Blended Families

Part 1 of 2: Living in a Blended Family
with
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Welcome to The Table where we discuss issues of God and culture. I’m Darrell Bock, Executive Director for Cultural Engagement at the Hendricks Center and my guest today is Ron Deal who works for Family Life Ministries in Little Rock, Arkansas, is that right?

That’s right.

And you have a special area within Family Life and we’re going to start off by just defining our terms. So that area is?

Well, I manage a department called Family Life Blended. We work specifically with strengthening stepfamilies and stepfamily ministry.

Okay. So sometimes that’s called mixed families so let’s deal with terminology to start off with. What’s the difference between mixed and step and whatever else we might throw in?

It really is confusing. It really is. It depends on what part of the country you’re from if you’re in North America. It depends on what part of the world you’re from in terms of what term you’ll use, for example. Stepfamily is the most popular term in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand and most of the UK. The word blended family is commonly used in the United States to refer to stepfamilies, but only in certain context. So blended family is the idea, right, that’s what you’re creating is a blended family. But when you talk about any specific relationship, it’s a step-parent or step-child or step-sibling. There’s no such thing as a blended mom.

But by the way we’ve got to qualify this because if you live in the southeast part of the United States, a blended family is generally the term for a biracial couple.

Yeah, and sometimes it’s called a mixed marriage.

Exactly. It depends on where you are and what people will use. So here’s what I’ve learned to do. Use both terms, stepfamily and blended family, within the same sentence within 30 seconds of beginning to speak to any particular audience, just so I can help define for them what I do and who I’m talking about.
Darrell Bock  Now how long have you been at Family Life?

Ron Deal  I’ve been there just over three years. I’ve been doing step-family ministry since the late 90s. I actually started as a marriage and family therapist working in church context in the early 90s and that’s when I really began to explore this thing called the step-family, what it is and how it’s different from biological families and how we help.

Darrell Bock  I’m asking a question I have no idea what the answer is to, and that is have things changed in the last 50 years when it comes to step families or what, particularly in relation to the church?

Ron Deal  Well, yes. Boy, is that a loaded question.

Darrell Bock  At least I didn’t say in 25 words or less.

Ron Deal  Good. We could look at that from a sociological standpoint. Or we can look at it from a church ministry standpoint. It probably would be good for us to do both of those.

A lot of people are really surprised. From a sociological standpoint, let me say two things. The proportion of blended families in our culture today is a little higher than it used to be. But going back clear 100 years, it’s still about the same as it is now.

Now here’s what’s different. One hundred years ago, 150 years ago, most step-families were born out of the death of one parent. The average marriage lasted seven years but it wasn’t because of divorce. It ended because the death of a parent, usually the mom in childbirth. So the dad was left, he had children, he marries again. That’s a stepfamily.

So the proportion of stepfamilies in our culture has always continued to be about the same, although I believe in the last 20 years it has begun to increase pretty rapidly. We can come back to some trends about why that is.
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Here’s the other thing that really surprises a lot Christian people. If you stop and you look at the Old Testament families of the Bible, they were stepfamilies of a different color, I should say. They were complex families where you had multiple marriage. So it wasn’t a marriage and a death and then another marriage, or a divorce and another marriage. It was Jacob getting married four times…

**Darrell Bock**  Multi-layered.

**Ron Deal**  And having lots of boys and lots of rivalry and favoritism. Most of the Old Testament families we read about and talk about and have studied are very common and have the same dynamics as modern day stepfamilies. We just never really thought about it.

So they’ve always been a part of God’s people. I think that’s a really important thing because I encounter a lot of ministry leaders who, one eyebrow goes up when I begin to talk about this. They’re like, ‘Who, what, why would we even – what’s the ministry all about and why do we need to do that?’ As if this was a new thing. It’s not a new thing.

**Darrell Bock**  Interesting. Interesting.

**Ron Deal**  Now sociologically what are the trends that have seen an increase in stepfamilies today? Divorce has a whole lot to do with it going back to the 60s and the increase that hit its peak in the 70s. So we have two or three generations now of kids, of young people that have seen serial divorces in their family. And that’s a really new thing and it’s something we have to pay attention to. The other thing is co-habitation rates.

So there’s three different ways you can find yourself in a blended family. It’s not always about divorce. Sometimes it is; most of the time it is. But often it’s about the death of a spouse. We’re living longer so think about this scenario. You have a 30 marriage and your spouse dies. And a year later you get married again.
My brother-in-law became a step-son, a step-child, at the age of 49. Now this guy is not telling him to take out the trash, that’s not the nature of their relationship. But he is figuring out who is this guy married to my mom and how do we get along at Thanksgiving. It changes everything in their family. His grandkids now have a step-grandparent. Think about that for a minute. Those are very legitimate reasons that people find themselves in step family situations. So we’re living longer and there are lots and lots of later life marriages that are forming step families.

And the last trend is out of wedlock pregnancy. You may have heard this, 40% of children in the US now are born out of wedlock. That’s kind of the headline. You’ll see that when we’re talking about family ministry. But here’s what people don’t know that’s behind that. Ready for this? Sixty percent of those couples that are having a child out of wedlock, there’s already one child. One of those two parents, the mom or the dad of this new baby, already has a kid from another relationship.

**Darrell Bock**

So it’s multiple basically.

**Ron Deal**

It’s multiple births out of wedlock and multiple half sibling relationships, step-sibling relationships, complex families are becoming more and more, it’s just growing.

So there’s the path of no marriage and no divorce and no death. There’s the path of divorce. There’s the path of the death of a spouse. All of which give birth to blended families.

So we estimate in our ministry that easily one third of all weddings in the US today, at least a third, are giving birth to a blended family. It could be as high as 40%.

**Darrell Bock**

So let’s flip the page here from sociology to the church. What does that mean for the church and how has the church handled what has obviously in one sense been around for a time, but also is to some degree a little more prevalent.
Ron Deal  
If I can be candid, we haven’t handled it. We have marginalized and ignored stepfamilies, for the most part. Not because we wanted to or because we’re mean. I spent 25 years of my life in local church context; I get how hard ministry is in a day in and day out basis. It’s not that we’re trying to do that. It’s just we’re busy. And honestly, I think for a lot of ministry leaders they just never thought about it and they didn’t realize that there’s something unique or different here.

So I’m doing premarital counseling, for example, in my church and a couple comes to me, and wow, he has two kids and she has three. All I know to do is do my premarital counseling thing so I talk to the couple about communication and sex and managing their money and praying together. I don’t know to talk about kids or ex-spouses or the complexities of being a parent and a step-parent in the same household. I don’t even know to talk about those things.

Darrell Bock  
Yeah, there are layers of things that you just don’t think of because our model is you get married and you stay married, and that’s kind of the world that we try and live in. But this isn’t the 1950s.

Ron Deal  
That’s right. So historically, I think we haven’t done well. But I’m very encouraged that I’m here this week in Dallas for four days to do presentations at a marriage ministry conference and 500 ministry leaders are going to be there. And they have seen fit, the creators of this conference, to give me some stage time. In other words, that’s the first time we’ve ever said this is big enough, everybody needs to know about this.

Let me give you another analogy that may encourage you, and that is Family Life, the ministry that I work with, international ministry, subsidiary of CRU. We’re in 101 countries throughout the world, 50,000 or 60,000 people in North America will go through our marriage conference called A Weekend to Remember. This year, 60,000 will be touched by that. We have online materials and resources. And for 38 years, Dennis Rainey has been the president of that; he is a DTS grad.

Darrell Bock  
Yeah. When you call something Weekend to Remember, you’d better have a success on your hands.
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Ron Deal  That’s right. So here’s this awesome ministry that’s highly respected around the world, does some great, great work working with couples and parents. And for 35 of those 38 years, didn’t have a clue and know what to do with stepfamilies.

Darrell Bock  Well, it’s the analogy of the picture and the parable that we’re talking about.

Ron Deal  Right. So Dennis comes to me, calls me out of the blue one day and says, ‘Hey, you’re the guy. You’ve been doing this and you understand it and we don’t. Would you be willing to come and help us?’ Now that sort of shift is taking place not just at Family Life but in local churches, family ministries, marriage ministries, discipleship ministries, all over the country. It’s slow, but we’re really finally catching on. We are behind in terms of being relevant to people to try to help them redeem this family that they’re in and redeem then the next generation that’s growing up in this family.

Darrell Bock  And cope with the variety of relationships they have to deal with as a result.

Ron Deal  And make God the center of this home and help them to be successful. One of my little mottos is, ‘Make this marriage your last.’ We want it to last so it is their last marriage. We don’t want any repetitive divorces. But the divorce rate for couples in stepfamilies is at least 10% to 25% higher than it is for couple in first marriages. We’re concerned about divorce. We should be overly concerned about re-divorce. It’s a different animal but it impacts lives and it has detrimental effects to faith development in children to the process of loving within the home and creating a safe environment where God is honored.

So we’re just really catching on to this thing. We’ve got to do something about this.

Darrell Bock  I’m kind of fascinated by the mechanics of what we’re talking about to a certain degree. What was the transition like when Family Life brought you in and said, alright, this is going to be a part of what we’re going to do and what we’re going to be talking about, what did that look like and how would you define the transition into that world? Did they just come and say, “Help us” or were there elements of space to negotiate through as you became integrated into Family Life?
It started with a ‘Help us’ and then we had to get down to logistics and strategies. You know, the same strategies we’ve implemented at Family Life I will teach this week to marriage ministry leaders.

For example, you don’t have to recreate entirely new things. Whatever you’re doing for couples in your marriage ministry around communication or sexuality or all those topics that we like to talk about, those all help couples in stepfamilies, too. So that’s great; you’ve got a running start. Now add 100% more to what you teach them because there’s a whole new set of things.

There’s another layer of stuff.

There are multiple layers of stuff. And so to be really on target and really help them deal with where they live life, then we’ve got to just add some stuff to it.

For example, Family Life is doing that. The Weekend to Remember marriage conference that we talked about now has sprinkled all the way through the two and half-day event messages and tips and tools and a story that illustrates some piece of healthy step family living. We know our audience is about 25% blended couples so we can speak to them in the midst of the general marriage ministry. Pastors can do this from the pulpit.

One of the most creative ideas I’ve heard recently is a senior pastor, he’s preaching on marriage and one of the things he’s learned to do is maybe bring up a couple at the end of the sermon, and of course it’s pre-arranged, and they have a little conversation just like you and I are. And he gets to ask them how they have applied the principles he’s been teaching about.

Now what he does is he brings up two couples, one in a first marriage and one in a stepfamily. Sometimes their answers are very parallel to one another and pretty much the same. But on occasion the couple in the stepfamily will say, ‘Yeah, but in our family it works like this. This is what’s on our mind. Money management in our marriage not only applied to me but applied to the money we have to think about going to the other home, child care.’ So there are layers of complexity begin to come out and the people who are attending get to see that, especially those who are living that or somebody who is a grandma who cares about her son who lives in a step family all the way across the country. And everybody is learning how that applies to them.
Just those simple little things that you do add to what you normally would have done and really, really touches people’s lives.

Darrell Bock

I assume these other topics include things like helping children adjust to the arrival of a new authority figure in the house and how you relate to that and the stages of life that would be in, because young kids are very, very different from older kids and the memories the older kids tend to have.

I’ll just go ahead and share my own story. My mom died at 42 when I was 14 years old. And so my dad remarried several years later and so we have a new mother in the house now. Now two of my siblings were already in college when she passed away and then two of us were in the house. And I was the only one, I had a brother and two sisters, I was the only one of the four of us who liked the person that my dad married. Everyone else had a suspicious or even hostile reaction.

Which introduced all kinds of new stuff into the dynamics of what had been a healthy family but a little bit traumatic. We had been through cancer as a family together from the time I was eight until my passed away at 14 so we had had six years or that, in and out of hospitals and that kind of thing. That was disruptive. But we knew my mom and dad loved each other and we all got along. It wasn’t perfect, but it was nice. Now all of a sudden in the house there was all this tension you didn’t used to have introduced by a figure who my dad obviously cared about a great deal, but the kids were not happy.

Ron Deal

Do you have a sense, if I might ask, for those who found it hard to receive her and open themselves to her, what was it? What was their concern?
Darrell Bock

It was a combination of things, I would say. One was I think they sense a sense of innate disloyalty to Mom. I think the other part of it was there was suspicion on the part of at least some that the reason she was attracted to my dad is my dad was a fairly well-to-do business man who could provide nicely for her. She came out of a different social strata in the city so there was skepticism at that level. There were a variety of things at play. The thing is I had spent more time with her during my dad’s courtship because of where I was; I was a junior and senior in high school so we were around each other a lot. I got to know her in a way that my two older siblings away at college never had the chance to. So boom, this woman pops into their lives.

And my younger sister was so traumatized by my mom’s death, because she was a couple years younger than I was, that she was still going through the grief of losing mom. We all were, but it really hit her significantly at a very sensitive age.

And so actually what I’m mapping out to you is probably not atypical. Every child has a different reaction to what’s happening in the house. And in the midst of that, you’ve got all these balls bouncing off the walls colliding at different angles with each other.

Ron Deal

Absolutely. So what you’ve kind of hit on is a couple of really big themes that if you’re going to understand stepfamilies and be helpful, there are a couple of big things in here. One of them is loss. I say to people all the time a wedding that forms a blended family is not the beginning, it’s the middle. Now think about that for a second. When a couple gets married for the first time, let’s say they’re 25 and 26 years of age, no kids involved, it’s the gateway to the rest of their lives. It used to be the way marriage was in our culture, that’s how it was seen as the gateway to everything else in your life. You get a job, you buy a house, you have children and everything flows from that.

Well now marriage is a capstone; it’s not the gateway. I’m not saying it should be this, I’m just saying that’s the way people view it. It’s the capstone. So you can live together, you can have three kids with three different fathers, but you’ve not arrived until you’ve gotten married. It’s still prized that much. But how you get there is just a totally different path.
But it used to be that marriage is the beginning of the story. Now when it gives birth to a blended family it’s the middle of the story and there is a lost narrative that is always following the family, and it’s at the heart of everything. So a kid who says, ‘You’re not my mom, I don’t have to do what you say,’ is in part telling you, ‘I miss my mom.’ That’s what’s deep in that statement. I wish she were here. But she’s not and I’m having to grieve her, and you being here is a constant reminder of that.

**Darrell Bock**

Yeah. You’re a substitute I really had no choice about.

**Ron Deal**

I didn’t get to choose her dying; I don’t get to choose you being here. Here’s another thing. It’s more loss for me that you’re here. It’s more of a reminder. My loyalty to Mom means that I really don’t want to make space for you. It feels like I’m burying her all over again. There are all kinds of really hard things wrapped up in the loss.

Here’s the thing, the adults and pastors tend to forget that loss didn’t end after the funeral. It just rolls every day for the rest of your life. And it’s always there.

Now here’s the other thing, the big rock that was tied up in your story, and it’s what we call competing attachments. So again, think about how big this is. In a first family, husband and wife meet, fall in love and then they begin to have children. All the emotions and attachments between those family members are all moving in the same direction. Nothing competes. They all move together. So when Dad spends time with his wife, the kids may be, ‘We wish we could go to the movie with you, but we understand. You guys are in love and you do that romantic thing and that’s okay with us. We love it that you’re together.’

**Darrell Bock**

The kids give the parents permission to be parents and be married to each other. That’s really nice.

**Ron Deal**

And let me tell you how serious this is to the kids. If Mom and Dad are having problems and they’re battling or they’re in conflict or they separate, the kids fight to get them back together again. Everything is moving in the same direction; they’re invested in the marriage just like the couple is invested in the marriage.
Here’s another observation about that. If Dad spends time with a son, is Mom threatened by that? No. She’s thrilled that Dad is investing in their kid. All things in balance. You don’t want to overdo anything. But the relationships are moving in the same direction.

Now in step family on day one, there is somewhere a competition. Relationships compete. So your sister’s relationship with your dad is now competing for your step-mom’s relationship with your dad. Think about that. So if Dad is successful in his marriage, it might come at the expense of a relationship with his child. And to that kid, this is not just one loss; this is loss number 100,000 on top of Mom’s death. So they’re highly sensitive to that.

And you haven’t even brought in the other part of the equation which is how do the siblings across the two families relate to each other, because in my situation the woman who my dad remarried had three children of her own that came into the equation, all younger than the youngest in our family because this woman that my dad remarried was significantly younger than he was. So that was a whole other set of –

And again, to show you the difference, I got to be a big brother to little brothers I never had. That was kind of fun. But to my older brother, and really to my older sister, it was three pieces of the family that never were a part of the family.

So they lost their mom and then they lost their family. They lost what home is. You got at Christmas and there’s ten other people there. You don’t even know who they are. It’s not even our home anymore. Think about that. It’s loss upon loss upon loss upon loss. That makes it difficult for those people to love and honor one another.

Think about how profound competing relationships is. I’d like to joke about this one for a minute. What if the Trinity had competing relationships? Can you imagine on the day of Jesus’ baptism the Holy Spirit said, ‘Whoa. He’s your beloved Son? Come on. Not that again. Come on. You favor him all the time. No way I’m descending like a dove.’ I mean, think about that.

Maybe like a vulture.
Yeah, like a vulture. Yeah. Think about that. If somebody says, ‘I’m not cooperating; this doesn’t feel good to me,’ it makes for the disharmony.

So you said it earlier when you said there was now tension in our home that we’d never had before. So what do you do with that? That’s new. That’s a new loss in and of itself. You and your siblings, you were kind of okay with step-mom and they weren’t.

And everybody is negotiating that space so I’m sitting here with my siblings going, ‘Why do you dislike her?’ I don’t get their hostility. They aren’t particularly thrilled about my acceptance.

Now you’re pitted against each other unfortunately.

Exactly right. Exactly. It’s a strange set of dynamics that come in, and it all came with the territory. There was no opting in or out. It happened. And I think in some cases, I think this is true with my older sister. My older sister never quite entirely got why her gut reaction was just so there. She never could quite put words on it but she knew she had it and she knew it was there. So it was like this mystery prick in your side. It’s painful, it’s there. And there even was a little bit of, ‘I know I should probably think different about this because Dad is happy. But that’s not how I’m feeling about it.’

Now imagine, just imagine – I don’t know if this would have worked or have been helpful for your sister – but imagine somebody in her situation having a children’s pastor come along side her –

Who knew the dynamics.

And say to her something to the effect of, ‘This is hard. It’s not supposed to feel good. And it makes all the sense in the world to me why it’s so hard for you to like your step-mother because you miss your mom.’ Wow, just think about that. Connecting it and putting words on it. See, she didn’t know why she –

She was searching for what it was.
**Ron Deal**

But if somebody gave words to it and said, ‘I think this is what it is,’ and then they went so far as to say, ‘You know what, you don’t have to embrace your step-mother like you did your mother. There is only Mom in your life and there is a certain, special space in your heart that is only reserved for your mom. And your step-mom will never even try to go into that place, and you don’t have to put her there. She is just another adult who cares for you, just like your teachers at school, just like a youth pastor.’

**Darrell Bock**

Hopefully she does a little better than that.

**Ron Deal**

Just like your Aunt Suzie. Just like Grandma. There’s lots of people in your life who care for you, and she’s another one of those. Not Mom. Just imagine somebody who is able to step into that space, put words on her experience, help her get some perspective and then give her permission to not have to like her and do away with Mom. Now all of a sudden maybe your sister, maybe, her shoulders drop a little bit and she –

**Darrell Bock**

You create some fresh space and it creates a location for this new reality that you’re having to deal with. And you’re also trying to pull away from the kind of inherent competitive sense that that move might have produced.

**Ron Deal**

If they were going to pre stepfamily counseling, imagine a senior pastor could see that one coming and work down a little time to talk to your sister one-on-one. And also I would say spend time with your dad and step-mom.

**Darrell Bock**

That’s the next place I was going.

**Ron Deal**

And help predict that.

**Darrell Bock**

Exactly. Because the other oddball situation in this is this was like a curve ball for my dad. He didn’t see it coming. He didn’t expect the depth of the reaction it produced. He was caught off guard by the amount of hostility that was surfacing, etc. Of course part of all he was seeing is my life is kind of coming back together. Here’s my life coming back together and my kids, like Congress, are like, ‘Hey, we didn’t take this through committee.’
Ron Deal

We’re going to veto this thing. So again, he loves his kids. That’s clear; that’s not changing. He loves this woman, that’s clear; that’s not changing. In his mind, what’s the problem? And that’s a common misconception and unrealistic expectation for people walking towards marriage. And that’s part of our job, I think, is to help raise their awareness. It doesn’t mean they’re doing the wrong thing and should stop; it just means they need to go in with their eyes open and understand how difficult this is.

And again, it’s easy for the biological parent, that’s just so classic that your dad would kind of feel that way because that’s a lot of what biological parents feel. In stepfamilies, we talk about insiders and outsiders, right? So your dad is an insider. He’s an insider with his children. They have DNA blood bond all the way down, psychological, spiritual, you can’t break that. Now he’s got this strong bond towards this woman that he’s fallen in love with. By the way, he still has a bond towards your mother and that has its own life to it. But he’s got this bond with this woman so for him, he’s an insider with everybody. But the step people, as I like to say, step-mom and step-kids now, are outsiders with one another and they’ve got to figure out how to become insiders and that’s where all the work comes in.

Darrell Bock

And the other element in this I think is, and I’m drawing out on my experience here for sure, is there are kids, there might be a third category, who are more inside than outside. And here’s what I mean. I got to see my dad’s courtship with this woman. I got to see how he was landing, if I can say it that way, from something that had been very painful. And I saw the positive aspects of their relationship. My younger sister was in too much pain to see any of that. And my older siblings, because they weren’t in the house at all didn’t see the courtship at all. They were really on the outside of this deal.

So because of the different locations we were coming at this relationship with and the reactions it was generating, everyone was in a different place in terms of what was going on.

Ron Deal

One of the analogies I like to use to help families is how do you cook a stepfamily? It’s not with a blender, even though they’re called blended families. It’s not with a blender. That just slams ingredients into one another and assumes that they’re all going to mesh. Microwaves are quick and fast; it’s not quick and fast.
You cook a stepfamily with a crockpot. Slow, a lot of time. But you get there and it’s really good to taste. Now here’s the deal. Some ingredients are in the crock-pot longer than others. You were in the crock-pot. You got to watch it, feel it, experience it, see it, participate in it in a way your older siblings, they were outside the crock pot, so to speak, living life on their own, older teenagers, maybe young adults. That’s what happens with a lot of what we call adult stepfamilies where the couple is later in life and their children are in their 20’s and 30’s, they’re not around at all. They don’t get to witness the nature of their relationship and come to trust it. It’s easy to be skeptical at that point.

That’s the point. Time is the thing that developments relationships.

And the nature of the closeness of the relationship – I mean, we might as well because it’s a good illustration – is I was in my teenage years when this was going on, the middle of high school. In some senses, this woman was a mother that I didn’t have because my mom got sick when I was very, very young and really not very conscience of the world around me other than little league baseball and that kind of thing. Now I’ve got life questions. I’m starting to date girls, I want a female’s point of view about things. She’s stepping in and being an adult in my life that’s actually helping me negotiate aspects of life that I’m discovering and trying to wrestle with. I’m appreciating all of that. None of my other siblings had any of that. So that, in part, explains some of the dynamics.

It does. Male and female. Boys tend to do better with remarriages than do girls. Step-daughters and step-mothers have the most difficult time bonding with one another. You had some of that going on, I think, in your home. There’s a lot of dynamics there. Some are predictable, some we can’t predict at all. Very common story.

Now let me just point out one thing to our audience. There is no sin in this story whatsoever.