

***MISSIONAL FATHERHOOD AS PRAXIS TO  
CHRISTIAN FAMILIES WHO GRAPPLE WITH  
FATHER ABSENCE: THE BIBLE AS KEY  
ANSWER TO THIS ISSUE,***  
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**Abstract:**

In this review, we explore Fazel Ebrihiam Freeks' book titled *Missional Fatherhood as Praxis to Christian Families Who Grapple with Father Absence: The Bible as Key Answer to This Issue*. The book significantly expands upon the role of missional parenting, the missional father and father absence both from biblical perspectives and contemporary societal contexts. The author stresses the paramount importance of cultivating good relationships between spouses and between parents and their children, and how these relations impact the children's health, safety and education and the cultural values and well-being of the entire family.

**Keywords:**

Missional fatherhood, father absence, family, community.

The author of this book, Fazel Ebrihiam Freeks, holds the position of Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Theology, North-West University of South Africa, Potchefstroom Campus, and serves as the Coordinator for Community Engagement. Professor Freeks demonstrates a keen interest in the multifaceted issues addressed within this volume, specifically focusing on fatherhood projects, programmes, initiatives and services. His academic background includes a National Diploma in Human Resources Management (2003) and a Certificate in Management Studies (2011). He also holds three doctoral degrees: a PhD in Teaching and Learning (2007), a PhD in Pastoral Theology (2011) and a PhD in Missiology (2018).

The book deals with a series of critical issues related to fathers' role in contemporary society, their presence or absence within families, their level of engagement or disengagement and their support for both their children and spouses. Furthermore, the book explores ways to address fatherlessness through the lens of divine fatherhood (p. VII) and examines fatherhood as “*derived from Scripture*” (p. X). The book is meant to be a “*descriptive, exegetical and explorative approach with reference to missional fatherhood as praxis and possible core solution to father absence*” (p. XIX).

The structure of the book is complex, comprising a preface, acknowledgements, an introduction, ten chapters, “A Final Word”, information about the author and a comprehensive list of literature references.

The first chapter entitled “Purpose and overview of concepts” outlines the aims and objectives of the book. These include recognising the major role of (missional) fathers, appreciating their significance in relation to their children, acknowledging fathers as valuable gifts from God within families, understanding the concept of missional fatherhood and appreciating the vital and nurturing godly relationships between fathers, mothers and children. The chapter also provides clear definitions for key concepts explored throughout the book, such as marriage as a sacrament, parenting (with a focus on ensuring children's health and safety and teaching them cultural values), family (including coping with social challenges), the role of fathers (as supportive figures) and the broader notions of man (created as a social being by the Creator) and manhood, gender (as a socially constructed concept) and fatherhood. Furthermore, it addresses physical, financial and emotional father absence, emphasising the importance of missional fatherhood in addressing these challenges.

Chapter 2 discusses missional fatherhood from a *missio Dei* perspective, starting from the idea that “*mission is the concern of the Triune/Trinity God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for the whole of the family*” (p. 16). The chapter explains the theological origin and history of the *missio Dei*. Missional fatherhood refers to “*Christian fathers (or men) who are accountable before God to lead their families and live sacrificial lives for the sake of their wives (mothers) and children*” (p. 18). The chapter also explores holistic mission for missional fatherhood, encompassing families' relations with God, themselves, others and the rest of society. Moreover, it delves into

transformational development for missional fatherhood (i.e. transformations, changes of people's choices), the incorporation of the *missio Dei* perspective and the contribution of missional fatherhood. The importance of spiritual development for missional fatherhood, spiritual formation as an important need for missional fatherhood and the importance of prayer as a daily need and virtue are also discussed here.

In Chapter 3, readers are urged "*to understand that men and women, mothers and fathers, or wives and husbands are not at war with each other in terms of their roles within the family*" (p. 33). They need to collaborate and understand their status and responsibilities as Christian men (fathers) and Christian women (mothers). The author further elaborates on issues such as: the man as a person responsible before God; man and woman in partnership, cooperating despite their differences, transmitting Christian, cultural values within the family; the role of the woman and the importance of eccentricity ("*A woman (mother) needs to stand her ground and not always be the humble one within the home. Men (or fathers) need to do the same by practising this characteristic more often. Men (fathers) should also be the humble ones within the family, and not feel that they are always right*"); the role of the man and the importance of egocentricity (p. 41). The statistics linked to major crimes in South Africa provided by the author are worrisome. They are related to the presence, influence or absence of fathers/men within their families.

Chapter 4 explains "*the fatherhood concept as a problem which exists worldwide, and presents a huge challenge to many families, communities and society*" (p. 47). The chapter addresses masculinity and its main qualities, such as manliness, powerfulness, virility, provider and protector and head of a household. It also discusses masculinity as a crisis, particularly in relation to how men are portrayed in media (TV, movies, books and magazines) and identifies father absence (father absenteeism and fatherlessness as different concepts) as a major problem in South Africa and worldwide. The author emphasises that father absence can have serious negative consequences on children's behaviour, including early sexuality, depression, suicide, substance abuse and poverty. It can generate a lot of problems, "*such as broken families, aggressive behaviour among children, as well as financial and social ills and poverty*" (p. 58) in a world "*of growing child abuse and rape, child poverty and homelessness, juvenile delinquency and violence, illegitimacy and*

*infanticide*” (p. 64). The challenges faced by the phenomenon of fatherhood are compounded by complex family structures, including child-headed households in South Africa (where the main caregivers are younger than 18), gay men as parents, divorced parents, stepfamilies and single parenting and so on.

Chapter 5 discusses fatherhood and the importance of men within a family from a biblical perspective. The author provides guidelines for fatherhood based on Bible scriptures and asserts that “*fatherhood can be restored by God through His Son, Jesus Christ, and by the divine power of the Holy Spirit*” (p. 71). According to the author,

*“the biblical fatherhood notion does not only refer to an authoritative source of admonition, connection, teaching, training and equipping. It rather provides exceptional measures and guidelines that attest to the uniqueness of God as Father while highlighting the worth of an earthly father within a family system”* (p. 74).

The Scripture outlines qualifications for a godly man (father); he must be a husband of a single wife, sober, of sound behaviour, self-disciplined, caring for his family and teaching his children.

Chapter 6, entitled “Fatherhood values and character formation,” deals with the concepts of values and character. The author decries the moral crisis prevalent both in South Africa and globally, particularly within households. Definitions of values, character, character transformation and Christian character are provided. The chapter underscores the significance of character formation within the home, especially considering the pivotal role of fathers. Children are taught various skills and values, yet the reality is often alarming. Many children face bullying, engage in fights at school, carry weapons, smoke, use drugs, experience early pregnancies or are coerced into sexual situations.

Chapter 7 highlights the importance of missional fatherhood and “*gives attention to the exposition of the biblical aspect of Micah’s fathers with significant characteristics or traits within the home*”. Missional fatherhood serves as a corrective response to father absence, a phenomenon associated with serious social problems. The author proposes guidelines to mitigate the negative impact of absent and uninvolved fathers (p. 93). According to the author, Micah’s fathers are missional fathers, as called in the Bible. The author’s opinion is that “*the missional father should encourage his children*

to adopt an attitude of giving and sharing their money, gifts and energy to others, the church and community” (p. 95). Furthermore, the missional father serves as a teacher and mentor within the family.

Chapter 8, titled “The practicality of missional fatherhood,” explores the practical aspects of the topic. The chapter addresses several issues such as: the missional father’s role across the three phases of a child’s life (infancy, toddlerhood and adolescence), emphasising physical and emotional health, behaviour, and habits; domestic qualities expected of the missional father, including accountability to God, authority, modelling, protection during times of danger, provision, intimacy, love and guidance; the missional father’s responsibilities (to be “*physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually involved in the lives of their children*” p. 117); the missional father as a corrective figure, transmitting good behaviour; the importance of a missional fatherhood model for Christian families, including prayer meetings, Bible studies, singing hymns, significant salvation moments and The Lord’s Supper; missional families actively engaged in meeting community needs; the crucial role of the church and communities in supporting missional fatherhood.

Chapter 9 explains the concept of missional parenting, its meaning and the roles of the missional family. The family contributes to God’s greater plan by fulfilling the mission of being parents both inside and outside the home. They convey the Gospel of Jesus Christ within the home context and teach children to embrace this mission as a lifestyle. Partnership and teamwork are vital within the family. The chapter also presents essential missiological principles for every missional household, including: the core of the Gospel; the importance of repentance; spiritual growth and spiritual formation; the importance of growing in biblical knowledge, of prayer, worship and music; fellowship with other Christians; the importance of Christian family life and family worship, of developing a Christian worldview and values.

Chapter 10, “A life beyond iron bars: A fatherhood initiative for incarcerated fathers (inmates) at The Potchefstroom Remand Detention Facility,” is a poignant exploration, dealing “*with the author’s community engagement programme, the missional Fatherhood Training and Equipping Programme which he developed and compiled from previous research and lived experiences within various communities*” (p. 149). The programme,

initiated in 2015 with the support of Families South Africa (FAMSA) and the Faculty of Theology at North-West University,

*“aims to address the essential role of the father within a family context in order to build better relationships in families through the leadership of the father and mother; to make inmates (fathers) able to be reintegrated within society if their dignity is restored through spiritual resilience”* (p. 152).

The chapter delves into several critical issues such as: the concept of fathering; the importance of self-image for fathers, their character and career; strategies for overcoming labelling and handling disappointments, *“becoming the person God intended for you to be”* (p. 155); the Christian’s responsibility towards incarcerated fathers; the importance of faith-based values with

*“specific indicators, including religious practices, faith, worship, prayer, sanctification, obedience, friendship, love, respect, honour, assurance in faith, human dignity, obedience, deliverance, diligence, justice, kindness, generosity, self-control, righteousness, honesty, caution, gentleness, integrity, humility, purity and patience”* p. 161.

In the concluding section, “A Final Word,” the author states that

*“it is time to recover and to restore the original meaning of what it is to be a real man and father, and to represent the image of God to a world that is hungry and in desperate need of good and involved fathers: missional fathers who are mentors to their children and who, consequently, make a difference and an impact”* (p. 163).

This book is worth reading for several reasons. While it is accessible, readers should take time to reflect on the ideas emphasised by the author, particularly regarding the role of fatherhood within the family, community and society. The extensive bibliography underscores the author’s well-researched and relevant ideas. Notably, the book caters to both religious and non-religious readers (laypeople).

## **Bibliography**

Fazel Ebrihiam Freeks, 2021, *Missional Fatherhood as Praxis to Christian Families Who Grapple with Father Absence: The Bible as Key Answer to This Issue*, African Sun Media under the Sun Press Imprint at Stellenbosch.