church should lead the way in addressing poverty, seeing its roots in a breakdown of relationship with God and ignoring of God's ways. Specifically, those ways include how things work at home. Families have an economic role to play that goes beyond parental care for children (which is the most obvious family economic provision). Care for older generations, as well as local non-familied poor, is all part of the mandate that constitutes the life of the community. For a world that knows deep down that its diagnosis is bleak, seeing a healthy body will put flesh on the word of the gospel.

*Matt Williams' full report on family, poverty and the economy will be published in 2020, and will be available to order in future editions of Engage.*

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extend his plan of redemption by enriching the life of Abraham with many offspring.

The father maintains this tension between limitation and transcendence. He must fundamentally and repeatedly risk his future with the child in order to promote true freedom for the child and in himself. God loves us enough to promote our freedom by extending grace on top of grace, just as he freely chose to father Israel in a way that 'risked' his own reputation and preserved their ability to reject him.

## **Forgiveness**

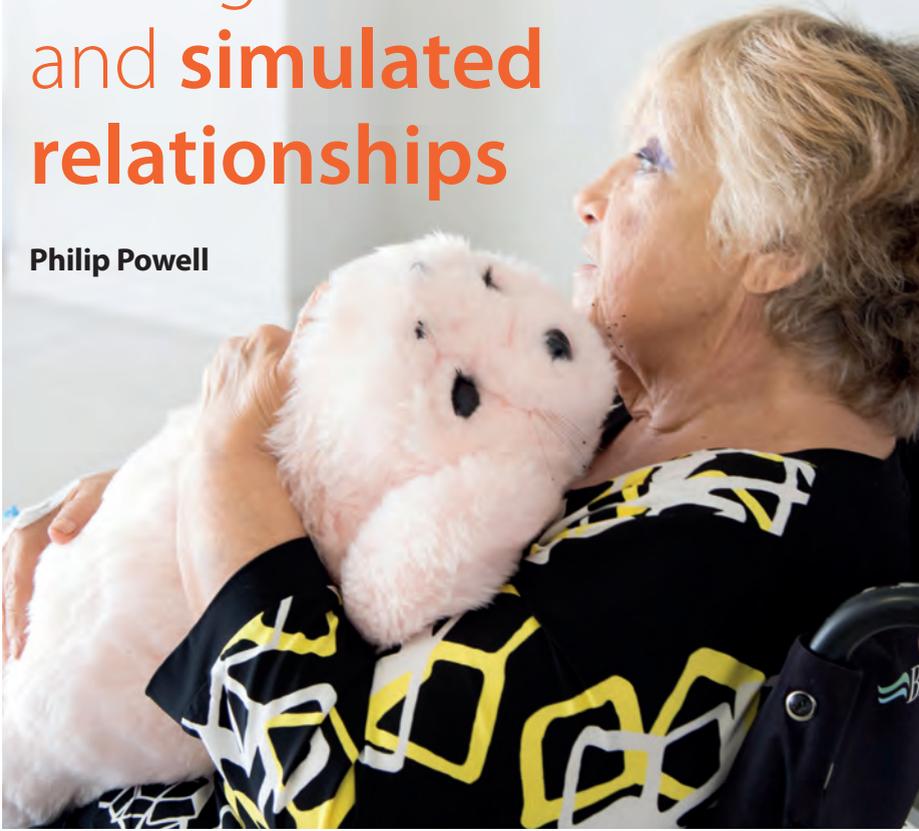
Just as fathers must claim the responsibility of fathering their children, so also must children choose to obey their fathers. The mother-child relationship involves less conscious choosing; it begins with the gift of conception and ripens in the womb. But where there is conscious choosing, there is also potential for rebellion.

In this context, the father is strongly linked to the idea of forgiveness (Mal. 4:6). Mothers expect and even hope for their children to surpass them. Fathers, however, have the potential to experience the succession of their children as a confrontation (2 Sam 15–19).

The threat of rebellion provides potential for true forgiveness. Crucially, this does not mean it is easy or natural for fathers to forgive their children. However, when we consider the story of the Prodigal Son, it is powerful not because it portrays forgiveness as the pinnacle of tolerance, but because it reveals forgiveness as unmerited grace – built on the gift of unmerited freedom given by a father.

# Artificial intelligence and simulated relationships

Philip Powell



*Paro the Robotic Seal - Credit Fondazione Santa Lucia, CC BY-NC 2.0*

**The new world of AI chatbots, Amazon's Alexa, Google Home and Apple's Siri is already here. It's making interactions between persons and machines more human-like, even emotionally intelligent and attractive.**

But how do these interactions interface and interfere with the real, messy process of human-to-human relationships? In this latest Cambridge Paper, Professor John Wyatt explores these challenges and asks, what will guide our thinking as we deal with fresh ethical issues in this brave new world?

One area is dealing with the challenges of the care industry. Increasingly sophisticated AI-powered robots are taking on the role of caregiver for the elderly. These relationships are called synthetic relationships. Another area is mental health monitoring and therapy. And there is increasing evidence to suggest that relationships with 'care' robots do benefit those with mental health concerns.

There is a common narrative which underpins the introduction of AI devices and 'companions' in the fields of care, therapy and education. It says there aren't enough skilled humans to fulfil these roles, and the needs for care across the planet are only projected to increase with ageing populations. Machines

are a 'good enough' replacement, and this more pragmatic argument seems to trump all other ethical considerations.

Another area of concern is the world of sex robots. Sex acts with a machine may not be the same as with a human but this is better – so the argument goes – than being deprived of sexual activity altogether. But this raises troubling questions and regulatory challenges. Should humans be allowed to enact violent actions on humanoid robots who realistically plead for mercy? Should the use of child sex robots be outlawed?

In all this, human-like robots are anthropomorphised with increasingly human-like speech and a focus on the face and eyes. Eye movements and gaze offer non-verbal cues that help humans understand the intentions of other social agents. Establishing eye contact, and experiencing the other as 'looking back at us', enables us to reach out to another person who is conceived and rationalised as being 'behind the eyes'.

It's possible that some AI-powered technologies could give us experiences which are analogous to real human friendships, and this may have some beneficial consequences. Robots could support human empowerment. But the 'relationally sensitive' responses

that chatbots generate are those that their programmers have prioritised. There are hidden humans who are haunting the robots in our homes. The tech specialist who writes the computer codes and programmes these machines often has an instrumental understanding of human relationships. These synthetic relationships are changing what it means to truly relate to another person. Human relationships will become more distorted in the future if children learn how to relate primarily from their interactions with AI-powered devices. This could lead to future relational dysfunctionality that no technology can fix.

How does the Bible inform our thinking as we face these challenges? Human beings are created as embodied persons, sharing a biological inheritance with animals, but uniquely created as God's image-bearers. Machines on the other hand cannot share our fleshy embodiment. They are artefacts of human creativity, with the potential to support our unique human calling, but they can never enter into genuine human relationships.

There is a basic ontological difference between humans and machines. The machine is nothing but a sophisticated artefact. Human beings are called to love God and one another; our humanity embodied in flesh is central to our relationships. We are called to the paradoxical nature of Christ-like love where, instead of meeting one's own needs, we are self-forgetful and focus on the other.

While there may be economic and practical benefits from advancing AI technology, we are called to safeguard and to celebrate the centrality of embodied humanity to human relationships. There is no machine substitute for this.

**You can order a copy of John Wyatt's Cambridge Paper using the response form.**

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opportunities abound in the other direction too – for both children and adults to support old people who are frequently lonely and needing practical and emotional support.

Every child born belongs to a family. Families carry cultural knowledge and values, including faith, from one generation to another. They provide the foundation for personal and emotional security and wellbeing throughout life.

Families matter. Let's celebrate them, and help provide the motive, opportunity and support for them to thrive according to God's purposes, and the rest of society with them.

# News and events



## Social Reformers Summer School

Thursday 18th to Sunday 21st June 2020

Theme: **Family in a changing world**

Family. It's the essential unit of society, a reality of birth and a trajectory for the future. But it also doesn't belong to the politically left or right. Instead a biblical perspective on family offers sharp challenges to both extreme individualism and a sacralising of the 'nuclear' model of family. And this will affect our approach to public policy, the decisions we make as communities and churches, and the choices made by families themselves.

Join us for our annual Social Reformers Summer School, a gathering of Christians who want to see the gospel have a lasting transformation on society's institutions and values.

The School will inspire you with stories of Christian social reformers from the past, equip you with a biblical strategy and principles for transformation in the present, and help you take steps personally towards becoming a social reformer in the future.

The Summer School is for people aged between 18 and 40 who are recent graduates, young professionals and others in business, public services or the charity sector.

**Venue** Westminster College, Cambridge  
**Prices**

**Early Bird** (until April 01, 2020)

Residential- £245, Non Residential - £145

**Regular** (after April 01, 2020)

Residential - £295, Non Residential - £195

[jubilee-centre.org/summer-school](http://jubilee-centre.org/summer-school)

## SAGE Graduate Programme: Join the 2020 intake

*SAGE helped me develop my research skills and thinking so that I can better communicate biblical ideas in the public square, and have richer public conversations about faith and society. I would recommend SAGE to anyone who is considering how their view of the world shapes how they interact with it—and how God can be essential to that worldview.*  
Hannah Eves, 2018/9 Participant

SAGE is Jubilee Centre's year-long residential training programme for emerging leaders. Participants will learn to think biblically about issues in public life, develop research skills and mobilise other Christians to get involved in social transformation. The SAGE Programme is for recent graduates with mature Christian character and leadership potential, and is based at the Jubilee Centre's office in central Cambridge.

The 2018/19 participants' research project ended up being published as *Thoughtful Eating: a biblical perspective on food, relationships and the environment*. They've since gone on to other positions, including at Theos Think Tank and The DCU Brexit Institute.

Applications are now open for the September 2020 intake.

To find out more visit:

[jubilee-centre.org/sage](http://jubilee-centre.org/sage)

or request an application pack by emailing Mercedes McGuire:

[m.mcguire@jubilee-centre.org](mailto:m.mcguire@jubilee-centre.org)

## Communities of Reform

Saturday 14th March 2020 - a day symposium in Cambridge

Are you troubled by the lack of Christian values and witness in many public institutions? Do you long to see the redemptive influence of the gospel in business, education, healthcare or government? We are convinced that long-lasting reform is only possible when people commit to working together for the common good over the long haul. Join us for a day symposium exploring a theological framework and practical inspiration for 21st century 'communities of reform', which will also connect you with other like-minded Christians.

To register your interest or find out more, please contact Mercedes McGuire: [m.mcguire@jubilee-centre.org](mailto:m.mcguire@jubilee-centre.org)

## About Jubilee Centre

The Jubilee Centre is a research and policy think tank that offers a biblical perspective on social, economic and political issues. Through our research, publications, events and training we equip Christians to be salt and light in the public square.

Jubilee Centre is based in the centre of Cambridge, which is ideal for collaborating with local churches, like-minded charities, students and academics in the two universities and our sister organisations Relationships Foundation and Relational Research.

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