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The relevance of covenant theology to fatherlessness in Kenya: A youth and family ministry perspective

ABSTRACT

This article explores fatherlessness within the Kenyan society, as well as its causes and effects. The article uses a practical theological methodology that unpacks the doctrine of reformed covenant theology (RCT) and its implications for strengthening the church's ministries to young people and families within the context of fatherlessness in Kenya. The article argues that RCT strengthens the individual's self-concept in light of family dysfunction; restores a covenantal understanding of marriage with implications for marital and family life, and provides a context for covenant communities of faith to function as nurturing families for young people who have been abandoned or isolated through fatherlessness or father absence. This article suggests that RCT offers a robust theology that can anchor practical interventions within the scope of the church's ministry to its young people as well as its families.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Fatherlessness is not only a reality within the community at large, but also a reality faced by youth and family ministry practitioners. It affects individuals and societies in multifaceted ways. The literature pays sufficient attention to the reality of fatherhood and fatherlessness within African societies. Richter *et al.* (2010:361-362) unpack the low rates of fatherlessness in South Africa, by noting the influence of migrant labour of poor

men; the reality of apartheid's laws and violent resistance; African kinship arrangements, and male income levels as contributing factors to the reality of the country. They seek to offer a qualitative analysis to the statistics that depict South Africa with the lowest marriage rate in the continent as well as the second lowest country (after Namibia) with present fathers. However, the topic of fatherlessness has not been significantly engaged from a reformed practical theological perspective. This research gap is explored further in section 3.

More recently, Freeks (2017) presents Carstens' (2014:9-11) research on how fatherlessness has been a concerning societal issue in many countries of the world, including America, Russia, South Africa, Brazil, Grenada, Seychelles, Chattanooga, and others. Freeks (2017:90) notes the following statistics of how fatherlessness impacts on family and societal life within the global context:

- 63% of suicides come from fatherless homes.
- 70% of juveniles in state-operated institutions come from fatherless homes.
- 80% of rapists motivated by displaced anger come from fatherless homes.
- 40% of all children do not live with their biological fathers.
- 85% of children with behavioural problems come from fatherless homes.
- 90% of homeless children come from fatherless homes.

These statistics reveal how fatherlessness is a reality that impacts on the mental well-being of individuals, on crime and delinquency among adolescents, on sexual and physical violence and on the attendant factors concerning children- and youth-at-risk. Similar issues are traced among other countries in Africa, as is explored below. While research on fatherlessness has been conducted within various contexts, there is a significant gap in how it can be approached from a theological perspective within the Kenyan context. This article proposes that reformed covenant theology can provide a solid foundation for research on fatherlessness, from which to draw practical implications for the purposes of church ministry.

2. EXPLORING FATHERLESSNESS

2.1 Fatherlessness: A continental perspective

Significant studies consider globalisation and transnational forces that have affected African family systems (Therborn 2004:13). One of the chapters in a case study of Ghana reveals how, in the early 1990s, the structural adjustment

plans in African states have contributed to rural-urban migrations among both genders, reduced focus on childcare, and absenteeism in parenting (Therborn 2004:14). Another psychological study in Nigeria shows how entrenched patriarchal attitudes in some Nigerian communities influence the notion of family responsibilities in the home as well as parental involvement in income-generating activities, both of which have implications for fatherhood (Therborn 2004:15). More recently, a study within the Zimbabwean context reveals how fatherlessness is both a result and a consequence of youth unemployment, delinquency, teenage pregnancy, and psychological distress (Jerie 2015:56).

2.2 Fatherlessness: A Kenyan perspective

Within the Kenyan context, the causes and impact of fatherlessness or father absence on society are as follows:

- Divorce, poverty, and out-of-wedlock births are viewed as significant causes of fatherlessness (Daniels 2000; Hyunok & Nel 2020).
- Single-parent homes may lead to economic disadvantages among young people (Ngure *et al.* 2017).
- The absence of one parent negatively affects learner achievement in school (Ngure *et al.* 2017).
- Within the context of slums, fatherlessness is a factor in adolescent delinquency, community insecurity, and consequentially community development (Izugbara *et al.* 2014:40).
- Fatherlessness is a contributing factor to crime involvement and incarceration among young people in prison systems (Omboto *et al.* 2013).
- Nationally, only 55% of Kenyan children, aged 0-17 years, live with both of their biological parents (KDHS 2014:23).
- Although 22% of Kenyan children have both parents alive, their father is living elsewhere (KDHS 2014:23).

From Ngunjiri's (2019) study conducted among a sample of 350 inmates in the Kenyan prison system between April and September 2019, the following statistics reveal the impact of fatherhood on adolescent and juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, challenges in educational progress, as well as psychosocial and mental health well-being in Kenya:

- 70% of the prisoners from Industrial area prison and 60% of the prisoners from Nairobi West prison come from broken families with no father.
- 85% of children with behavioural problems come from fatherless homes.
- 71% of children who do not finish school come from fatherless homes.

In summary, the causes of fatherlessness, nationally and globally, include early teenage pregnancies and the inability to take paternal responsibility; polygamous family dynamics that impact on paternal presence; the death of the father; entrenched impacts of fatherlessness that is passed on to the next generations, and socio-economic settings that push fathers away from their homes to earn a living (Freeks 2017:102; Jeynes & Martinez 2015:160). To support the last point, qualitative studies in Kenya have shown that young people's experiences of the marriages of their parent(s) shape their attitudes towards marriage and family life (Pike *et al.* 2018). This article suggests that these sociological and psychological markers have an impact on marital and family life, with attendant consequences on various social issues in Kenya.

3. THE RESEARCH GAP: THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR PRACTICAL INTERVENTIONS

Fatherlessness is a destructive cycle that is entrenched in a dysfunctional environment, within which young people with psychological stressors and self-awareness issues are likely to engage in delinquent behaviour that fosters a likelihood of fatherlessness in their own lives (Aute 2020; Moen 2020; Simonović-Grujić 2018). Fortunately, various interventions have been offered, including the importance of promoting equal gender values, the role of positive support systems for fathers, socio-economic interventions, education, and training in fatherhood, among others (Freeks 2017, 2020a; Richter *et al.* 2010:364). In Kenya, various organisations and churches have responded to these issues, by running programmes on masculinity and fatherhood. An example is the programme by Transform Nations called *Boys to men*, that targets masculinity, as well as *Intentional dads*, that targets fatherhood. Within my own denomination, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), the Men's Fellowship has partnered with youth ministries in churches to run mentorship programmes for boys, in order to address some of these issues.

However, from the aforementioned research, there is a gap in the theological foundations from which such interventions flow. This article proposes that an understanding of reformed covenant theology (RCT) is one such theological foundation that could ground the proposed interventions in the literature. The reasons are that, first, fatherhood is a role given by the Triune God and is a powerful model of the love of God to family members; secondly, RCT foregrounds the family as an important locus in the activity of God, in his plan of restoring fallen humanity as well as in the spiritual and moral formation of the church and society; thirdly, as the family is the smallest covenantal unit, where there are healthy values and interactions in the family,

the same individuals can bear that same hope within society, and lastly, where young people come from contexts of fatherlessness and absentee fathers, the church as a covenant community is an ecclesial family through which such young people can find much healing, restoration, and safety. The following section unpacks several aspects of RCT.

4. ASPECTS OF REFORMED COVENANT THEOLOGY

The concept of covenant theology is a salient feature in reformed theology. The definition of the word “covenant” is developed from its Old and New Testament usages, respectively. In the Old Testament Hebrew, it is translated from the word *berit*, which denotes an agreement that is “cut” between two parties and may either be voluntary or imposed by one party (Berkhof 2012:262). In the sense of the covenants that God enters with particular individuals such as Abraham, Noah, and David, the covenant is usually an imposition of God’s ordinances stemming from his sovereignty above humanity (Berkhof 2012:262). The idea was also common within Ancient Near Eastern cultures in the history of Israel between a *suzerain*, or great king, and his *vassal*, or lesser king or subjects (Reid 2020; Unger 2014). In Greek, the word for “covenant” is *suntheke*; yet in the New Testament, other words such as *diatheke* are used to refer to the concept of covenant. According to Berkhof (2012:263), the reason for this change is that *suntheke* was used for two equal parties getting into an agreement, rather than a sovereign party entering into an agreement with a lesser person. Thus, *suntheke* fails to capture the scriptural system of thought of a sovereign entering into an agreement with a subject. These are also the same concepts that have come to be translated as “testament” in both the New and the Old Testament, although Vos (2014:26) observes that the “old” in Old Testament refers to the period between Moses and Christ, and not from the fall of man to Christ.

As such, the concept of covenant contains within it a relational aspect. This relational aspect is developed from within the covenantal relationships in the Triune persons, but also between the Triune God and his creatures (Horton 2009:10). It is from this relational aspect that reformed theologians have further distinguished the concept of covenant into three parts – the covenants of redemption, works, and grace. In the covenant of redemption, the covenant is between the Triune persons, while in the covenants of works and grace, God has entered a covenant with humanity (Berkhof 2012:265, 272). The covenant of redemption is the agreement or *pactum salutis* made between the Father and the Son to save the elect (Berkhof 2012:265). However, God can only relate with man through a covenant, and he does so

through the “double-covenant schema” of the covenants of works and grace (Beach 2002:120). Thus, reformed theologians distinguish between God’s covenantal relationship with man, before and after the fall. Before the fall, God relates with man through the covenant of works, while he relates with man after the fall through the covenant of grace. The covenant of works promised blessing upon perfect obedience and curses upon disobedience. As such, the covenant of works is based on a works-based system as opposed to a grace-based relationship. Therefore, in entering into a covenant of grace with Adam, God reveals his loving kindness and beneficence to those whom he has elected to save by faith. On this covenantal basis in the Triune godhead, God then entered into a covenant of grace with humankind, delineating the terms of their salvation through their covenant head, Jesus Christ, in both his active and passive obedience (Berkhof 2012:272; Venema 2008:79).

Berkhof (2012:265) observes that these covenantal concepts, although nuanced in understanding and development, have been a hallmark of reformed theology in the works of Cocceius, Kuyper, Bavinck, Maastricht, Turretini, Hodge, Shedd, and others. Griffith (2020:327) observes that Luther’s theology was not as steeped in covenant theology as much as Calvin’s, who built on the work of both Zwingli and Bullinger on the covenant. Further, these overarching covenants and the biblical covenants are differentiated in the parties of the covenant, the stipulations of the covenants, and the consequences of faithfulness to or against the covenant (Berkhoff 2012:272).

Finally, the concept of “covenant” pre-eminently reveals God’s heart for his covenant people and undergirds all the doctrinal foci of systematic theology, including a high doctrine of salvation that is espoused within reformed theology. It is on the basis of covenant theology that reformed doctrines such as election, atonement, and perseverance, for instance, rest. Secondly, the concept of covenant reveals the personal nature of God to his creatures. Thirdly, the concept of covenant has affected reformed biblical interpretation, which views the whole Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, as one big story of God’s relationship with man – as opposed to a dispensational hermeneutic, which breaks down the concept of covenant, and is short-sighted in its view of the interpretation and importance of Old Testament history and narratives. For instance, Burger (2019:281) reads God’s covenants with creation, Noah, Israel, and David as “one story”, even though his argument is that the federal view of the covenants, which distinguishes between conditional and unconditional covenants, needs to be reconsidered.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH AND FAMILY MINISTRY

Consequently, the doctrine of the covenant has wide implications for how we read and interpret the Bible, how we develop our doctrinal understanding on issues such as baptism and salvation, and how we envisage the marriage ordinance and its practical implications for family life. Freeks (2017) proposes education on fatherhood as an intervention on the problem of fatherlessness. Since fatherhood rests in the marital union, that education must, therefore, include education on marriage and family life, within a biblical and theological perspective. Some of the issues on fatherlessness deal with misinformation and ignorance concerning the marriage institution, a transactional view of sexuality, inherited and popular cultural views on motherhood and fatherhood, as well as truncated views of self, which are defined more by past experiences than by the grace of God through the covenant of redemption. This section unpacks the implication of the doctrine of covenant on various issues that affect the reality of fatherlessness in the Kenyan society.

5.1 How the covenant of grace restores and heals individuals

The above research on fatherlessness reveals that it is exacerbated within a dysfunctional cycle. While psychologists and sociologists may have helpful interventions for those within these hope-depriving cycles, the covenant of grace in Christ offers the ultimate foundation for hope. Chapter 7, article 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, views the covenant as the means whereby God, who is far and sovereign, “condescends” to humanity (WCF 2018:38). The work of Christ, the mediator between God and man, is interpreted through this covenantal lens, with the attendant implication of redemption regarded as calling, justification, adoption, sanctification, and perseverance, among others. Thus, for individuals who come from dysfunctional settings of crime and violence, the message of redemption is sufficient to deal with their sin, guilt, shame, and brokenness. To those young people feeling abandoned by their earthly fathers, God their Father takes them

into his number, and [they] enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, have his name put upon them, receive the spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry Abba, Father; are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by him as by a Father; yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption, and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation (WCF 2018:66).

This quote reveals how God's covenantal relationship with his children, viewed through the lens of the doctrine of adoption, enriches the understanding of God as our Father and meaningfully restores those who may have been affected by fatherlessness. Several studies in the literature on parenting styles reveal how absentee and permissive parenting can be correlated with negative outcomes in psychosocial well-being among children (Akinawo 2020:634). Where youth have found themselves in cycles of deviancy and delinquency as a result of dysfunctional fatherhood and parenting styles, God the Father exercises a fatherhood based on firmness and gentleness. A healthy pattern of fatherhood is best exemplified by a relationship with God in Christ (Freeks 2020b:4). This is the kind of Father who creates a nurturing environment, where his children can grow in a manner that restores and heals them.

5.2 Restoring a covenantal understanding of marriage

The second implication of the doctrine of the covenant touches on the understanding of marital life. Vorster (2016:1) observes how postmodern and popular cultural ethics view marriage from within a socially constructed perspective, for the purposes of individual fulfilment that is expressed through a contractual view of marriage, rather than the covenantal view that the Bible teaches. On the other hand, extreme patriarchal views of marriage are perceived to further impact on issues concerning fatherhood, earning among both men and women, as well as paternal responsibilities, within the various aspects of marriage (Freeks 2017).

The solution to these distorted views of marriage is to restore God's view of marriage. This covenantal view of marriage, especially developed by the reformers, considers marriage as instituted by the Triune God, structured around differentiated roles and with the element of permanence in terms of duration of the covenant (Köstenberger 2011; Vorster 2016). This covenantal understanding of marriage has informed the understanding of marriage within reformed churches in contemporary African ecclesiology. For example, within my own tradition of the PCEA, the covenantal underpinnings are captured in the liturgical words by the minister of word and sacraments during the marriage ceremony:

My friends, we are gathered here before God and this congregation to join this man and this woman in marriage. Marriage is a way of life given to us from the beginning of creation; and it was blessed by the presence of our Lord Jesus when he did his first great sign at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. The Scriptures teach that marriage is universally to be honoured, and that it is symbolic of the holy union between Christ and his church. For this reason, it must not be entered carelessly without proper thought. Marriage is to be undertaken before God, after due consideration of the purposes for which it was ordained by him (PCEA 2011:115).

This view unpacks the Lord's teaching about the permanence of the marital bond, the foundation of companionship and the welfare of marriage to the society and to be lived out in fidelity before God, as the author of the institution (PCEA 1998). These reveal how a proper understanding of marriage as covenant can offer a corrective solution to the watered-down concept of marriage within popular culture. I would propose that these covenantal ideas of marriage be instilled in the children and the youth of the church as part of their catechism and discipleship, in order to shape their view of biblical marriage.

5.3 Covenant life in the *ekklesia* as a nurturing family for abandoned or isolated youth

Finally, the doctrine of the covenant enriches the doctrine of ecclesiology, with direct implications for covenant members in the community of faith. In the reformed confessions, the church is viewed as the "whole number of the elect", gathered in the past or to be gathered in the future, under the headship of Christ (WCF 2018:137). This language unpacks the federal theology behind covenant theology and recognises believing adults and their children among the household of God (WCF 2018:138). This shows the importance of children and young people within reformed ecclesiology, and reveals the high view of family life within the doctrine and practice of church life. This offers a corrective to the modern conceptualisation of the church merely as an emerging movement, a corporate organisation, or a mono-cultural outfit. By recognising the visibility and invisibility of the church, reformed ecclesiology enriches the concept of the church from an individualistic or consumerist perspective, by grounding the church within God's covenantal relationship and his purpose for his people.

The implication for such a covenantal and reformed ecclesiology ideally leads to an intergenerational approach to ministry to children and young people. Youth and family ministry scholars have offered various approaches to how young people can be incorporated in the church through an intergenerational approach (Chiroma 2020; Cloete 2019; Weber & De Beer 2016). Cloete (2019:62), for instance, engages Jansen's generational theory as a lens of conceiving the church's ministry to young people. By incorporating different generations as part of the church's core ministries, the church is able to borrow from the strengths of different generations and to remedy the weaknesses of different generations. This becomes a mediating factor in enriching the church's ministry. The reality of fatherlessness complicates the lives of young people and hampers their value system and sense of self-worth. Clark (2011) considers the issue of teen abandonment as central in articulating a meaningful ministry to young people, leading him to propose that the church

be called to adopt young people coming from such backgrounds (Clark 2018). By being part of a covenant community, intergenerational relationships can assist abandoned youth to build healthy value systems and remedy the gaps in their life in a healthy way (Chiroma 2020). Through the intergenerational relationships mediated through the covenant community, the church then functions as a kind of family that helps them deal with the past hurts in their lives, undergirded by the grace of God in Christ and applied through the Holy Spirit, within the community of faith and its total ministry to them.

6. CONCLUSION

This article explored the reality of fatherlessness as an issue that affects society at large. By examining the global, continental, and national statistics on fatherlessness, this article revealed the varied causes and impacts of fatherlessness. Causes of fatherlessness and father absenteeism in Kenyan families were enumerated as migration for work opportunities, early teenage pregnancies, evasion of paternal responsibility, and sociocultural perspectives on issues such as polygamy, among others. Effects of fatherlessness on the lives of young people include involvement in adolescent deviancy and delinquency, increase in alcohol and drug abuse, negative impacts on community development, distorted pictures of masculinity, fatherhood, motherhood, and ultimately marriage and family life. Most significantly, this article revealed that fatherlessness tends to foster repeated patterns of negative sociological, behavioural, and marital issues.

In light of these causes and effects of fatherlessness, the article sought to anchor interventions on the reformed doctrine of the covenant. In exploring various aspects of covenant theology within the reformed tradition, this article applied the concept of covenant in three particular areas. First, covenant theology enriches the self-concept of individuals who have been negatively affected by fatherlessness. By considering the specific doctrine of adoption that is undergirded by covenant theology, this article showed how a healthy concept of fatherhood is developed from the Fatherhood of God. Secondly, this article showed how the doctrine of the covenant enriches marital and family concepts and may offer a corrective to misconceptions about marriage and family life within the African context. Lastly, this article explored the implication of covenant theology on the doctrine of the church or ecclesiology and how the covenantal community offers a nurturing community for young people who have been abandoned or isolated through fatherlessness. Such a covenantal understanding within reformed theology offers a deeper engagement of intergenerationality, which is the hallmark of holistic ministry to young people through the instrumentality of covenant communities of faith.

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