

Christianity and the Family: Ancient Challenge, Modern Crisis

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To begin this strange tale of Christianity and the family, I will read two quotations. One is from a Colorado-based group called Focus on the Family. This is their account of themselves: "Focus on the Family attempts to turn hearts towards home by reasonable, Biblical, and empirical insight so people will be able to discover the founder of homes and the creator of families – Jesus Christ" (Focus on the Family). My second quote is as follows: "If anyone comes to me and cannot hate his own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Jesus of Nazareth). These quotes set up the contradiction I would like to discuss.

Right-wing Christians have tried to portray themselves as the restorers of what they call the God-given Biblical form of the family. What they mean by this is a male-headed nuclear family with a working husband and a non-working wife. But this form of the family is actually the white, middle-class Victorian family of the late nineteenth century, or the family of the 1950s. They claim that this family type is part of the "orders of creation," that is,

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established by God at creation and hence eternal and unchangeable. But this is historically and theologically mistaken. There is no such normative Biblical family. In Hebrew scripture one finds, in fact, many forms of the family. For instance, the tribal clan extended family that quite often included two wives and their children, and their slaves and their children. The type of family these modern Christian conservatives regard as normative was actually a creation of the white middle class in the late nineteenth century, and it is in crisis today for the obvious reason that it never worked for working class people nor for black people, and is no longer working for middle class whites in North America today.

In the New Testament, one finds a significant number of negative statements about the biological family in the early strata of the Gospels, referred to as the “Jesus Movement.” Over against this is a later restoration of the patriarchal slave-holding family in the later strata of the New Testament. In the Gospels, one finds a strong criticism of the biological family, or at least a strong relativization of it. Jesus is portrayed as rejecting his own family – his mother and brothers – in favor of the community of believers. In several stories found in all of the Gospels, mothers and brothers are described as coming to seize him, believing him to be mad, and Jesus repudiates them, saying, “Who are my brothers and my mother?” And looking around at those that sat around him he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers and my sisters. Whoever does the will of God will be my brother and sister and mother.” In other words, the community of faith is seen as negating or putting aside the natural biological family, as in the words of Luke which I quoted at the beginning.

I think that this negation of family in Jesus’ tradition reflects several things. One of them is a belief that the kingdom of God is dawning, a transformed state of reality, in which there will be no marrying and giving in marriage. And indeed those who live now in anticipation of the coming of the kingdom of God also will depart from marriage. In theological terminology, this is “eschatological ethics.” Furthermore, in Jesus’ time many people *could not* marry. Slaves could not marry – and there were a lot of slaves – soldiers could not marry during their terms of service, and many poor people could not afford to marry or were not allowed to marry outside of ethnic groups. Early Christianity was made up of many such disenfranchised or uprooted people, who were without families, and in that context the church or community of

believers became an “alternative family,” or what some writers call a “fictive kin group.” So the church, the community of believers, was understood as the true family of brothers and sisters gathered apart from oppressive systems in a society that supported these marginalized people.

This view of the church as the “true family” continues also in Paul. Paul’s writings are loaded with analogies drawn from the family and the patriarchal slave-holding household of the Roman world. Christians are described as being people who were slaves and have been emancipated and adopted by the father of the household. Or they are like, in another interesting analogy, a wife who has been emancipated because the husband who held control over her has died. The fleshly family of Israel is recorded as having been superseded by a new people, the spiritual people of God and the church. In Paul, the church is a new family related by faith that replaces the old ties of kinship, race, and class. It both severs believers from their biological family and at the same time unites them with a whole range of people with whom one would not have broken bread in one’s former kinship group. But in Paul there also arises a conflict over the idea or suggestion that unmarried women or even married women are liberated from subordination to the patriarchal family by joining the church. This idea later becomes associated with celibacy, but in the early church, women could put aside marriage in order to function in larger society in a new way. Such women were allowed to travel as evangelists, preach, and lead early Christian communities.

Some of the early Christian writings, such as the Acts of Paul and Thecla, exalt the woman of faith who repudiates her family, rejects her subordination, rejects the will of her parents, rejects her fiancé and the right of her family to betroth her to a husband, and leaves home to evangelize, baptize, and preach. Women get converted, reject husband or family, and take to the open road. Paul appears at the end of the Acts of Paul and Thecla, affirming Thecla’s choice and commissioning her to return to her hometown to preach. Now, the Paul of the Pauline epistles of the New Testament, it seems to me, shared some of these assumptions. He also believed that celibacy represented the anticipation of God, and this relativized marriage, so the most committed Christians like himself did not marry. But he was also threatened by these independent women who claimed that conversion to Christ was a basis for throwing off authority and engaging in itinerant preaching.

In the post-Pauline church, represented by epistles such as I Timothy, we find an attack on these single women church leaders, an effort to silence them. "Let a woman learn silence in all submissiveness." "I permit no women teach or have authority over men. They are to keep silent." What these texts unwittingly reveal to us is that, in fact, women *were* commonly teaching and having authority over men in Pauline churches. Otherwise, these admonitions would have been unnecessary. Timothy champions the traditional patriarchal slave-holding family as normative for the church and believes that the church leaders should be drawn from the proven male heads of families. One finds repeatedly in the later strata of the New Testament the three-fold command, "Wives, obey your husbands; slaves, obey your masters; children, obey your parents." These commands seek to re-establish a type of family that had been, in fact, challenged in the earlier egalitarian Christian tradition. But single women, either those who were never married or widows, continued to play a major leadership role in the churches.

The Acts of Paul and Thecla gives us a glimpse of this alternative Pauline Christianity. My hypothesis, and that of others as well, is that there was actually a split between these two positions within the Pauline churches, and that this alternative Pauline Christianity also looked to Paul for his mandate that women could leave their families, repudiate the authority of parents and husband, and preach. Having offered a little taste of this conflict within the New Testament, I want to give you a sense of how this tradition developed, shifted, and was reinterpreted in classic and medieval Christianity.

The second to fourth centuries saw a continuation of the conflict between unmarried women, virgins, or widows and the patriarchal family. Various radical movements within the early church championed the idea of a Christian community of men and women who were equals as a community of sisters and brothers. But these movements were increasingly marginalized by patriarchal Christians who idealized the idea of celibacy but rejected women's leadership. The result of this conflict was a gradual synthesis between patriarchy and celibacy. Males alone came to be the ones who could have public leadership. Women celibates were idealized but only in private forms of asceticism. Married people came to be defined as third-class citizens in the church, those who had chosen a lesser form of life not as holy as celibacy.

A major debate broke out in the late fourth century over whether celibacy and marriage were of equal value or whether celibacy was superior. Jerome, Augustine, and Ambrose – all vehemently took the position that celibacy was superior and the other side was silenced. So, the eschatological interpretation of celibacy was gradually changed into a hierarchy of celibacy over marriage, and then increasingly it came to be identified with the priesthood, which was not the case earlier. I think it is also very significant that the theology or spirituality of celibacy changes as well. Originally, celibacy was identified with anticipation of the kingdom of God, but as it becomes identified with the priesthood, it gets interpreted instead as cultic purity, which is a very different concept. What this meant was that the priest must be pure to celebrate the sacrament, and must distance himself from women and sexuality.

To summarize, three movements were beginning to shape the pattern of the Western church in the late patristic and medieval periods: first, the celibatizing of the clergy; second, the Christianizing of marriage; and third, the marginalizing of women's ministry. The celibatizing of the clergy was a continual effort, from the late fourth century to the middle ages, to force celibacy on priests who had previously been married. Except for a certain elite of the monastic clergy, this mostly failed. For obvious reasons, village priests could simply not survive without a wife in terms of the economics of survival. And many priests resisted celibacy as not having been part of the earlier church tradition. Finally, in the eleventh century, the church forbade all priests to marry and then defined their wives as concubines and their children as bastards. This did not prevent priests from marrying, however, and marriage continued to be typical of poor village clergy, but they were degraded, their wives were considered whores, and their children forbidden to inherit property and to be ordained.

The second movement, the Christianizing of marriage, was an effort to force monogamy – with no divorce or remarriage – on the Christian people. This was contrary to Germanic and Celtic law, which allowed polygamy, easy divorce, and marriage between relatives. There was also an effort to establish very wide degrees of kinship within which you could not marry. This ran counter to the typical pattern of the feudal nobility, and so was aimed mainly

at that class of people. Insistence on monogamy, with no divorce or remarriage, became the church's policy.

The third movement, marginalizing women's ministry, was an ongoing effort to cloister celibate women and to forbid them from public ministry and the self-government of their communities. This effort was resisted throughout the Middle Ages and again during the Counter-Reformation. The major shift in this respect occurred in the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. The practice of a celibate clergy had created a large number of abuses, and so the Protestant reformers rejected this celibate ideal which had dominated Christianity for fifteen hundred years. In rejecting the celibate priesthood, the reformers also rejected monastic life for both men and women. Recent studies of women and the Reformation have shown that the closure of monasteries had a very different impact on women than on men. There was actually significant resistance on the part of women monastics to the closure of their monasteries. The effect of the negation of both celibacy and the monastic life was to deprive women of any vocation other than marriage. In other words, the monk-turned-reformer could be a Protestant minister, and have a family too, whereas women simply were losing any vocation other than marriage.

Protestantism championed patriarchal marriage as the order of creation, which is where contemporary Christian conservatives get the idea that patriarchal marriage was an ordinance of creation. But the reformers also insisted that nobody could possibly be celibate and not fall into fornication, and thus they tried to insist that everybody should marry. Now the single person was the one who was suspect, which is still the case in much of Protestantism. Another important aspect of the reformers' reinterpretation of the tradition of marriage is that they rejected the sacramentality of marriage. So even while the reformers said everybody should marry, and thus seemed to raise the status of marriage, they simultaneously rejected the idea that marriage is a sacrament. They did that because they thought marriage was a natural institution of creation, not a redemptive institution representative of the new creation established by Christ. The desacramentalizing of marriage also meant divorce was allowed. Catholics had argued divorce was not permissible because sacraments are indissoluble. Under Protestantism, marriage was not a sacrament but an ordinance of creation, yet divorce was allowed, though the grounds for it were narrow and mainly limited to adultery and desertion.

There was thus a significant shift in thinking on marriage in the Western Christian tradition and in Protestantism in the Reformation. The kind of family that Focus on the Family says belongs to the ordinance of creation began to be shaped in the early modern period. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw an increasing economic shift that marginalized women from skilled, paid work. In Protestant areas, single women were looked upon with suspicion, had no vocation, were an anomaly, and had to live in houses headed by men. At the same time, there was a movement whereby married women were removed from membership in guilds or craft-unions, and were increasingly allowed only unpaid domestic work or occasional marketing in the informal economy. It became increasingly difficult for a woman to be a self-supporting householder. Protestantism did not allow women public ministry, nor could women attend university in any country in Europe until the twentieth century.

By the nineteenth century, the family was becoming that of a husband leaving the household to work, with a dependent wife and children. The artist-and-household economy, typical of the late medieval period through the eighteenth century, was a collective work force in which the sons, daughters, and resident apprentices all worked together in the household. There was no separation of work and home. This was gradually destroyed as the production of goods and services were removed from the home to a public economy. Poor women and children were later drawn into paid factory work, while poorer women and children were domestic servants in wealthy households.

As factories were developed in the nineteenth century, the middle-class household was the household of the factory owners. Over time, the middle-class household was increasingly removed from those areas of town where there was paid work, and the household of the factory owner was removed from the areas of factories. As an example, when factories were developed in New England in the 1830s, it was very typical for the household of the factory owner to be located at the head of the area where the factory was, and for the factory owner's wife to be an integral part of the factory management, keeping the accounts, for example. But that pattern began to break down: the owner's household was removed from the factory area, the wife lost her central role and instead was separated in neighborhoods with ornamental gardens. An urban household surrounded by grass and flowers instead of herbs, vegetables,

and chickens, as was the case in earlier times, signaled that it was no longer dependent on any kind of household production.

The ideal family then came to be defined as white and middle class, with a domesticated wife who does not work, and children who do not work. As a full-time wife and mother, the woman was entirely supported by her husband's wages, which he earned in a separate place disconnected from the household. An entire ideology became constructed around this radical separation of spheres between home and work. At the same time, the realm of religion was identified with the private sphere of the home, while the secular realm was identified with the public work force. These in turn were characterized as feminine and masculine respectively, and thus an ideology was structured around this development of the separation of spheres.

This kind of ideal was basically unattainable for most working-class families in the nineteenth century. Working class women always had to work to support the family as did children as well. Black women, of course, were allowed only the poorest work – share-cropping, domestic service, and laundry. Immigrant women workers performed labor as domestic servants and in factories but only to do the poorest work, such as piecework and sweatshop labor. The labor movement by and large championed the middle-class family ideal, and tried to raise a man's wages to the level where his wife could be a full-time housewife.

Nineteenth-century middle-class women began to revolt against the isolated domestication that occurred, and so organized to obtain the vote, higher education, and professional employment. These new turn-of-the-century professional white women remained single, many choosing life long relationships with other women rather than marriage. It was simply assumed that a woman could not have a profession and also marry. One could do one or the other, but not combine them. The way in which white professional women solved this was to bond with another woman, a pattern that came to be called the "Boston marriage."

The twentieth century has witnessed a remarkable series of shifts about gender, work, and family. We've seen this flip-flopping and shifts in ideology almost on a decade-by-decade basis from 1900 to the present, but at the same time there has been a steady direction. Underneath the surface of the shifts in ideology there has been a movement in one direction, basically toward the

two-earner husband-and-wife family. In the United States, this now represents over fifty per cent of households. It is important to emphasize, once again, that the working wife and mother has always been the pattern for black and working class families, but that did not become a controversial issue until white middle-class women sought better pay, professional work, and also wanted a family. In other words, black women who worked long hours as domestic servants, laundresses, or women who did piecework in sweatshops while leaving their kids to take care of themselves, were not seen as a social problem. But when white women sought to become business executives, doctors, lawyers, or college teachers, and also to marry and raise children, suddenly the working mother was defined as a social problem. Working wives were defined as neglecting their husbands and children and causing all manner of social pathologies.

The 1920s saw a significant shift in terms of the ideology of femaleness that included a rejection of the single female bonded lifestyle of the suffragists and women reformers in favor of championing marital, sexual pleasure, including the belief that women too were capable of sexual pleasure. This raised the issue of birth control, which had been avoided by the suffragists and which was considered illegal and immoral by both Protestants and Catholics. Professional women began to argue for combining work and family, which became more possible when women were able to space pregnancies more effectively. But there was also a counter-attack against the working wife, based on a popularizing of Freudian psychology that condemned the independent working woman as pathological. The argument was that she just didn't want to be a real woman, and suffered from "penis envy."

In the next decade, the Depression-era 1930s, this attack on the working wife was installed in the public policy of government and business. It was argued that working wives were the cause of male unemployment, something that was actually completely irrelevant to the Depression. Nevertheless, governments passed laws saying that a woman could only work if she was single, and a married woman should leave the workforce. It became policy that married women not hold jobs outside the home, supposedly in order to prevent them from taking men's jobs. Of course, women with unemployed husbands *had* to work, but what was really happening was that they were being pushed out of better paid work and into lower paid work. They weren't

really pushed out of the labor force, they were pushed *down* in the labor force, and men began to take over what had been the upper level of female professions, such as librarianship and public school teaching.

The 1940s and World War II saw a temporary reversal of these policies, as women's participation in the labor force was suddenly valued. Women were encouraged to take up employment in all areas, including munitions. Contrary to the myth that women war workers were all single girls waiting for a boyfriend to come home so they could marry, most of the women workers were married women who had worked prior to the war. War work really allowed them to achieve a higher pay level. Many of these women also had children, and so the United States federal government for the first and only time recognized the need for childcare and funded a system of daycare for these workers. Then came the 1950s, the end of the war, and the return of the veterans. The government responded with a complete switch in its policies on women workers. Women were laid off employment in droves to make room for the vets. The government subsidized higher education and housing for vets while working women were again attacked as pathological.

The 1950s became an apogee of the ideal suburban family with a full-time wife and mother, driving her kids to piano lessons, to soccer, to whatever. For a brief period of time, women's educational levels actually fell compared to what they had been a few decades earlier. The age of marriage for women also fell, to the late teens and early twenties. In other words, there was a fall in women's education and an earlier marriage level than had existed before. Working class and black women continued to have to combine work and marriage, but they were not visible in this ideological debate.

The decade of 1965-1975 witnessed a new attack by middle-class white women on domestication. Those suburbs were getting stifling, and a critique of the "feminine mystique" emerged from educated women who had been domesticated. Women began to organize a new feminist movement to complete the agenda of women's equality – legally, educationally, and economically. And there were many legislative victories. In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, a number of very startling victories increased the number of women in higher education and employment. The capstone of this was the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), by the 1972 U.S. congress, stalled since it was first proposed in 1923. Even though it was passed by Congress, it failed

to be ratified. In 1973 came the landmark *Roe vs. Wade* decision that legalized abortion in the third trimester. This latter event created the occasion for the mobilization of a right-wing reaction that became an anti-feminist backlash in the next decade, 1975-85. Led by the rise of right-wing Christians who moved into political power and were buttressed by right wing pressure groups, this backlash made one of its first major targets the Equal Rights Amendment, which was blocked from passage by the states.

There has also been a continual effort to roll back reproductive rights, and women's political, legal, and economic gains. Welfare rights were attacked as "anti-family." And it was claimed that welfare allowed black women to live in luxury as "welfare queens." In fact, black women were not even allowed to get welfare until the 1960s, so part of what that decade did was organize black women so they could get on welfare, which they deserved legally but were blocked from getting. When black women began to receive welfare, suddenly they were "welfare queens." At the same time, the actual welfare stipends were continually sinking.

Alongside this back-and-forth in the ideological debate, there was also continual development in one direction. That one direction is the increase of the two-earner husband-and-wife household which, as I said, is now over fifty percent of married households. But there also has been an increasing number of working single-people, men and women, and actually the single person household is something like twenty percent of households, and that is across age groups. There is an increasing number of one-person households and also female-headed households. At the same time, particularly in the last couple of decades, there has been an increasing gap between the rich and the poor in the United States. The middle class has shrunk, creating a two-tiered economy. The lower third live on hourly wages of five to ten dollars an hour, often part-time, without benefits, pensions, or medical coverage, whereas the professional upper class assumes a starting wage of fifty thousand dollars or more with full benefits. The wages of CEOs are typically six figures. It is also assumed that this privileged upper-class of workers should put in fifty or sixty hours a week. In other words, forget the forty-hour week the working class fought for. Now you have an increasing expansion of work time for the professional class, and it obviously makes the balance between home and work even more difficult for the two-earner family with children. Meanwhile, poor families have no

choice but to have two or three family workers, or maybe people working several jobs but without affordable daycare, benefits, or health.

I want to end with saying a word about the church. Does the church have anything to say about this? Is there anything it can do? It seems to me that there is an urgent need for the churches to criticize the unjust situation of women and families, to disassociate itself from the right-wing rhetoric of family values that are actually mostly an attack on women and the poor and that add to the stress and poverty of families. There are three areas that churches should work toward. First, for more equal wages for all, men and women, together with shorter work days, flex-time jobs, full benefits and medical care, and affordable child care in neighborhoods or on the job. Those policies would make it possible for women and men to balance work and family with both men and women having income-producing jobs with time to share child-raising and to have more adequate time together. That is one kind of move that is different from what is actually happening.

Secondly, I think the church should stop making sacred the Victorian concept of the family based on separate spheres for men and women. This type of family was never available to poor or black Americans, and today has become untenable for most middle-class white Americans. The churches should recognize that both men and women have roles in both family care and in work. The church should accept and support a diversity of household and family forms, including single people, gay and lesbian couples and their children, blended families, extended families, black and white. That is, the church needs to become a welcoming place for the actual diversity of households in our society.

Thirdly, I suggest that perhaps there could be a separation between the legal and the sacramental in social, sexual relations. The government should be the place for legal arrangements between partners, such as sharing medical benefits, and so on. The church should focus on creating ways for people to covenant together, to receive sacramental blessing for community and relationships that can support love, friendship, and fidelity.

There are many ways that people are finding to bond together and to create sustainable communities of daily life. The church's support for more diverse forms of the family would allow Christians to reclaim something of the

critique of the oppressive family that is suggested in early Christianity, together with creative expressions of sacramental covenanting that could support many forms of our lives. By naturalizing a patriarchal nuclear family and failing to see that this type of family is a socially constructed system for a certain type of people, the church has failed to grasp the importance of the critique of the family in the Gospels. The churches have failed to visualize family, not as a fixed part of a divinely created order, but rather as a part of the new creation that critiques the part of society that oppresses women, children, the aged, and the poor. Creating good, just, and loving families is the responsibility of the redemptive process of making creation ever new, of calling to personal and social transformation, and of beginning to imagine and construct various ways of creating sustainable relationships with one another, between partners, and between partners and children.

Once we can take family out of the mythic notion of a fixed institution mandated by God from the beginning, and recognize it as a part of a continually renewed, redemptive hope, we can perhaps reinterpret the idea of marriage as sacramental, mirroring a redemptive community. That is, some kind of sense of new creation and redemptive community anticipated in, among other places, the union of lovers becoming friends, building nurturing families, and becoming co-workers in bringing about the reign of God's justice and peace on earth.