Now, a lot of people have a judgment about blended families. And it's that somehow, they're all born out of sin. Some of them are. Okay, clearly, some of them are.

Dr. Darrell Bock 

Yeah, right.

Ron Deal 

Not this one. And it's still complicated. It's still a challenge. You still need direction specific to your family situation. To just walk in and say, "Okay, ma'am, you're now the woman of this house. Be a mom." Oh my goodness. How does she be a mom to girls that don't accept her presence? She can't just put on the mom hat and be the mom.

Dr. Darrell Bock 

How can she be a mom to an older brother who's in his 20s in law school, has his own life, and he hasn't really had a mom for 8 years.

Ron Deal 

She could be the mom to you. By the way, she's got three kids of her own she's still trying to be the mom to. What does that look like?

Dr. Darrell Bock 

Yeah, exactly.

Ron Deal 

Okay. So there's so many layers to this. Complexity is the middle name of the stepfamily. And we have to do, I think, in ministry our due diligence to understand it. You don't have to be an expert in it, but you have to understand it. You have to at least kind of get it from the outside so that you can then point to resources; help people in a moment where they just need to sit down and have some hope brought to them. But if we're not willing to do that then we just stay irrelevant.

Just the other day – how many stepfamilies are in the church? We can talk about stepfamilies in our culture. There's 100 million – let's do that for a minute.

Dr. Darrell Bock 

Okay.

Ron Deal 

There's 100 million people in the United States with a step relationship.

Dr. Darrell Bock 

That's what, 33 percent?
It is a third of Americans who can touch it, meaning I say above, beside or below; they have a stepparent, they have a stepsibling, or they have a stepchild. 100 million, okay. That does not count the people that are grandmas or grandpas who have a son who's just married a woman with two kids and he became a stepdad and grandma's trying to figure out how to help her son. Right, she just wants to bless them, and how do I do that. It doesn't count those people. So real fast, this is a lot of people we're talking about. This is not a niche ministry.

Dr. Darrell Bock
No, this is a whole section of your church. [Laughs]

Ron Deal
From a household standpoint, the stats are these. Forty percent of families, that is if there's a couple who's married with children in the house, full-time or part-time, forty percent of them are blended families.

The next question people ask me is what percentage of people in the church are blended families. And the answer is we don't know. Nobody's ever done the math, done the science to find out. We guess. Now, I can tell you that I think conservatively my guess is about a third. It depends on what kind of church you're in, what part of the U.S. you're in. But it's pretty safe to say 20 to 30, 35 percent.

I had a conversation with somebody just the other day, a church in a metro Denver area, suburb, middle-class suburb, and they did the math in their church, and 47 percent of their families are stepfamilies.

Dr. Darrell Bock
Whoa.

Ron Deal
So it depends on where you are. But we could be talking about a lot of people. Stop and think about it for a minute. How often do you speak to them on any level at any place in your church from the pulpit, in a web page article, in an e-mail, in children's ministry, in youth ministry, in your marriage ministry, parent training –

Dr. Darrell Bock
With anywhere; so what we just spent half an hour talking about.

Ron Deal
Do you ever speak to any of this?
My concern is that we're just irrelevant. And it pains me because I think this is one – there is a lot of fields that are white for harvest in our culture. There really are. I think this is one of them and I think it's a big one. And it's a growing field that's white for harvest. And if we just can step in with a word that offers hope and guidance and points them in the right direction, you know, people are thirsty…

Yeah, that's a great observation.

For help. And it can either be us or it can be the media. And I know what they're going to give them. Pop answers that aren’t going to help at all.

So let's turn – we've talked about the sociology. We've talked about some of the dynamics. We've talked a little bit about the church. I think the page that I want to turn now because we've got about 20 minutes left is to kind of say, all right, so what do you say to families on the one hand. And I think we've covered some of that. But what do you say to churches on the other? What's the message for the church?

Yeah, in terms of practically what they can do –

In terms of practically what they can do, yeah.

Well, let me go down, first of all, the important road, and that is deal with your theological questions around this, especially around divorce and remarriage, okay. And I've studied it and I know you've read and there are lots of scholars, and they don't agree. The really smart people don't agree. So we do the best that we can. I do think every church needs to really have a good policy in place so that whoever's leading the stepfamily group or whatever, to whoever's doing the premarital counseling, can be theologically driven and understand what the church is comfortable with and where they need to go and where they don't need to go.
So I think that's step one. Step two then is to say, okay, where can we begin. And I think there's a lot of really good ways to do this. There's so many different entry points. You can just kind of pick the one that makes the most sense to you and start with that. So for example, let's say you have an established parent education training or marriage education class, workshop, maybe it's an annual conference that you host, whatever that looks like for you. Start with that. So do what I call sidebars, right.

Talk about marriage. And then when you're talking about managing conflict in marriage, you might tell a story about a couple who's managing the conflict around his ex-spouse and how they're going to deal with their co-parenting questions as the children move between homes because that issue with his ex is a source of contention in the couple's marriage, right. And so now, you're talking, wow, that's where we live. His ex-wife calls, and our life goes into chaos.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** Yeah, and that's a whole – I mean that's a whole dimension we didn’t even talk about 'cause it wasn't really applying to the scenario that we were in in my family. But when you're dealing with a remarriage that does involve divorce and has ex-spouses and children who have been – who are mixed in two directions –

**Ron Deal** Mm-hmm, that's right.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** If there's a remarriage on the other end then we just – we've added a whole nother layer to everything that we were just talking about.

**Ron Deal** Yep, yep. The degree of difficulty, as we like to say at Family Life has just gone up considerably every time.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** Yeah.

**Ron Deal** And so yes, there's more and more layers, depending upon death or divorce or what the story of the family is. And so, again, if you do that little sidebar in the middle of a marriage education ministry, you've just taken two minutes. You've told one story. You haven't changed your curriculum. But you connected to all the couples in that room, right. You did a couple of things.
Number one, you told them, "We know you're there and we love you and it's okay. We're glad you're here." That is huge. Darrell, I got to tell you, couples and stepfamilies have so much shame. I think it's one of the most shame-based groups in our church.

*Dr. Darrell Bock* Interesting.

*Ron Deal* Which is why a number of things happen. If you offer a small group, you'll think you'll be flooded with, "Well, half our church is in a blended – they'll all show up." No, because they're going to wait and see if you're going to –

*Dr. Darrell Bock* How you're going to handle it.

*Ron Deal* to tell them they're going to hell, right. Or if – how you're going to handle this really matters to them. They’ve been coming to your church, but they’ve never told you they were married before and they're kind of afraid to.

And so there's this marginalization issue. Sometimes, it comes from within them. Sometimes, it's imposed by some of the things that we've said or done in the past. And inadvertently, we say things that make people feel less than. And they just feel unworthy. So that whole issue I think is important. One of the things I say to churches is you've got to build bridges of grace to them so they know they can trust to come to you.

*Dr. Darrell Bock* And here's another layer that I hear. The moment you also share that illustration in the midst of a group that has many couples in it, you're actually sending community vibes at the same time. You're not just speaking to that couple. You're speaking to everyone in that room that part of our community is made up of people like this that are a part of our community and our family that we have to be aware of. And you're doing some – in the midst of having the conversation, you're also doing some educating of everybody else.

*Ron Deal* Yep, that's right. That's right.

*Dr. Darrell Bock* Which is important.
Ron Deal: That's right. And one of the ways you get there is if you have a story, you share that. I just want to commend you for sharing and talking about your family story. It's just as simple as that. And all of a sudden, we had a big dialogue and conversation. That same thing can happen in small groups, couples, small groups, marriage education groups or conferences with 2000 people. It's another way to open that door, build that bridge of grace, and then they feel like they can trust you with their story.

And so premarital counseling is a way. Maybe you're going to do the same premarital counseling you do with a first married couple, but you're going to add a couple of things. You're going to spend a little time or you're going to ask them to read a book. Hey, let's talk about chapter two next week. Read that thing. Let's discuss it. I don't really know what I'm doing, but together, we're going to figure this out. That's how you get through it; exposing them to materials and resources is really helpful.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Here's a whole nother layer.

Ron Deal: The more you think about it –

Dr. Darrell Bock: The more I think about it, [laughs] I mean it's just a – there's the way in which the original couple related to one another as male and female. You've got another person in the mix. Same gender, different person.

Ron Deal: Yep.

Dr. Darrell Bock: So the rules that you had in your first marriage may not end up being the rules that work in your second marriage, even though you're the same person, the way you interact with the ingredients in the crock-pot, if I can say it that way –

Ron Deal: That's right.

Dr. Darrell Bock: may not make – produce the same chemical reaction.
Ron Deal: One of the equations I tell couples is yellow plus green equals blue, but yellow plus red is orange, right. You still have one color that's consistent. But you get a whole new us-ness when you add a different color. You've got to really think about that. And, again, people who – here's a unique thing. People who have had a bad marriage that ended in divorce want a very different kind of spouse and marriage. People who had a good marriage that ended in death want the same thing. And what they don't realize is that they –

Dr. Darrell Bock: They can't have either.

Ron Deal: You can't have either. You know, it's always going to be different. And so you go in with this kind of idealistic notion that, wow, we got along so well. We talked. We communicated. And you and I, of course, that's the fog of falling in love.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Right, right.

Ron Deal: And then you get to real life and it's harder, and you're thinking, okay, is there something wrong. And then you add the complexities of you don't get along with my kids and it's just easy for resentment, to begin to resound on many, many levels.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Hmm.

Ron Deal: If the church is having dialogue, if we're talking about it in small groups or large groups, if we're pointing to resources, ideally, I think every church should have a stepfamily class, you know, small group, whatever works for your congregation, whatever the format is that matches your church, that's what I say you do. Just get couples together. Get them talking through some information. There's books. There's videos. You know, 15 years ago, people complained to me constantly there was no resources.
Every once in a while, I hear somebody say that today. It's not true anymore. There are great Christian resources available now for stepfamilies and for church leaders. And if you get them talking in a group with others who are going through similar sorts of experiences, and all of a sudden they're going, "Ah, that's my life, that's exactly what it's like in our household. I don't feel so weird anymore. I feel like I still belong here. I feel more committed to this church. And I'm getting some practical information that's helping us live."

Dr. Darrell Bock: Yeah. Some people get this. Yeah.

Ron Deal: You know, I tell people; look. This is not much different than any other ministry we do. We need to give them the answers that fit their life and their circumstances, whether a recovery ministry, I mean we do this all the time. Get people together in community and fellowship around good content, and let the church be the church. We just have to be the ones to instigate it. It can happen.

So there is the premarital avenue for impacting somebody's life. There's the marriage ministry avenue that you could impact. There's the parent education avenue that you might fall into. There's the, okay, we have a special class for stepfamily couples, step-couples I like to call them. And it's just for them. And we have people in various points of ministry, and we're doing this over here and this over here. Here's another one. Divorce recovery ministry is actually a good place to start planting seeds in people's minds about the complexities of remarriage and the stepfamily living.

And it's as simple as let's say you do divorce care; you know, 13 video sessions, and at the end of the last night, you take 10 minutes. You hand out an article I wrote called 10 Things to Know Before You Remarry, right. And it's free, and people can download it off the web. And you hand it out and you go, "Hey, we know you guys are not dating." Some of them are. And we wish they weren't, but they already are.

Dr. Darrell Bock: [Laughs] Yeah, that's right.
And someday, you might just find yourself in a new relationship. And we just want you to know there's some differences about that. So here's this article to read and God bless, right. And they're looking at you like, eh, this is crazy. I'm never going to fall in love ever again. I'm not going to go through that pain or that heartbreak. And two years later, they're looking up your phone number because they can't remember what you said but they know you said something about this being different, and they begin to sense that.

And now, they're thinking about getting married, and they've got kids and all this is coming back. And now, they want to know what you have to offer. And you plug them into a class or you hand them – the whole point is just reach people wherever you are, know they are there also, find a way to try to talk to them, even if it's just a little bit.

Mm-hmm. There's a whole dimension of this that we haven't talked about yet that I think is interesting and has some potential, too. A lot of times when you preach on a Sunday and you're preaching a message, you talk about the family and family dynamics and that kind of thing. But I – I'm going to propose something here that I think often goes on that walks into this area, and that is – but I think we tend to do it in a leave it to Beaver mode, okay. [Laughs]

And what I mean by that – I'm sorry for the young people that didn't get that illustration. [Laughs] But the point is here's the Clever family and you've got the – it's the one family with the two boys and it's the – it's the ideal family picture. And we preach out of that mode or we talk about relationships in the context of the single marriage, if I can say it that way.

And as you've already pointed out, maybe a third of my audience isn't even there.

Right.

They're somewhere else. They're in a different reality. And the more I consistently preach only out of that one lens and I never go to the other place, the more dislocated a significant portion of my audience feels.
Now, let's talk about a tension that exists in this. Because we're the people who preach the ideal. And we should. Okay.

I am a number-one believer that we've got to teach God's blueprints for the family better, stronger, louder, harder than we ever have in the past because we are moving further and further away from it. The secular –

The pressures are all pulling you in different directions.

Within the secular society, and even within our church family. So we have to do that. And we have to then live with that tension of saying – and yet, if this isn't you, you know, that's really the redemptive – I mean isn't this what it's all about?

Well, the fact is, is that we preach in a fallen world.

Yeah.

And the gospel operates in a fallen world. Grace manifests itself in a fallen world.

Nobody would be in the church if there wasn't sin.

Exactly right.

Everybody there is imperfect.

That's right. So in the midst of doing that, it seems to me it's incumbent to use a term you used earlier in a message perhaps now and again to have a sidebar that communicates that I know that this hasn't been the experience of everyone, and some of you find yourself in this place. Now, what's the best way to operate Biblically if this is where you find yourself?
And you're off and running. And in the process, we're back to the things we talked about earlier. Not only have I connected with a portion of the audience that up to this point I haven't been connecting to, I'm perhaps making them feel a little more marginalized in the process, but I'm also educating my entire community about the kind of community they're living in.

**Ron Deal**  
Exactly. We're helping all of us to become more relevant to our friends and our neighbors and the people that are around us.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  
And so it seems to me that this is an incumbent part of reflecting on pastoral ministry as we teach about family. And so I take it that – [laughs] kind of come full circle – that part of the reason you have the job that you do is the people of family life realize this.

**Ron Deal**  
Yeah, that's exactly right.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  
It basically dawned on them, here's a whole portion of our community. We're attempting to minister about families and where they are and help them cope with where God has them, and there's a whole segment of the population that we've completely bypassed.

**Ron Deal**  
And let me tell you, we live in this tension all the time. We have to walk the line. I think at Family Life and within the church local ministry, this tension of talking about the ideal, talking about God's design and blueprints, we want to move people towards that whenever we can and at the same time talking about the realities of where we live and what life is like. And honestly, again, Old Testament families kind of help us do that.

Did Jesus grow up with a stepdad? There's one to ponder.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  
Right, right.

**Ron Deal**  
So this whole point of this is not new. We just have to bring the wisdom and the truth of scripture into the realities of where people live. And we walk that fine line, and we don't have to apologize for that.
Dr. Darrell Bock: That's pretty fascinating. So what advice would you give to pastors – I mean we've sort of overviewed this – but if you were to give specific advice to pastors in particular and say, "Think about this here," what kinds of things would you be saying? What are you going to be saying to them in the next few days?

Ron Deal: Students and pastors, I'd say the same thing. Get educated about it. Let me back up. I don't live in a stepfamily. I don't remember – I don't think I mentioned that. This is not my life. I'm 29 years married to the same woman, my first wife. We always – I always introduce her as my first wife because everybody assumes I'm in a stepfamily.

Dr. Darrell Bock: And you didn't grow up in a stepfamily.

Ron Deal: I didn't grow up in one either. This is not my world. I have three siblings that are all in first marriages. My parents are coming up on year 60. My in-laws have been married 55 years.

Dr. Darrell Bock: [Laughs] You're in the fossilized Clever world. [Laughs]

Ron Deal: I'm the wrong guy –

Dr. Darrell Bock: My goodness.

Ron Deal: I am – I tell people I'm the wrong guy, which in some ways, in God's economy, I guess maybe makes you the right guy, right? He uses you, the wrong people – so you know it's all about him.

Dr. Darrell Bock: The irony, yeah.

Ron Deal: And that's the truth. I really believe that. And so pastors sometimes get intimidated. And they think, "Man, this is not my life. I don't get this. they're using words and language, and what is step-parenting? What's different about that?" Okay. Read one book. Read one book over the next six months. Get educated. Learn something. Have your eyes opened a little bit. And then whenever you have an opportunity, pass along something that you've learned. If it's premarital counseling with somebody, if it's from the pulpit, it's in teaching, it's in a – whatever those opportunities are, you're – God'll open those doors and point people towards resources.
Get them connected with each other. I will give you this one word of caution because I think this is important. Because of the shame issue that a lot of blended families deal with, I found – I've been doing this, wow, I've been working specifically with stepfamilies for over 20 years. They're the hardest people to get in the room. If you offer a class, a workshop, or a conference, they don't show up in droves because they're not sure they want to go there and be that vulnerable and transparent with their story.

Dr. Darrell Bock
It opens up all kinds of pain.

Ron Deal
It just does. It does. It really does. And so understandably so, they're tough to get in the room. But once you get them there, they bond faster than anything you've ever seen. They finally found somebody who has a similar story to them and they can be honest about it and open about it. And together, we're figuring this out with God's grace, and we're feeling rooted in our church and supported by our church. And it is fun to watch.

So there's challenges and there's incredibly opportunities. And I really believe that we can make a difference. So find opportunities to get them connected to each other. Marriage mentors; you know, that's another great ministry that's on the rise in our culture. Find a step couple and say, hey, meet with them. Have dinner with them once or twice a month for the next year. Just get them together and talking. And show them a few good resources that'll really help them. That's one of the things we do at Family Life Blended is try to support those resources and let them go.

I've got to share this one thing with you because I think this is what it's really all about. This is why we're doing what we're doing. Two years ago, right here in Dallas, we hosted – Family Life hosted our first event called Blended and Blessed: The Summit on Stepfamily Ministry. We do an annual event specifically around stepfamily ministry. The next event will be in Irvine, California in Mariner's Church this coming November.

Two years ago, we sponsored our first one here in Dallas, and at that event, I invited a friend of mine, Dr. Francesca Adler-Baeder from Auburn University. She runs a national stepfamily resource center that’s based at Auburn. She runs the National – or the Alabama Healthy Marriage Initiative for the state of Alabama. She's a smart cookie, okay. And she came, and she shared something with us that I didn't even know until she said it.
She's followed kids who have grown up in healthy blended families. And what they found is that those young people have a more positive view of the institution of marriage, as compared to other children of divorce, have a more positive view. They make better choices about their mate. And when they get married, their marriages have a quality that reflects the high-quality step couple marriage compared to their parental marriage that ended in divorce that led to the stepfamily in the first place.

In other words, the mitigating factor to take kids from – who have experienced breakup and heartbreak and difficulty and fracture family, the mitigating factor to redeem them back towards God's design is the healthy stepfamily. Now, an unhealthy stepfamily just adds chaos and confusion and heartbreak and disrupts faith development, all kinds of negativity comes out of it. But a healthy stepfamily is the change point. It's the redemption point for the next generation.

We can take back first marriage in one generation if we help the stepfamily do well. That's good news.

*Dr. Darrell Bock* That's very good news.

*Ron Deal* That is why we need to be doing this and mindful and putting time and energy into it because we're not just kind of saying wow, they messed up and we're just, oh, poor them. Well, let's try to help them out. No, no, no. [Laughs] We're offering God's grace.

*Dr. Darrell Bock* There's a multigenerational impact is what you're saying.

*Ron Deal* Absolutely. And God's grace gets applied and it changes the future.

*Dr. Darrell Bock* Hmm. So at Family Life, they have you I guess talking about this? And this is what you do?

*Ron Deal* This is what I do full-time. I've written five books. We have a DVD series for churches. We have another small group study that's available.

*Dr. Darrell Bock* I was going to ask you about resources.
Ron Deal

But that's not all there is. One of the things we're doing through our summit on stepfamily ministry is we're pulling together anybody around the country who is invested in this area of ministry. We're trying to encourage other ministries to get involved, focus on the family, for example, as a partner. We're helping other smaller ministries that have published study guides and materials to try to help find an audience so that churches can have resources.

That's one of the neat things about the summit is that we're all coming together under the same banner. And I think there will be – think about how many books you have on your shelf that are marriage, family, parenting related. And how many stepfamily books do you have on your shelf?

Dr. Darrell Bock

That's true.

Ron Deal

Okay. Well, soon, we hope in the coming years, there'll be that may available to you within the Christian community.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Hmm. Well, Ron, I really do appreciate you taking the time to be with us today and kind of walk us through this territory and get us – give us a feel of what it's like. I think it's been fascinating to think through the really many layers of aspect and then the very differing dynamics that are in play, depending on whether you're dealing with a new family that comes out of a death versus a divorce and that kind of thing. All very, very helpful. We wish you all the best in your ministry there at Family Life, and of course the entire ministry there has been a really terrific resource for the church.

I do want to close by asking you one question, and that is what kinds of resources can people get their hands on through Family Life?

Ron Deal

Well, we have a video called Ministering to Stepfamilies. That's a great starting point for you and for others you want to share it with, get them talking and thinking and understanding the rationale for this, the Biblical understanding, theology, all those good questions.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Could you do a Sunday school class around this kind of material?
Absolutely. Absolutely. So while the Ministering to Stepfamilies is for the leaders and leadership, then we have a book called The Smart Stepfamily that was my first book. And we came out with a revised expanded edition just last year. Has a DVD video curriculum that goes with it. That's a great, great tool to take couples through to really help them understand what's going on in their life and how to build their life.

Then other books in the series, The Smart Stepmom, Smart Stepdad, both of whom who have discussion questions for stepdads or stepmoms to work through with others in small groups. Dating and the Single Parent is a resource that's for dating couples and guides the pastor, gives you some ideas that help them do well through the dating process, involving the kids, making decisions, and how do you move forward, red lights, green lights, yellow lights.

And then once you're engaged, what do you do to try to help the family get ready for the wedding? That's all Dating and the Single Parent. And then the last book that's just coming out next month. As a matter of fact, I got my first copy two days called The Smart Stepfamily Marriage. Some of your audience will know David Olson. He's created Prepare/Enrich, which is a profile that's used by premarital counselors and therapists all over the world. David and I did a research study of couples in stepfamilies, and we basically fleshed out what the high qualities are of couples that do really well and then what predicts poor relationships.

And we wrote a book that's very practical in nature to try to help couples build that. Comes – there's a free PDF study guide that goes along with it. You going to get a 13-week Sunday school or small group curriculum out of that. So there's some pretty high caliber kinds of resources I think that are available for people turnkey. All our video – our video resources are all on Right Now Media for those churches that subscribe to that. We have materials on Youversion, the Bible App. There's a free six-day reading plan on blended families that's available.

Familylife.com and my website, smartstepfamilies.com, collectively have close to 400 articles for ministry leaders, couples, therapists, all free. You just got to go find it.
Dr. Darrell Bock  So you got a whole nother series you could do called the Stupid Stepfamily; what not to do. [Laughs]

Ron Deal  Yeah, we want them to be smart. [laughs]

Dr. Darrell Bock  So that’s great. Well, I really appreciate again you coming in and talking with us. And we wish you the best in this ministry [music playing] and we just thank you for the help that you've given us today.

Ron Deal  Thanks for having me.

Dr. Darrell Bock  Yeah. And we thank you for being a part of The Table, and we hope to see you back again soon.