

Faith Mennonite Church
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Families, Singleness & Marriage, part 1
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“Families in the Kingdom: beyond bloodlines”

Galatians 3:23-4:7; Mark 3:31-35

There’s been a lot of talk of “family values” in our country in the past several decades. Much of the discussion has been based on the notion that there is an ideal “traditional” family type. This family has a mother and a father who fell in love and got married, several children (or pets), a house in a quaint neighborhood or the suburbs (and perhaps a second home in order to “get away”), ample resources that allow for a vacation and new school clothes each year, a variety of lessons and organized sports activities for the children, home entertainment, and, the three-car garage to hold multiple vehicles or the belonging that don’t fit in the house. And, oh yes, the family attends church on Sunday, at least occasionally, when other activities don’t impinge.

Many Christians vigorously defend this family type as if it were lifted right from the Bible. When people say that “the family is under attack” it is generally this family they have in mind. But neither this family type, nor the values it is based on are particularly biblical. This independent, “nuclear, or bourgeois¹ family, developed in the 19th century—quite a latecomer on the human scene. Its identifying traits include: a) family life “as a private refuge from a harsh public world”; b) a “heightened concern for children, particularly their formation and education”; c) “family as the source of values and identity”; d) romantic love as a major motive for marriage”; e) spouses that are intensely affectionate and respectful to one other”; and f) “the woman as paramount in the home which is her special domain.”

In the 20th century this family type adapted well to the growing capitalist and consumer economic system, taking on another trait, that of a unit of consumption. This latter factor may actually be the greatest threat to the stability and longevity of family relationships, because an economy of consumption is built on dissatisfaction and obsolescence. We try or use something for a time and then trade it in for another. Thus we “shop” for church experiences and move on if our needs aren’t being met. It is telling that the language we once used to install appliances—“hook up”—is now the language of sexual encounters.

The cultural expectations and sociological factors that shape today’s family in dominant US culture are very strong. Even those of us who critique certain aspects of it realize how much we are shaped by it. And certainly there are aspects of it that we affirm. But there is little about it that reflects a Biblical view of family, either in the Old or New Testament.

The Old Testament family in ancient Israel was clan based, with little if any separation between the public and private. Marriages were arranged for political and economic purposes and children were first of all property rather than a source of affection. Albeit we have stories of the familial affection in the Old Testament, but we also have stories that confound us by the lack of affection that allowed some fathers to place their children in violent, life-threatening situations. In the oldest stories we find polygamous families, although this practice waned in later years of Israel’s history.

¹ Rodney Clapp in *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* summarizes six characteristics of the bourgeois family as described by Brigitte and Peter Berger in *The War Over the Family*.

Hebrew families were extended families that made up small villages of 50-100 people. They were units of production, involved in animal husbandry and farming. At times these clans would take in a sojourner, a non-blood relative, who would live among them as family. Procreation was essential to the economic vitality of the family, and it served another essential function. Before the emergence of the concept of an afterlife, children were the only guarantee that one would be remembered or have any life beyond death.

When we consider family in the Old Testament we must realize first how different, even foreign, it is from our experience. But we must not think of it as static, any more than we think of our contemporary family life as static. Certainly it would be a risky proposition to take a single episode in the life of one family portrayed in the Bible, and claim it as a prototype to emulate. Each story must be read and interpreted in light of the whole unfolding story of a people in relationship with God.

The heart of the Old Testament story is covenant and God's faithfulness: God chose a marginalized people to enter a relationship of blessing. God promised blessing *to* this people if they lived in faithful relationship with God and with their neighbors. God promised blessing *through* this people to all people. Throughout the Old Testament we come to know a Covenant God who calls for justice—right relationship—in all relationships, with God, within the clan/family, and for the sojourner and alien. Human marriage became a central metaphor for how the people of Israel understood their covenant relationship with God.

This was the tradition into which Jesus was born. It is not surprising then that the Gospel writers don't provide a great deal of information about Jesus' family and early life. Although much is written and known about the family of the prophet Muhammed, we know extremely little about Jesus' family. We know the names of his parents and that he had siblings (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3), but beyond his brother James, who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem after Jesus' death, we know next to nothing about his siblings. The last reference to Jesus' mother is in the first chapter of Acts as the post-resurrection followers of Jesus awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit. The gospels of Mark and John tell us nothing about Jesus' early life—they begin with his ministry. And what Matthew and Luke tell us in their birth and childhood narratives serve a larger theological purpose about the nature of Jesus rather than providing a prototype for a Christian family.

Jesus clearly didn't fit the conventions of family in his day. He defied the expected norm of marriage for young Jewish men and remained single. The community that he formed at the beginning of his ministry, as he called 12 disciples, was not family-based, along blood lines, but a sign of a new reality, a dawning of a new Israel. Some of the recorded sayings of Jesus seem rather anti-family: he said he had come to "turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" (Matthew 10:35). When one who wished to follow him asked for permission to fulfill the burial requirements of his father, Jesus said: "Let the dead bury the dead" (Matthew 8:22). And when Jesus' mother and brothers sought him out, perhaps out of concern that he was coming unhinged, he did not stop for a family meeting but rather dissed them, saying: "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice" (Luke 8:21).

Two vignettes from the end of the Gospel of John give us a glimpse of the larger project that Jesus was about. As he hung on the cross, he addressed his mother Mary and the disciple whom he loved, declaring them a new family: "'Woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, this disciple took her into his home" (John 19:26-27). And after the resurrection, when Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, he said:

“Go...to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (John 20:17). In both of these passages we see the formation of a spiritual family in which our relationship with our heavenly Parent is what binds us to one another. Jesus was not doing away with the biological family, but he placed allegiance to his kingdom, the new community, above and before the family. We know that Jesus valued children and didn’t let the disciples simply turn them away. We know he placed a very high value on marital faithfulness. But salvation didn’t come through the family. Those who wanted to follow Jesus needed to be born a second time through baptism.

On the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the setting was familial—in a home, not in the temple. And while the apostles continued to observe Jewish religious practices in the temple, these were supplemented with daily gatherings in homes, where they sang, prayed and broke bread, reminiscent of the table fellowship that was at the heart of Jesus’ ministry. The earliest churches that sprang up across Asia Minor, as the apostles moved out from Jerusalem, were house churches. Yet these house churches were not private meetings of individual families or clans. House churches were made of a variety of people from various ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic classes. Indeed, this formation of a new Christian family of diverse people no doubt caused some of the conflict that emerged in the church at Corinth, which Paul addressed in the two letters to the Corinthians.

In Paul’s letters he repeatedly addressed church members as “brothers” (the phrase “my brothers” occurs over 65 times in his letters²). He used the metaphor of adoption to explain the way people of diverse backgrounds are brought into God’s family, the church. Paul speaks of a whole new orientation in life as people are baptized, leaving their former life behind. Paul anticipated that former allegiance to biological family would become subordinate to membership in the Christian community.

As we enter into conversation in the next seven weeks about family, singleness and marriage, we are not simply talking *about* family, we are talking and discerning *as* family, for we are part of one household of faith. I trust that the Spirit of God our parent and of Jesus our brother will surround our conversations. Let us hold one another in high regard, “looking not to our own interests,” as the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, “but to the interests of others.” And “let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus...” (Philippians 2: 4-5)

² Rodney Clapp in *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options*, Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993, 81.