

“They Ganged Up On Me”

- Tom Wheeler

A friend told me of yet another failed marriage last week. The husband is a friend of many in my Bible study group who, to a man, thought his marriage would work. *Jim* is a good man. He is successful without being a workaholic. He is gentle and caring. He planned to use the biblical model of family headship. With God’s help, he hoped to be the husband and dad *Robin* and her son and daughter by previous marriage seemed to so desperately need. He and Robin loved each other, had a shared faith, and went through premarital counseling with their pastor. The marriage lasted just over six months.

So far, all anyone has been able to get out of Jim is, “They ganged up on me”. What he and Robin had failed to accomplish was the understanding and mastery of issues surrounding his role in this new “instant family”.

There seem to be authority issues involved in stepfamily relations that differ greatly from the nuclear family context that, if not dealt with properly, will prevent you from achieving the New Normal you hope for in this marriage. Healthy environments have a nurturing structure, based on established boundaries for everyone in your household. This sets the stage for a realistic sense of self-worth and achievement that everyone in this new family needs in order to be part of a forward moving team.

“OK. Sounds great. I thought that’s what I was doing. But I keep getting ambushed! What’s up with that?” These are the questions I faced as a new stepparent. The hard lessons I learned underlined my lack of understanding of how remarkably different stepfamilies function as opposed to traditional nuclear families. If we are able to separate and define authority issues, however, success can be achieved. Much has been written about dealing with *external* problems. For now, let’s see what can be done to bring order in the face of the *internal* issues so we can eliminate them as *eternal* obstacles.

The word **authority** seems inadequate in describing the complexities surrounding stepfamily dynamics. All too often we find ourselves lost in the maze of “Just who’s in charge here?” Our role in this new family seems to become increasingly cloudy. What’s worse, we often feel cornered when we can’t get the word **authority** to fit the task at hand. If not resolved, this issue can rob a stepparent of the ability to make a positive contribution to the way the family functions. Resulting feelings of futility and personal irrelevance can be a marriage killer if not successfully addressed. If we don’t feel we’re allowed to perform our function as a part of the husband/wife team, we’ve lost the reason for joining the team in the first place, haven’t we? A healthy and nurturing marriage relationship cannot limit the function of one partner to that of breadwinner, cook, housemaid or sex partner alone. This is hardly a functioning partnership. No wonder so many stepparents come to the conclusion that “this isn’t what I signed up for” and decide the whole thing was a mistake.

There is hope. And it comes when we first realize that the issue of “authority” isn’t really the issue that defeats us. It is actually that one or more of the components of the concept of authority are not being properly understood. Authority means one thing in a work environment. It can be a very different thing at home. At work, we have the employer/employee relationship, which includes issues of management, supervision, standards of workmanship/productivity, punctuality and all of the things we face in the workplace on a daily basis. In your new household, the collection of issues that comprise authority in the head-of-family context are different and must be understood and mastered individually. Here are three major sub-issues that I encountered; the handling of which helped me reduce the stress, anarchy and chaos in my stepfamily. Authority in any variation of “yours, mine and ours” families involves issues of **credibility, respect and governance**. Let’s look at them separately.

Credibility: Credibility is something that can only be achieved over time. The key word is *achieved*. Having “your yes be yes and your no be no” consistently is a good way for the kids to be able to tell if you are a person of integrity. It is to be hoped that you and your new spouse were sure of each other in this regard before you re-married. As Ron Deal, author of The Smart Stepfamily and founder of Successful Stepfamilies has so ably illustrated, it takes time and patience when it comes to the kids. As Ron points out, the process of integration into a workable stepfamily usually takes anywhere from three to seven years, depending on the ages of the children. I believe the issue of credibility plays a significant role in just how long this process can take. The younger the children – the shorter the time. Generally. It can be more difficult and prolonged due to prior trauma or abuse issues. The task is to focus on being *consistent and patient*. Your goal in life is to be seen by the children as the most reliably stable factor in their lives. When all is said and done, having your “yes be yes and your no be no” can add an area of peace in their lives that they may come to value in the face of the uncertainty they have been through. There is a joker in the deck you must be ready for. Establishment of credibility relies, to a great degree, on how the children perceive you. A big factor in how we receive, process and react to people and situations is our own internal perception system. It is the lens through which we view the world and those with whom we interact. That lens has been shaped, colored and sometimes fractured by our own experiences. Right or wrong, perceptions have the effect of reality in all of us. Consistency and patience can eventually overcome the wrong perceptions or even open hostility, which is often normal in kids who may view you initially as a usurper. Isn’t this a vital part of the mechanics of mentoring – the daily acts of doing what is right (even when it hurts) in a way that children can witness and imitate? Notice I didn’t say, “Tell them what is right”. The operative words are **do** and **witness**. These are wonderful lens cleaning tools.

Respect: There is a difference between *respect* and *respectfulness*. They may (and hopefully *will*) be integrated eventually, but are not reliant on each other. Respectfulness has to do with courtesy and communication. These factors are

important components in the establishment of boundaries. More about respectfulness in a moment.

Respect is a hoped for result of the consistent and patient practice of leadership skills. Respect is earned through a combination of personal integrity and mentoring. It is also dependent, to some degree, on whether or not the children are willing to grant that you are a person worthy of respect – and their standards will be high. Sometimes impossibly so. They may have difficulty in achieving an evolving concept of who you are due to things you have no responsibility for or control over (previous emotional trauma, for example). *Always remember that this family is born out of loss.* Be that as it may be, you are the adult. Nurturing and trying to mentor severely damaged children must be undertaken with realistic expectations on the part of *both spouses* and usually requires outside professional help.

I'm speaking here of acting in the face of the more typical defense mechanisms that children of divorce have had to establish. They want to know if you are their mom's protector (and, therefore, *theirs*). They want to see if you put your new family's welfare ahead of your own. Is this a difficult road to travel? You bet. And, again, it takes time. It may be helpful at this point to remind yourself that your true worthiness resides in you, through Christ, and depends on how realistically high a standard you've set for yourself. You want to be able to look back, in the end, and be able to say you consistently did your best in doing the right thing for your family.

Governance: This is the area in which your new marriage team has the ability to influence your family dynamics the most. And it can only be successful if you really *are* a team! Here are a few tips:

1. You cannot start out, in the vast majority of situations, as the family's new Dad or Mom. The goal, instead, is to establish *leadership authority* as a new Marital Unit – ***not a new parenthood structure that the children (and 'ex-es'), for a variety of reasons, often reject out of hand.*** This rejection can begin to be taken personally. And the rejection often has nothing to do with your personal worth as a parent or your ability, qualifications or loving concern for the kids. It can then develop into a root cause of frustration that can destroy stepfamilies from within if not dealt with through the mutual efforts of both spouses. It is the responsibility of each parent to make it clear to their own children that this new adult in the home is a co-leader of the family organization and has been invited to accept this job only after much prayerful consideration. Great care has been taken to ensure that this new marriage will be better for the family and will make the household a better and safer place in which to live – a household in which **everyone** will be valued and have a sense of belonging. Everyone will be able to contribute and everyone has the responsibility to do their best in working toward this goal. Make it gently (but firmly) clear that this was an adult decision – made by the adults – in the best interests of the entire family.

2. Be careful to avoid viewing governance issues and disciplinary issues as one subject. Here is an opportunity for couples to clearly establish a model of joint governance authority. I disagree with the current thought that only a bio-parent can discipline a child. This, in my experience, causes a divisive line that can only result in double standards that kids will resent. You end up trying to maintain two families under one roof and a house divided against itself. Response to infractions should be decided in private by both adults. The *sentence* is delivered by the bio-parent. Use terms such as, “we have decided”, and, “when I’m not here, he/she has the same authority as I do” to reinforce that your new spouse wears the mantle of joint governance authority. This not only eliminates the “You’re not my dad/mom” rejection of authority for which we have very few comfortable and non-escalating responses, it also gives the child access to an automatic court of appeals through their bio-parent. Remember also that it is normal for kids to approach their bio-parent first for decisions. A good governance model will hopefully lead to one of those “hallelujah!” days when your stepchild comes to you first for advice. But this has to come from within them. If you have this as an immediate expectation, you will likely produce opposition and rebellion - which will actually delay the process.

3. Make it clear that you know it will take some time for everyone to become comfortable with the new structure. There will be stress – and not everyone will grow into the new family structure at the same rate of speed. The leadership structure, however, starts *today* and will not rely on everyone’s consensus. Both adults should be careful to reinforce each other’s status as a leader whenever it is questioned. It is hoped that over time affection, trust and genuine closeness will develop. But children must know from the outset that failure to recognize the authority of a family leader because “you’re not my dad/mom”, will be as productive as being pulled over for going 100mph on the Interstate and ignoring the cop who stops you because you haven’t opted to recognize his authority. Respect for you as an *individual* involves the establishment of trust, which takes time and is an earned commodity. Respect for your *authority as a leader*, however, must be insisted upon and reinforced by **both** adults at all times. The idea that your new spouse and your children need to “just work it out” by themselves places him or her in an unfair, unsupported and often unworkable situation that creates warfare rather than unity. The rule for building family unity must be: “In this household, even if you don’t particularly know or like someone very well, politeness and *respectfulness* are a requirement.” And respect for leadership authority is a constant expectation. From everyone. No exceptions.

4. It is a valid assumption that, in order for you to be in a stepfamily, at least one of you spent some time in the challenging life of single-parenthood. A by-product of single-parenthood is often the reflexive drive to shelter your children from further strife and hurt. All of us recognize the trauma they have been through. Unfortunately, many of us are too quick to come to our children’s defense and do not allow or even encourage them to fight the battles they must learn to fight (no

matter how unfair they seem). The goal is to equip them with the coping skills they need in order to become healthy adults. Their growth into successful adulthood is the primary goal of parenthood, isn't it?. It is vital to your new marriage that you work hard to let your single-parenthood fade into a memory of something you survived or even triumphed over. Excessive or reflexive defensiveness in the face of your new mate's exercise of governance authority can torpedo the whole stepfamily dynamic in that it marginalizes their authority over at least some of the children now in their care. Real issues will probably arise as each one of you works toward management styles that suit your abilities as a new team. But teamwork is the ultimate goal. Momma Bear lunging out of her cave too quickly to defend her cubs who "have been through a lot and don't need you hounding them" can derail this. Sound familiar? Get thee (BOTH of you) to a professional counselor. If you've reached this point, there is probably stuff both of you need to get a handle on and these issues must be dealt with away from the kids. It is an unfortunately common experience for us to be unaware of the extent to which this mindset is at work in us. It is also common for us to be more able to see it in someone else. This is the They Ganged Up On Me Syndrome. In the absence of abusive intent, work hard to "let it go". Fine-tune the process *in private* with your mate (and not until your nostrils quit flaring). Work in the belief that your prayerful judgment in selecting this new co-leader was good. Be willing to trust your new mate – especially if you are a mother of boys. Boys grow into manhood by striking sparks with other males; preferably functional men rather than women and other boys.

Being a stepparent is, in a lot of ways, more like starting a new job as an executive manager than as a new mom or dad. Good management technique can be more useful than the traditional family model most of us carry in our minds. The nuclear family is simply not the appropriate model upon which to base the stepfamily adventure. The relational dynamics are quite often "outside of the box" of traditional parenting. Boundaries often need to be a bit wider. Governance authority, exercised in an encouraging way, can achieve the result you are seeking.