
Kimathi, G 1994 — Your marriage and family

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Reviewer: Pastor Elijah Mahlangu

In their publication of Grace Kimathi's book, Potchefstroom University has provided to African readers and keen observers of African issues a much awaited assessment and evaluation of the institution of marriage and its important component, parenting.

The uniqueness of Kimathi's book is clearly discerned from the first few pages. She has identified a very unusual sample and made it the subject of her research — the Kenyan elite. She is the first to admit that her choice of this sample may not be a very popular one. Although she maintains that the elite are important in that they occupy positions of influence, are a credible source of information and set standards for the whole society, she also mentions a biblical concept (justification) by citing Jesus' parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:4-6. This concept 'and the parable' is, however, quoted out of context. The man referred to by Jesus in the parable leaves the ninety-nine sheep already safe and departs to search for the one which is lost. In Kimathi's sample, it is not only the elite which is lost but also the middle and lower classes. It would have been fascinating if Kimathi's choice of the sample could have been random because the family in Africa irrespective of social status is plagued by the same pressures.

Kimathi should however be commended by identifying the need for an African approach on the subject of marriage and family: '... it can be safely concluded that there is a need for a book written from the point of view of an African Christian. Much of what has flooded our markets has come from the West and does not quite meet the need within our present cultural context ...' (p 7). Due to the processes taking place today in sub-Saharan Africa, inter alia acculturation, urbanisation and Westernisation, Kimathi's need identification is crucial. It is however doubtful whether the purpose as stated has been adequately accomplished. What she has instead done is to provide the African viewpoint on an assortment of issues such as the education of children, the position of the man and woman, childlessness, singleness, et cetera. Praises should however be sung to her for this part. But in her quest Kimathi lacks the models which will assist in an understanding of the Christian marriage and family in the African context. It is also surprising that she gives very little credit to the African traditional view of life regarding marriage and the family.

Kimathi hardly mentions the practice of lobola (dowry) which is a unique feature of the African marriage. Furthermore, does Kimathi's family refer to father, mother and child? Is that the African conception of family? What about the extended African family? What about the fact that to an African child

every adult in the community is his/her parent? I strongly maintain that Kimathi could have sought models through which such strong values could be enhanced, especially by the Biblical message. While I do not think that the Christian message should rubber-stamp everything African, it (Christianity) should not disapprove of or undermine everything African. Instead the African should evaluate his/her traditional heritage in the light of the Biblical message. I therefore find Kimathi's submission that the newly weds should leave their parents (leaving geographically - p 27) to start their own lives, against the communalistic disposition of Africans.

Notwithstanding the criticisms cited above, Kimathi's book has succeeded in highlighting the plight of marriage and the family in Africa. She sees what she calls the African Christian family caught in a cultural web consisting of the strong cultures of ethnic groups, the assimilation of Western culture and the preaching of Christian values. In short she maintains that the African family finds itself living in three worlds, the African, Christian and the West.

In her discussion of the problem of parenting, she quotes Castle (1966:67): 'Children who were once subjected to deliberate and systematic instruction are now left too much on their own, in a world where traditional values have been uprooted, but no adequate moral values substituted'. She submits to this view and aptly so by citing relevant Scriptures indicating that the only way to salvage the institution of marriage and the family in Africa is by way of finding refuge in what God says in the Bible. This she enhances by stating that the family is yet another battleground between God and Satan: '... Satan hates the presence of the Lord in families. He particularly hates marriages where spouses acknowledge the centrality of Christ ... as you know Satan is Christ's number one enemy' (p 95). I agree in principle with Kimathi that Satan's influence is responsible for the tragedies encountered in marriage and the family. However, Satan cannot do anything if those involved do not give him the permission to do so. For instance, Satan did not constrain Adam and Eve (Gen 3) to disobey God, he only suggested it to them. It is therefore irresponsible and a refusal to assume responsibility and accountability if we blame Satan for all the wrong things in marriage and the family.

In conclusion, Kimathi has laid a very good foundation and also a challenge to African thinkers, marriage counselors, philosophers, theologians, et cetera to come up with models which will assist in identifying where the Biblical message (on the family and marriage) converges with traditional African value systems, together with Western culture which is a factor and reality today in Africa.
