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God's Special Trio: Foreigners, Fatherless, and Widows

The habit of reading the Bible through every year from cover to cover has provided some insights that I may not have picked up without this systematic approach. There are three groups of people that God identifies repeatedly. They are almost always mentioned together. God is intensely concerned about how his followers respond to these subgroups of humanity. I would like to call them God's special trio. They are the foreigners, fatherless, and widows.

Foreigners, fatherless, and widows appear as a trio in 11 verses in the book of Deuteronomy. It is impossible to miss them when reading through this book. The first verse in which they are mentioned is Deut 10:18. God's passion is clearly articulated, "He defends the cause of the *fatherless* and the *widow*, and loves the *foreigner* residing among you, giving them food and clothing" (emphasis added). How does God provide for them? In chapter 14 verse 29, God calls on his people to supply food for these individuals and emphasizes that by doing so, he will bless them in all the work of their hands. Every local city or village was expected to respond to the needs of the foreigners, fatherless, and widows who lived among them. God's blessing was tied directly to how they responded to the needs of these groups.

God was very specific in his instruction concerning the treatment of his special trio. His people were not to take advantage of them, such as depriving the foreigner and fatherless of justice or taking the cloak of a widow as a pledge (Deut 24:17). At harvest time, they were not to thoroughly harvest their farms. They were to leave olives, grapes, and wheat available for harvesting by the foreigners, fatherless, and widows (vv. 19, 20, 21). A tenth of the harvest was to be given to the Levites as a tithe. From this tenth, the foreigners, fatherless, and widows were also to be cared for (26:12).

What intrigued me was when I came across this trio again in my

reading of Psalms, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Malachi. Psalm 146:9 repeats the response of God found in Deut 10:18, “The Lord watches over the *foreigner* and sustains the *fatherless* and the *widow*” (emphasis added).

Many verses referring to God’s special trio come in the form of a warning—do not oppress the foreigner, fatherless, and widow. Jeremiah 7:5-7 puts it this way, “If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever.”

A brief survey of the Old Testament perspective on foreigners, fatherless, and widows indicates that these groups are a special focus of God’s attention. He expects them to be treated well (not oppressed) and to be provided for by his people. God’s blessing of his people is directly connected to how they treat these individuals.

Foreigner

I will explore further each of the three groups, beginning with foreigners. The NIV selects the word “foreigner” to describe this group. Other translations use the word “stranger,” “immigrant,” or “sojourner.” Leviticus 19:34 (NIV) provides an insight into what God is referring to: “The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.” The Hebrew word used in this passage is *haggar* which is from the same root word (*guwr*) used in Deut 10:18 and is best translated as sojourner. This rarely used English word means to turn aside and tarry for a definite or indefinite time. Biblically, this person was a newcomer who did not have rights based on birth (Brown-Driver-Briggs 2006). A biblical example of a sojourner is the story of Naomi and Ruth. When Naomi moved her family to Moab because of a famine in Israel, she became a sojourner in Moab. When Ruth, a Moabite, moved with Naomi back to Israel, Ruth became a sojourner. In today’s context, refugees or immigrants are familiar words that define groups of people that fit the meaning of the word sojourner (*haggar*).

From the inception of Israel, there was a mandate from God to respond with compassion to the foreigner. God shared his vision for Abraham and his descendants in Gen 12:3, “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” The calling of Israel to positively impact the nations surrounding them was a unique one. “Although ancient Near Eastern law codes stressed protection for the widow and orphan, only Israel’s contained legislation for the resident alien” (Elwell 1996).

In our contemporary context, foreigners, and in particular refugees, are making headlines around the world. Desperate political conditions in Syria and Libya have created a monumental humanitarian crisis. It is estimated that 11 million Syrians have fled their homes since civil war broke out in March 2011 (Syrian Refugees 2016). In the first six weeks of 2016, 409 individuals lost their lives at sea in their attempt to escape. European nations face unprecedented challenges as they scramble to respond compassionately to the cry for help. Joe Millman, a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) stated, "There are more concurrent crises around than we've ever seen at one time" (Batha 2016). It is not anticipated that this intensity will decrease anytime soon.

Complicating matters further is a legitimate fear that terrorists are infiltrating the refugees as they seek asylum. It is impossible to close a blind eye to the risks while trying to respond compassionately to the millions who desperately need help. It is not the purpose of this article to debate the political landmines related to the current refugee crisis, rather to present a case for a biblical response to this group that is part of "God's special trio."

If we examine the pattern established in the Old Testament, it is abundantly clear that God's people must respond with acts of compassion. Every city was responsible to care for those within their territory. Applying that methodology today, it would become the responsibility of the local church and individual members to engage in ministry to refugees within their own community. Deuteronomy 10:18 clearly highlights the priority of providing for the physical needs with food and clothing. Additional ways to provide tangible help could be assisting with medical and dental needs, bed/blankets for the home, learning the language of their new country, orientation to the community, etc. Inviting a refugee family home for a meal would foster a relationship and heighten awareness of specific needs.

The Iowa-Missouri Conference has taken decided action to do something tangible for the refugees within their territory. They have established a refugee tuition fund that provides assistance for Adventist education to children of refugees (Iowa-Missouri Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2016).

Seventh-day Adventists are an end-time movement with a mission to carry the Three Angels' Messages to the ends of the earth. Could the influx of refugees be God-ordained?

God would be pleased to see far more accomplished by his people in the presentation of the truth for this time to the foreigners in America than has been done in the past. . . . As I have testified for years, if we were quick in discerning the opening providences of God, we should

be able to see in the multiplying opportunities to reach many foreigners in America a divinely appointed means of rapidly extending the third angel's message into all the nations of earth. God in His providence has brought men to our very doors and thrust them, as it were, into our arms, that they might learn the truth, and be qualified to do a work we could not do in getting the light before men of other tongues. (White 1946:570)

Pastor Jimmy Shwe spent over 20 years living in a refugee camp. He is now a United States citizen and lives in North Carolina. Pastor Jimmy understands the significance of the above quote from the book *Evangelism*. Since 2011, he has been involved in helping to identify 43 Karen refugee groups in the United States. Today, there are over 2,000 Karen refugees worshipping as Seventh-day Adventists in the United States.

Are there refugees living in your city? To find out, visit the website: www.reachtheworldnextdoor.com. Click on the link "Make Friends with Internationals" and then "Find Internationals." Perhaps your church could become a host to a refugee group and assist them as they plant a church. Experience has demonstrated that these groups flourish best when supported to begin their own ministry verses integrating them into the worship service of the existing Adventist church. If space is provided by the local church for them to conduct Sabbath School and church in their own language, they will flourish. The local church can respond to their physical needs and help them transition to their new home country. This is mission at its best.

Fatherless

The second group in God's special trio is the fatherless. This group is close to God's heart. As highlighted previously, the group referred to as "fatherless" appear 18 times in the Old Testament as part of the trilogy of foreigners, fatherless, and widows. The fatherless are mentioned an additional 23 times in the Old Testament. Perhaps the most well-known passage is Ps 68:5, "A father to the *fatherless*, a defender of widows, is God in His holy dwelling" (emphasis added). Psalms 27:10 sheds further light on God's passion for the fatherless, "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take care of me."

In the ancient Near East, the father provided the main economic support for his family. The loss of a father through death in war, accident, or disease placed the children and widow in a desperate financial situation. Second Kings 4:1-7 shares the hopeless plight of a widow who had the creditors coming after her following the death of her husband. The ruthless creditor was even threatening to take her two sons as slaves in order

to pay the debt. Elisha instructed her to collect vessels and pour the small amount of oil that she had into them. Miraculously the oil multiplied and all the pots were filled. She was able to sell the oil and pay off the creditor. Such highly vulnerable widows were to be cared for by God's people. In this case, it seems that help had not come and God himself provided a miracle to care for the widow and her children.

Just as God placed the responsibility of reflecting his passion and coming to the aid of the fatherless in the Old Testament, he clearly indicates the priority for his followers today: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after *orphans* and widows in their distress" (Jas 1:27, emphasis added). According to the Christian Alliance for Orphans, 17.8 million children have lost both parents—double orphans, while 153 million children who have lost one or both parents. These numbers do not include children living in institutions (orphanages) or on the streets (On Understanding Orphan Statistics n.d.).

How can a Seventh-day Adventist directly impact the life of an orphan today? Two years ago during Christmas of 2014, our family decided to host two orphan brothers through an organization called Project 143 (Project 143 2016). The boys came to our home for four weeks to live with our family and enjoy the Christmas holidays. The experience was so transformational for our family we decided to host them again for eight weeks during the following summer. We have now hosted the boys four times and also visited their orphanage in Eastern Europe. They have learned English and one of our biological boys is communicating with them in their language. We are currently in the process of adopting them. Spending time with these boys caused me to wonder how two such amazing boys could be abandoned by their parents. They have such promise for the future, but desperately need a family who will love them and raise them to make a difference in this world for God. They come from what is considered the most secular part of the world. Praying, going to church, family worship, even the name of Jesus are all new concepts for them. It was exciting to see the transformation in their lives during their short time with us. The older boy, who was seven at the time, came up to me one Sabbath after hearing me preach and in broken English said, "I help for God." Needless to say, I was overcome with emotion.

Perhaps you have an interest in doing something closer to home. Being a foster parent is another way to make an impact for orphans. This ministry for children should certainly be promoted in the local church. If this is not the right step for your family, perhaps you can be a support for someone who is fostering, by offering respite care. Respite means to provide a primary caregiver with a break. By hosting a child in your home for a few hours or over the weekend, you can give the foster parent much

needed rest and as a result not only help the child, but also help the foster parent do their job better. The same need is also present for single parents and their children.

Ellen White took the biblical injunction to assist orphans personally. She comments on her experience:

After my marriage I was instructed that I must show a special interest in motherless and fatherless children, taking some under my own charge for a time, and then finding homes for them. Thus I would be giving others an example of what they could do.

Although called to travel often, and having much writing to do, I have taken children of three and five years of age, and have cared for them, educated them, and trained them for responsible positions. I have taken into my home from time to time boys from ten to sixteen years of age, giving them motherly care, and a training for service. I have felt it my duty to bring before our people that work for which those in every church should feel a responsibility.

While in Australia I carried on this same line of work, taking into my home orphan children, who were in danger of being exposed to temptations that might cause the loss of their souls. (White 1958:34)

Note that it was God who instructed Ellen White to do this. Also, it was to be an example to others of what they could do. She clearly recommends that every church take on the responsibility of ministering to orphans. With the busy life that Ellen White lived, what an inspiration!

Widows

The final group of God's special trio to be examined further is referred to as "widows." In the Old Testament, widows and orphans are typically grouped together. One event precipitated the status of widow and orphan in a moment, the death of the husband/father. At that moment the future of the wife (now a widow) and children (now orphans) became very uncertain.

Jesus draws our attention to a broader ministry to widows in Luke 4:25-26, "But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the day of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarapheth, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow." Elijah's interaction with the widow of Zarapheth resulted in God's miraculous preservation of the widow's life and that of her son. The provision was for their basic need of food. God miraculously supplied oil and flour until the famine ended. In these verses, Jesus emphasizes that

there were many widows in Israel. The story of the widow of Zaraheth additionally points out that God's care extended beyond the borders of Israel.

The plight of widows does not escape God's notice, and it should not escape our notice either. Some women become widows while they still have children living at home, others become widows because they outlive their spouse who has died of old age. On average, women outlive men by seven to ten years. If a man marries a woman that is a few years younger, then the time spent in widowhood can be even longer. The loss of a spouse, having to care for a home alone, and feeling uncertain financially, all can create a very distressing situation. Ideally, children or other family members will rise to the occasion and provide the support needed. However, that should not be assumed. There are many ways that church members can respond with compassion and love. Inviting them to your home for a meal, helping them organize their finances, mowing their yard, doing odd jobs/repairs around their house, preparing food for them, adopting them as a "grandparent" for your children, taking them on family outings with you, etc. There may be physical needs, but we also should be in tune with the emotional needs. Local churches should provide social and spiritual opportunities for these individuals to interact with others who are facing a similar stage in their life. Beyond our own members, we should be reaching out to widows in the community as well.

Single Moms

Our society is impacted by another group that has many similarities to widows: single moms. This group is created by two cultural dynamics: divorce and unwed pregnancies, both of which result in children being raised without a mother and father in the home. Single moms represent a significant portion of society. The *Washington Post* made this observation, "Single motherhood has grown so common in America that demographers now believe half of all children will live with a single mom at some point before the age of 18" (Badger 2014).

Following are some startling statistics regarding single moms in America:

- Seventy-eight percent of the current prison population was raised by single moms.
- Children of single parent homes are 5 times more likely to commit suicide, and 10 times more likely to drop out of high school.
- One-third of single moms live in poverty (The Life of a Single Mom 2012-2015).

How has the Christian church responded? Only 1% of the nation's 300,000 Evangelical churches have any type ministry for single moms.

Two-thirds of single moms do not attend church, which means their children are not there either (The Life of a Single Mom 2012-2015). The combined number of unchurched single moms and their children makes this segment of society the most likely under-evangelized/unchurched group in America. And yet this is a group with tremendous needs and potential high receptivity.

Ministering to Single Moms

How does the Seventh-day Adventist church do when it comes to ministering to single moms? Statistics are not available to know the exact percentages, but it is likely very similar to the 1% statistic cited above. Research indicates when the church makes an effort to connect with single moms in meaningful ways that it will bear fruit:

- Churches with single parent support groups are twice as likely to retain single parents in their church long-term.
- Churches with a single moms' support program have seen a 58% increase in the number of single parents attending their church (The Life of a Single Mom 2012-2015).

One of the most innovative churches ministering to single moms in North America is the Church in the Valley Seventh-day Adventist Church in Langley, British Columbia. For the past 15 years, through their Acts of Kindness ministry (what they have renamed their Community Services), single moms in the community have benefitted in many ways. One ongoing ministry is that of changing the oil in their vehicles. This ministry is offered at no cost every six months. The church also offers free breakfast every school day for children from low-income families at a nearby public school. Most of these children are from single-mom homes. This ministry has been ongoing for 15 years. The church also takes donations of vehicles and makes sure they are in good running condition. They then select a single mom to provide the car to as a gift. The most dramatic ministry is Extreme Home Repair. Every year the church takes nominations from the community of a home that is desperately in need of repair. In most cases, the recipient is a single parent. The church partners together with the community for donations of material and labor and over the course of two weeks repairs and renovates the home at no cost to the single mom. You can watch videos and learn more by visiting AOK's Extreme Home Repair.

Recommendations

Foreigners, the fatherless, and widows are representative of many

groups that are marginalized in society today. As a church, we cannot ignore their plight. There are two New Testament passages I would like to draw attention to in conclusion. The first is Matt 28:19, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations." It is not enough for the church to open their doors in the hopes that these groups will show up on a Sabbath morning. The first action in reaching the marginalized is "going." Ellen White challenges the church: "There is need of coming close to the people by personal effort. If less time were given to sermonizing, and more time were spent in personal ministry, greater results would be seen. The poor are to be relieved, the sick cared for, the sorrowing and the bereaved comforted, the ignorant instructed, the inexperienced counseled" (White 1905:143).

The next action involves "making disciples." Discipleship is best modeled, rather than preached. This will require an individual effort on our part to deeply invest our lives into a handful of marginalized individuals, who will in turn invest their lives in others. Discipleship is not a microwave approach. The investment of time is required. As we engage personally in the lives of foreigners, orphans, and widows, they will capture a picture of what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus. As a result, their life can be transformed for eternity.

The final verse I would like to highlight is Matt 25:40, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." Without question, marginalized groups are ones that Jesus highlights in this passage. Our actions of compassion toward foreigners, orphans, and widows will truly make an impact for eternity. What burden has God placed on your heart? What action will you take? As a church, what tangible ministry will you engage in?

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