

# family

a christian approach

The Social Issues Executive (*SIE*) of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney exists to honour God by helping Christians think biblically about the world we live in and the issues we face daily.

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'Why are Christians so into 'family'?'

'Was Jesus an enemy of family?'

'What about the dark side of family?'

Edited and designed by





## Can friends be family?



*'Families are an unmitigated disaster! They are where we see child abuse, co-dependence, suffocating emotional manipulation, domestic violence, and all manner of bleakness. Society does us a favour to rescue us from our families.'*

*'No! Family values are the core of a good society! If we get back to a proper emphasis upon nuclear families, society will stop its moral rot, and the fabric of it will be repaired. God is for families!'*

*'But families don't need a heterosexual marriage to be a family! Any group of people who choose to bond together can be called a family! Single-parent families, gay and lesbian families, blended families, even housemates or groups of friends are all as valid as "traditional nuclear families"!'*

*'Nonsense! Families are only made of blood-ties! It is just pretence to group people other than by their genetic stock. Blood loyalty is the only true loyalty. My loyalty to my family trumps all other loyalties!'*

There are plenty of controversies about family—and to be honest, it is hard to settle them all straight from the Bible, because the Bible has a rich and varied account of family. Many of the above positions could lay claim to various Bible texts to back their position.

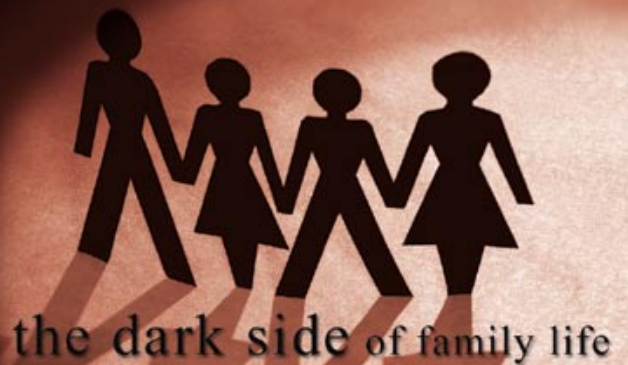
This booklet is an attempt to work out what the Bible says about families, because it is unparalleled in its ability to help us observe and understand family life. In this booklet, we hope to outline its unique position on family, which (we think) gives reasons to rethink all the positions above.

In writing about 'family', we don't mean to exclude single people, or to avoid the importance of thinking particularly about children amongst us. We also hope to write booklets about these matters soon! (We do say something brief but important about singleness at the end of this booklet.)

## 1. Does 'pro-family' make sense any more?

Christians have a reputation for being 'pro-family'. But today, such a position often seems to make no sense. For instance, in modern life sex is about what feels good. If actions are good only because of their consequences, then a whole range of sexual behaviours that bring pleasure seem 'good'; so why confine sex to marriage? Christian ethics about sex, marriage and family often encounters problems when Christians have a pro-family position without knowing the deep logic that informs it.

And there are outspoken campaigners against traditional views of family. For some, families have only ever been about parents dominating children. For others, marriage and family is whatever people decide to make it. For many, family is to be moulded to fit our own needs, rather than family being 'something bigger' that moulds us. Marriage, family, and sex become another example of people giving themselves what they want, in the way they want it. (This kind of approach, where morality is only about what the human will wants, is called *voluntarism*. According to voluntarism, *nothing in our fabric* shapes sex, marriage or family: the shape of these things resides solely in human will.)



Christian thought about sex, marriage and family is not voluntarist. It understands that these things are given by God, to be received gratefully with their proper 'shape' celebrated and enjoyed.

Christians have often disagreed with those around them, and even in ancient times, onlookers found Christian attitudes to sex, marriage and family slightly weird at first. Jesus himself had two interesting, and seemingly opposite, thoughts about marriage and family.

- On the one hand, he willingly affirmed marriage, as did the ancient Israelites and the Old Testament. Jesus points to creation as grounding marriage [Matt. 19:4-6 || Mk 10:5-9], and is seen enjoying a wedding in Cana [John 2:1-11]. He uses bridegroom imagery, which relies upon a positive estimate of marriage [Matt. 9:15 || Mk. 2:19-20, Lk. 5:34-35; cf. Matt. 25:1-10]. He was outrageous in the extent to which he promoted deep marital faithfulness [Matt. 5:27-32, 19:8-9].
- But on the other hand, he praises sexually abstinent singleness. Heaven is a place where "they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels" [Matt. 22:30 || Mk 12:25, Lk. 20:34-36]. He implies that "marrying and giving in marriage" will cease at the return of the Son of Man, "as it was in the days of Noah" [Matt. 24:36-44]. Some—such as Jesus himself?—have "eunuched themselves" for the Kingdom of Heaven [Matt 19:12]. This affirmation of sexually abstinent singleness is a new turn in Christian thought from that of the Old Testament. Ancient Hebrew has no word for, nor the OT any record of, 'bachelors' and 'spinsters', and no one ever thought of willingly living so as to be without an heir.

Christianity exploded into a pagan Greco-Roman world, which like our current culture, was very interested in sex. Initially, these early Christian notions were troubling to pagan onlookers. But in a comparatively short time, Christian views about sex, marriage and family were embraced by an empire.

What the Bible says about these matters is not what most people expect.

## 2. Jesus: friend and enemy of family

When Christians talk about family, it is easy to miss how Jesus' message at first sidelines the demands of family. Family has already been sidelined in the OT, and Jesus almost rudely sidelines his own family in the same way [Deut. 13:6-10 & Lk. 2:49-50]. He had spoken in a similar way to his mother when he was twelve [Luke 2:41-50], and his meaning becomes clearer when he all but publicly disowns her as an adult [Mark 3:31-35; || Lk 8:19-21, Matt. 12:46-50; cf. Jn 2:4]. It is not that Jesus thinks earthly families have suddenly become less important. Rather, he seeks to show what was always the case: the claim of the heavenly Father has always constituted a more primary kind of family.

Jesus constantly uses this truth to disintegrate the temptation to idolize family life [Matt. 10:34-38, || Lk 12:49-53]; Lk 14:26; Mk 10:28-31, || Matt. 19:29]. Movies and books about the Mafia offer a good picture of family being an idol: the good of the family justifies all and every other crime. But often, people don't mean to idolize their families. Sometimes the mundane realities of family life



simply anesthetize people against acting as if anything else matters [cf. Matt. 8:212-22, || Lk. 9:59-62; and Jesus' experience of this, Lk. 4:22-29, || Matt. 13:54-58, Jn 7:41-42].

So is Jesus uniformly negative about family? Not at all! He travels with his mother [John 2:12] and sees to her ongoing care [Jn 19:25-27]. He is 'pro-family' when he insists that responsibilities towards parents must be generously fulfilled [Mk 7:9-13, || Matt. 15:1-9; cf the fifth commandment, Mk 10:19, || Matt. 19:19, Lk. 18:20]; and that marriage commitments must be guarded tenaciously [Matt. 5:27-32; Mk 10:2-12, || Matt 19:3-9].<sup>1</sup> Jesus' direct response when households are threatened by illness also seems to reflect an affection for families and households [Centurion's servant: Matt. 8:5-13, || Lk 7:1-10; Simon Peter's mother in law: Matt 8:14-15, || Mk 1:29-31, Lk. 4:38-39; widow at Nain: Lk. 7:11-15; Jairus' daughter: Mk 5:21-24 & 35-43, || Lk. 8:41-42 & 49-56].

Jesus is not contradicting himself. His net effect is to say that marriage, and biological family, is the prime unit of life in this 'earthly' age, and must be honoured; but our natural family is not our final family. A Father and a Son call people into their family, as brothers and sisters to the Son.

John's gospel notably reveals the perfect relationships of this divine 'household'. The Father loves the Son [5:20] and teaches him [7:16, 8:28]; and the Son obeys the Father [5:19] and relies upon him [6:57], and both work together to honour the 'family name' and for the salvation of the world [5:21-23, 36-37; 8:29; 10:15; 13:31-32; 14:10-13, **17:1-26**].<sup>2</sup> Also, this divine household includes a third member: the Holy Spirit, who is from both the Father and the Son [John 15:26, and probably John 16:15].

New sons and daughters are adopted into this divine household [Rom. 8:23, Eph. 1:5], and they may join it because the Holy Spirit enables them to become one with the Father and the Son [2 Thessalonians. 2:13; Titus 3:5-6].

This adoption continues the way Israel was adopted first by God [Rom. 9:4]. We can find lodging in this new household [Jn 14:2-3, 23], and so 'brother' and 'sister' language is to describe the way believers now think of one another.<sup>3</sup>

So, we may receive the Holy Spirit and may be joined into a household that we do not genetically belong to. That is a remarkable possibility, and it introduces humanity to the idea that there is a basis for family that is bigger than our blood ties.

### 3. Family throughout the Bible

But even so, the NT's vision of where God is taking his world never annihilates or overturns what we still find in his creation. Marriage, and biological family, do remain the prime unit of social life in this 'earthly' age, as we see when NT churches are always seen as a collection of households. That is, the fact that people are 'brothers and sisters' in Christ is never used to supersede their relationship to their husband or wife or father or mother or children [cf. 1 Cor. 7:10-17].

What is said across the whole Bible about "earthly" families? That question is notoriously difficult at first, because the material is rich and multi-layered. We've thought it easiest, then, to lay out this material by answering three questions that keep appearing in modern discussions of family:

**Is the family 'nuclear'?**

**Is family always 'good'?**

**Are biblical families just an obsolete economic unit?**



### a) Is the family 'nuclear'?

The term 'nuclear family' refers to a mum, a dad and their kids. But perhaps two-thirds of the world do not live in nuclear families, and the biblical material portrays an incredible interplay of family forms. Yet Christians have a reputation for defending 'nuclear families' as the most proper sort of family. Do they have any biblical warrant?

There is no OT word for our 'nuclear' family. A person has a mother and father of course, but people are located in clans and tribes.

For example, the young Saul is located within the 'tribe' of Benjamin, the 'clan' of Matri, as the 'son' of Kish, but there is no mention of the small familial unit that comprised Kish and his sons [1 Sam. 10:21]. Does this oddity imply that there is such a deep sense of bond to the wider clan and tribe as to mean that they did not recognise such a thing as a 'nuclear family'? Not necessarily: Saul is described as 'the son of Kish', which obviously locates him in the 'nuclear' family of Kish.

But also obviously, Kish's family are very interconnected with those who surround them in a way that modern 'nuclear' families often are not. In patriarchal times, the boundaries of extended family are very flexible indeed [e.g. Lot's family, Gen. 13:5,8; & cf. 14:14-16; household circumcision, 17:12-13,27; Abimilech's household, 20:17-18; Abraham's concubines, 22:20-24, and chief servant, 24:2-9; almost too flexible with Jacob and Laban, 31:38-44?; Jacob's clan (4 matriarchs, 12 half-siblings); and the proto-'levirate' marriage of Gen. 38:8.]

This flexibility is very surprising to many Westerners and it might almost seem to suggest that the boundaries were completely fluid. But of course they were not, because

there is also a very clear confinement of sex to marriage in ancient Israelite communities. Married couples remain central to these extended families.<sup>4</sup>

However, extended family can become very messy for them. When Tamar is raped [2 Sam. 13], Absalom, Tamar and David seem to coalesce into a family within a family against the rapist, Amnon. The matter is complicated by rape, polygamy and perhaps by the outworking of a curse [2 Sam. 12].

The situation is perhaps reminiscent of some modern families, and reminds us not to romanticise ancient extended families, clans and tribes. It is easy to find societies where the only thing that matters is loyalty to clan and culture, which can turn marriage partners against each other and create indifference to others, or internecine feuding such as we glimpse in the OT [e.g. Judges 19].

The structures of family arrangements change over the course of the Bible. An agrarian culture becomes 'advanced-agrarian' and then urban, in a movement that seems to parallel the Bible's theological movement from a garden [Gen. 1-2] to a city [Rev. 21].

The tribes and clans of rural Israel and Judah give way to the *households* of the urbanised NT. It is generally agreed that these 'households' were places where domestic existence and economic activity coincided, with the household members working on tasks together. This arrangement is very unlike our society, where most of us travel beyond our families to our workplace.

Even so, some pressures in the ancient world must have been similar to our modern pressures. Then, as now, people must be urged to care for elderly parents and for



widows [1 Tim. 5:3-8]. An 'extended family' or a 'household' does not automatically solve the problems of the aged.<sup>5</sup>

Extended families are less obvious in the NT:

- When Jesus discussed divorce laws, marriage is the core issue. No extended family is on view, only the 'core relationship' that exists between a husband and a wife.
- The apostles travel with wives, without mention of a household [1 Cor. 9:5].
- The 'overseer' must 'be a husband of one wife,' a good manager of his own house' and the father of submissive, respectful children [1 Tim. 3:1-5]. We can speculate over the boundaries of the 'house'. But the persons mentioned in relation to this man are his wife and his children. The apostle seems to think of the household as having a nuclear 'core'.

The Bible keeps returning to the way families spring from a married man and woman. Indeed, the biblical authors are at pains to protect that relationship [eg Ephesians 5:22-33; 1 Corinthians 7:2-5; Hebrews 13:4; 1 Peter 3:1-7], and its implication for children [eg Col 3:19-21]. It is not wrong, then, to honour 'nuclear families' because in the Bible, families do have a 'nuclear core': a married couple and their children. (We will return below to situations where the married 'core' is disrupted.)

However, the NT 'household' and the OT clan and tribe alerts us that any 'nuclear' family must work very hard to remember that 'mum, dad and the kids' are *not* alone: they are part of a richer tapestry of wider relationships. Remembering this truth is often difficult in Western culture, and opponents of 'nuclear family' are right to observe that nuclear families can be selfish, self-absorbed and insular.

The NT's *final* word on family, though, is not about whether they are 'nuclear' or not. A very diverse group of people, some of whom are single and some of whom are within households, begin to be spoken of as 'one in Christ'. They are on the trajectory to join into a final family with their Father and his Son. Indeed, Jesus tells a man who wants to bury his father to 'leave the dead to bury their own dead, and follow me' [Matt. 18:22]. Christian talk of nuclear 'family values' is a rather strange way to present a faith whose founder talks like that!

## b) Is family always 'good'?

Christian emphasis upon 'nuclear families' and 'family values' sometimes suggests that families are always good, and anything less is bad. But that is not the Bible's teaching. There is an aspect of the biblical account of family that is often overlooked in treatments of 'family values': A **dark side** to family life emerges almost immediately. By a 'dark side' we refer both to outright evil, and to the many daily acts of carelessness and thoughtlessness that occur within families and which can make family life unbearably difficult. Writers of the Bible are able to note this dark side very realistically.

It appears from Genesis 3 onward. The man blames his wife for his own sin [Gen. 3:12], and a curse signals the start of the war of the sexes [Gen. 3:16b]. The first recorded human death is a first-degree murder between brothers [Gen. 4:8].

The subsequent chapters of Genesis are notable for the *lack* of any ideal families. A strange incident concerning Ham and Noah [Gen. 9:21-27] hints at something unseemly on Ham's part, or excessive harshness by Noah; either way, the breakdown of relationships in this family is all the more poignant after the family's braving the rigours of the flood together.

Some modern people argue against *'traditional family values'* because they have seen and experienced families at their very worst.



They must be taken seriously because of this biblical theme of *woe in family life*

Space forbids recounting the four-generation saga of Genesis 12-50. The narrative assumes the goodness of family (since the 'plot' is driven by the blessing of descendants); yet the life of this family is riddled with deception, intrigue, sexual impropriety [Gen. 19:31-36; 35:22; 38:18], jealousy and greed. Yet this material depicts God's gracious intention to bless the world through Abraham's dynasty *despite* that family's episodic self-destructive folly.

Consider also Elkanah the bigamist in the time of the Judges [1 Sam. 1]. In our modern language, his family is 'dysfunctional'. Elkanah gives the infertile Hannah extra food, both as a compensation to her and because she is his favourite. His other wife, Peninnah, though blessed with sons and daughters, is a bitter rival to Hannah. This account directly follows Judges 21:25, where there is no king and everyone does what seems right to them. The point is that the whole land is dysfunctional, and the mess that is Israel extends to its institutions, including its families. Just as Eli is an ineffective father to his sons, so also is Elkanah compromised and marginalised in his polygamous family. We could multiply OT examples. For example, the family of King David continues the 'dark side' theme, while the 'family' of Solomon seems to reduce the practice of polygamy to its most absurd conclusion. Yet these kings were considered to be godly! The implication seems to be—in a broken and fallen world, if this is how the godly behave, then what hope is there for the rest of us (apart from God's rescue)?

The 'dark side' of family is also clear in the wisdom literature. On top of his other troubles, Job is pictured as having to endure an unsympathetic wife [Job 2:9-10]; and the pain of a bad marriage is clear to the Proverbist [11:22? 12:4b; 19:13b; 21:9,19; 25:24; 27:15-16; & 30:23a!], as is the pain of wayward children. The OT canon closes with a messianic promise, couched in terms of salvation from family strife [Mal. 4:6].

The 'dark side' of family reappears within the Gospels, such as the machinations of Herodias [Matt. 14:3-12, || Mark 6:17-29; cf. Lk. 3:19-20]; a squabble over inheritance [Lk 12:13-15]; the hubris of two sons [Lk 15:11-32]; and the ambition of a mother [Matt. 20:20]. Jesus himself experienced family tension [Mk 3:21, Jn 7:3-4]; and for Jesus' followers, life in his service will sometimes exacerbate such sinfulness.

The 'dark side' remains in evidence in the epistles, from the man sleeping with his father's wife [1 Cor 5:1], to a lack of parental respect [2 Tim. 3:2] culminating in matricide and patricide [1 Tim 1:9].

Some modern people argue against 'traditional family values' because they have seen and experienced families at their very worst. This biblical theme of woe in family life means that *their objections must be taken very seriously!* Dysfunctional families don't merely damage the individuals in them, they affect other relationships throughout our lives, and in this way damage whole societies.



repentance  
forgiveness

**Families:**  
*based on an  
economic system  
that no longer  
exists?*



But the biblical authors do not conclude that families are a 'lost cause'. They look forward to the redemption of the family. They look forward to new life in the life of families and households in this age [e.g. Col. 3:18-22; Eph. 5:21-6:9; 1 Pet. 3:1-7]; and the wedding scenes at the end of time [Rev. 19:7-9, 21:2] resolve the status of family. As Paul taught in Ephesians 5, so also in Revelation: the real and final wedding is between Christ and his people. Here, the family's 'nuclear core' is writ large, and all the longings of marriage are met in that relationship. The dark side of family is gone for good.

This blessing can erupt into the present, as families rediscover each other again through the power of the Christian good news. By turning away from sin and rebellion against God, by repentance and forgiveness to God and each other, family members can find and love each other all over again (in ways that seemed impossible when the 'dark side' ruled the family).

### c) Are biblical families just an obsolete economic unit?

Throughout both Testaments, we see glimpses that the operation of biblical families and households have economic connections. The economics of agrarian life are very different to the economics of our own post-industrial society.

The relationships of agrarian families develop in connection with common work on economic goals for the household, whereas modern families send representatives elsewhere for economic purposes. Hence modern families might not participate in common tasks, and find that their various economic tasks distract them from their intra-family relationships, rather than helping those relationships.

Therefore some say that families are basically obsolete, and they think we are mistaken to look to the Bible on family. Are they right?


The integrity of households is honoured in many ways. Marriages, new lives, dead relatives, and lands are all honoured [Ex. 1:17,20; 20:17 (tenth commandment); 21:22; Lev. 21:1-4; 25:47-49; Deut. 20:7, 21:10-14, 25:5-10; Num. 27:3-11]. Details can be complex [e.g. Ex. 21:3-11, 22:16-17], but modern readers can't help noticing the way land plus a family unit does seem to give rise to one *economic* unit.

But OT family units protected their landholdings primarily because they were understood to be blessings from God, not merely because they were economically necessary [cf. 1 Ki. 21:1-3!]. There are of course economic overtones: these families worked this land, and there is a direct threat to their survival if it is taken away. But they do not seem to think of economics as the 'main game'. To have land is to share in the blessing of God. That is the primary category of its valuation, and we should not overstate the importance of their economic interdependence.

Using economics as the main lens through which to view family life distorts what we see. We, like the families of the OT, are bound together by a many things. The means of human interdependence might include activities of labour and finance, but these two hardly exhaust the list of activities that bind us together.

Indeed modern Australians are unconvinced by the claim that the modern family must bow to post-industrial economy. Some recent reports contend that workplace demands have reached the point of non-compliance for many, and otherwise rapacious workplaces are being forced to comply with the needs of family. A major Australian bank is increasing 'family-friendly' job-sharing





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and part-time work. An ACTU survey finds that “eighty per cent of Australian employees want more family friendly workplace laws and a cap on long working hours”. Another survey finds that people illicitly use sick-leave to balance work and family.<sup>6</sup> People notice the natural blessing of family, and seek to defend it by fair means and foul.

Working on a farm together as in the OT, or some equivalent economic task, would not necessarily bring families together. Indeed ‘the family business’ can take the form of nepotism and organised crime, and can in its own way also create familial and social dysfunction. That our modern work practices send us beyond the home can actually help to show us what matters beyond our family.

Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas thinks that modern families try to compete with the modern economy in a way that disintegrates families. Post-industrial families overcompensate by overstressing romantic ties of familial affection, to the point of frequent psychological dysfunction because more is asked of the family than can be borne by the bonds of affection alone.<sup>7</sup>

But Christians have another activity that binds them together. In the NT ‘household codes’ [e.g. Col. 3:18-22; Eph. 5:21-6:9; 1 Pet. 3:1-7], it is not economic activity or the need to survive that is at the heart of family life. Instead, we see that the new ‘heart’ of the household is made up of activities of spiritual care. Through this care, people find forgiveness, restoration and healing.

## 4. Families today

In the light of what we’ve seen, it is not hard to understand a family as the first and smallest social unit. It has what has been called a ‘corporate personality’

as its members interrelate with each other; yet it also honours individual importance, while teaching them their responsibilities toward the wider collective (church, neighbourhood, state).

The ‘clan and household’ conceptions of the Old and New Testaments seem to exemplify just such an ‘interrelational’ view. On the one hand the integrity of the household, with its ‘nuclear’ core of marriage is demarcated and defended; but on the other hand this unit is explicitly woven into a wider people—first the clans and tribes of Israel, then the Christian people within the Roman state. Households are explicitly instructed to notice, welcome, respect and care for strangers and other non-family in various ways, thereby preventing the ‘Mafia’ view of clan.

The Christian Scriptures gave the modern West an understanding of family as a bounded entity, generally with a married couple at its core, but whose boundaries are ‘semi-permeable’ enough to adopt new non-biological ‘kin’, and to promote and encourage interaction with people outside the household.

The following implications arise.

### a) A ‘nuclear core’ ?

Christian thought will be careful in its handling of the ‘nuclear family’ which is why we’ve spoken of a ‘nuclear core’ to family. And, we don’t mean that each family must have a nuclear ‘core’, but that *we would expect a healthy human society to have many families with such a ‘core’.*

It is important to phrase this claim correctly. Ruth and Naomi (both of whose husbands had died) were obviously a ‘family’ of sorts, even without a nuclear ‘core’, and perhaps with the right kind of assistance, could easily have remained so without any difficulty. Nevertheless,



something seems to have gone wrong in a society that does not naturally produce and keep a large proportion of families with a 'nuclear' core...

...although a good society accepts and supports family without a 'nuclear core'



we would not understand their kind of family as representing the bulk of Israelite society; and indeed the plot structure of Ruth pivots upon the tragedy of their situation. Admittedly, the tragedy has a lot to do with economics (i.e. there is a famine and no men to provide); but even if Ruth and Naomi were modern working women, there would remain an element of tragedy: for the companionship of marriage, and the hope of more children, is gone.

Therefore perhaps we can say something like this.

***While a 'good' society must accept, support and care without prejudice for families without a 'nuclear' core, something seems to have gone wrong in a society that does not naturally produce and keep a large proportion of families with a 'nuclear' core.***

Government can assist to set some (not all) of the conditions under which such families can proceed, and should be called to do so. But the identification of these conditions is difficult, and Christians need to take care not to have unrealistic expectations about how much a government can do to help.

Perhaps then Christians do better service to Australia by outlining those conditions for healthy family life which no government can set, and by weaning public and politicians off the delusion that government is the final authority in these matters. Such an approach might therefore commit Christians to direct their efforts into (a) discovery or production of Christian instruction about the kinds of personal godliness that seem to sustain and promote family life, and (b) research into the arena of 'family studies' to discover what is working for families, and the relationship of these findings to Christian theology and teaching.

## b) An 'attack' upon the family?

It might be mistaken to frame all modern problems as some kind of conspiratorial 'attack' upon the family. Is anyone in Australia seriously advocating the destruction of the family? Perhaps a few virulent fringe-voices are, but on the whole, many 'radical' proposals seem rather to stem from the quest for an alternative to painful childhood experiences of family (e.g. freedom from abusive men), or represent desperate and possibly misguided attempts to shore-up family (e.g. State-run full-time childcare to counter intolerable economic pressures). Attempts to define family as, simply, any collective of people who choose to go by the name of 'family' for a time possibly reflect a deep yearning for the bonds of family, and a deep pessimism about the possibility of an ongoing, loving and safe family characterised by faithfulness, grace and real commitment.

As well as sounding a bit paranoid, the language of 'attack upon the family' actually trivialises the problem. The 'attack' upon the family began in the human heart in Genesis 3, as witnessed by the 'dark side' of the Bible's teaching about family. It might be a genuinely new and surprising strategy for conservative Christians to proclaim the Bible's acknowledgement of the dark underbelly of family life (a biblical theme that seems to be absent when some speak of 'Christian family values'). Such a willingness to admit to the 'dark side' of family, while at the same time acknowledging the goods of family life, would blunt the more virulent attacks on family and affirm the deepest yearnings of the rest, while at the same time holding out hope that those yearnings can start to be met in families that know the gospel.

Christian thought is generally both world-affirming and world-denying. That is, Christian thought celebrates the



good things God has stitched into life on earth, and it points to the future 'world' of God's kingdom that is even better than our current version! So it is with the family. God schools us in the preciousness of other people in two ways, by both 'affirming' and 'denying' something about families:

- God schools us to enjoy and be competent in our family responsibilities. The calling of the married is to be married well, and to nurture children well. Until the Lord returns, family is the primary place for nurturing the preciousness of other people. Family is the 'first church', and churches becomes places where families of the married are strengthened, honoured and assisted.
- But God schools us to see beyond our own family. By calling together a church of many tribes, peoples, nations and languages, and by calling me to serve others within that church, we learn to recognise the preciousness of others beyond our own family.<sup>8</sup> (Indeed, it is hard to see how such recognition can be found elsewhere than in the Christian gospel, since when left to its own devices, humanity seems naturally to gravitate toward exaltation of the lonely individual or to harsh servitude of some tribe.) In this way, churches can truly be said to become the 'family' of each **single** person. **Single** people, in turn, have a ministry to the churches. They show us how it is possible to relate deeply across ties of blood and kinship. They show families how God's family takes precedence over the bonds of tribe, clan and blood that so easily divide us.

So whether by strengthening the family of the married, or by being the family of the single, each church shows how we can live in a world where we accept the authority of Jesus Christ and so find our true humanity.

## 5. Conclusion

We have begun to see the Bible's unique position on family. On the one hand, it is a great blessing from God which grounds communities by sustaining and nurturing its members. On the other hand, it is prone to terrible vices: families can distract people from God, its members can turn upon each other and/or cause people to neglect the outside world. Yet God loves to restore families to good health and points people to greater membership in his greater family.

A society – even its single members – needs to do all it can to produce and keep a large proportion of families with a nuclear core. But in a fallen world the "dark side" wrecks families, and society also needs to care for and sustain them.

For their part, families need to work out how to look beyond themselves, so that their family becomes a blessing for the world, not just for itself.



## Endnotes

1. Note also Jn 4:17-18, where Jesus contrasts five prior husbands with 'the man you now have [who] is not your husband'. Is this a terminological rejection of cohabitation as constitutive of marriage, but an acceptance of remarriage as truly a marriage?
2. John 8 is a fascinating reflection on 'family allegiance', evangelistically employed to describe the way people approach the truth entirely from their family's frame of reference. 8:43-44: "Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil ...". Sometimes a complete desertion of one family, and a concerted bid to enter another, is required!
3. Women in the NT churches are sometimes called 'sisters', but are always 'sons' and often 'brothers'. We should not conclude that women have therefore been overlooked by a carelessly patriarchal use of language. Rather, at a time and place where men had privileges that women didn't, there is no clearer way of saying that in 'brotherhood' with Christ Jesus, all enjoy the same inheritance. This language is actually a radical way of honouring the equivalent preciousness of women in God's family.
4. This claim might seem to be compromised by the OT practice of polygamy, which unfortunately is beyond the scope of this booklet. We should note, though, that while polygamous marriages were upheld as enduring and as legally and morally important, (a) the practice was never on view in Genesis 2; (b) it is painted as absurd in the case of Solomon (1 Ki. 11); (c) Yahweh's exclusive faithfulness to his people becomes a model for a man's relationship to one wife; and (d) polygamy is no longer evident among Jewish people by the time of the NT, and is not an option in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles.
5. An alternative explanation for this injunction might be to protect the elderly against any creeping cultural practices of euthanasia by neglect.
6. *Sydney Morning Herald* 10/2/2003 p.1.
7. Stanley Hauerwas, "The Radical Hope in the Annunciation: Why Both Single and Married Christians Welcome Children;" in John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (eds), *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 505-18.
8. An interesting series of proverbs describe how the morality and strength of a household is formed as its members relate rightly to others outside the family [Proverbs 14:1,11; 15:6,27; 17:1; 27:23-27].

## Further reading

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- Sowle Cahill, Lisa. *Family: A Christian Social Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000.

## Our research into relationships

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- Halcrow, Jeremy; Cameron, Andrew and Gordon, Tracy. *Home/work Conflict and Relational Wellbeing*, SIE and Anglican Media Sydney, 2005

