



## Family Integration and the Supremacy of the Gospel

Within the contemporary landscape of ministry approaches, Family Integrated Churches (FIC) find themselves in the minority. This has not always been the case, however. The witness of Scripture is that throughout the course of redemptive history, *families* have attended corporate worship together. When Moses prepares the Israelites for the reading of the law, he presumes that men, women, and children will all be gathered together to hear and be instructed:

“Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God...” (Deuteronomy 31:12-13 ESV)

“Little ones” are included in the assembly so that they may receive with the rest of God’s people the truth of God’s Word, and perpetuate a heritage of faith across generations. This picture is carried throughout the whole of the Bible. The integration of people from all demographics of society in worship is assumed as well by Paul. The Apostle’s letter to the Ephesians gives a snapshot of society in the early church as he instructs husbands, wives, children, masters, and bondservants, all gathered together to worship their Redeemer (Eph 5:21-6:4).

Family integration is not a new concept. Family integrated churches seek to return to the biblical model of ministry that has characterized the vast amount of church history. We believe that Scripture requires parents to teach their children about God and his ways (Deut 6:7). This charge cannot be passed off to another. It is not the purpose of this statement to offer a full defense of FIC.<sup>1</sup>

Any movement or organization that distinguishes itself from the majority view often faces the challenge of being known more for the distinction itself than anything else, regardless of the strength of the message it proclaims. Because it is not the majority approach, FIC can easily become the primary trait we are recognized for. After all, to those who have grown up in a traditional church, much will be different. The sanctuary will be filled with children. There is no Sunday School. Fathers and mothers are called, equipped, and expected to train their children in the fear and admonition of the Lord. Family worship in the home is encouraged.

The differences present in an FIC church are unavoidable to the outside observer, and yet *we do not find our identity primarily in family integration*. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ that has the power to redeem and unite diverse groups of people, and it is the gospel in which we find our identity. Most, if not all, of the members at Grace Family Church have not grown up in a church that practiced family integration. It is a biblical principle that has radically changed our lives, and to which we are firmly committed. And yet, it is not what animates our lives, fuels the energy of our church, or the rhythm of our homes.

The glorious gospel of God makes dead sinners come alive. Through faith in Jesus, God draws men to himself, who receive forgiveness of sin and eternal life. Our identity, both as individuals and as a church is drawn from this truth, that Jesus died for sinners. In him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). This is our identity, and the message that we preach.

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<sup>1</sup> For a full historical and biblical apologetic of FIC, see, Brown, Scott. *A Weed in the Church*. City: Merchant Adventures LLC, 2010.

## THE RELATIONSHIP OF FAMILY TO THE GOSPEL

What, then, is the relationship of family integration to the gospel? Scripture paints a picture where the family is neither disestablished by the gospel, nor where the family eclipses the gospel. When Pharisees came to Christ seeking to test him, they asked, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" (Matt 19: 3). Rather than minimizing the family, Jesus appeals to the creation account of male and female, reminding the Pharisees that the bond between husband and wife is a one-flesh union that should not be separated. *Jesus cares about the wholeness of the family.* He wants marriages and family relationships to grow and thrive under his reign. Jesus affirms and defends the family in part because *the institution of the family illuminates our understanding of the gospel itself.* In his wisdom, God has chosen to use the *family* as one of the primary metaphors of salvation and the christian life:

- God "predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ." (Eph 1:15)
- God is our heavenly father: "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father..." (Eph 3:14)
- Individuals within a church are to relate to one another as members of a spiritual family. "Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity." (1 Tim 5:1-2)
- God cares for his people like a mother comforts her son. (Is 66:13)
- The church relates to its Savior Christ, as his bride. (Eph 5)

The family, rightly ordered and loving one another, testifies to the unifying power of the gospel. When the family suffers breakdown within the church, the gospel is not seen as clearly. Fathers who lead and love their wives and children do so not only for their own family, but for the sake of the gospel. Christ's love as revealed in the gospel is the motivating energy behind family discipleship in the home, and family integration in the church.

## FAMILY IDOLATRY AND THE GOSPEL

Jesus' new covenant rule does not obliterate the importance of family. Still, he has strong warnings to those who would elevate the institution of the family over and above the gospel.

"For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:35-39 ESV)

Christ teaches that ultimate allegiance to anything in this world, even the family, is idolatry. This is a real temptation that should be noted. *The good news both affirms and transcends the family.* Our relationship to our family must not stand in the way of the subjection of our whole being to Christ's call to discipleship. We recognize that discipleship happens in many contexts. This includes the preaching of the Word in gathered worship, in family worship, in relationships at work, and in many other scenarios. Furthermore, because the gospel is powerful, it is able to *integrate* men, women, and children of every age, ethnicity, family background, socio-economic class, and every walk of life, within the covenant community.

Family is important because God created it. But the gospel demands total allegiance. FIC churches are passionate about the return to biblical discipleship of our children. We care about our marriages and families. Our convictions are strong on these issues. However, *family integration is not our main message.* We affirm with Paul as matters of first importance "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures..." (1 Cor 15). This gospel is supreme over every other thing. We care about families because we care about the gospel.