

God and family: from sociology to covenant theology

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Loyalty is a family value that can no longer be taken for granted. Too many families are hurting within and outside of our churches. Our mobility has made the extended family a virtual anachronism. People are or feel alone, wondering who to trust and for how long. This syndrome forces upon us questions about the basis of family loyalty (is it conditional or unconditional?) and about the relation of our loyalty to God and our loyalty to family. This paper offers some biblical perspectives in response to these questions.

Hermeneutical approach

Before dealing with specific texts or themes, we need to clarify our approach to biblical interpretation. Negatively, the shape of the family in the past is not assumed to be definitive for the family today. What is *described* in Scripture is not necessarily *proscribed*.

Positively, therefore, we need first of all to see the family in the biblical tradition in terms of its social context through a sociological analysis. Then we will attempt to see how the family is interpreted theologically in the past as the clue for how we can interpret our family life in the present. This will involve an analysis of the covenants in the Old Testament, followed by the peculiar statements of Jesus about the family in relation to the place of the family in the church of the first century.

Sociological analysis of the family in the Old Testament¹

The patriarchal family was within a pastoral society where kinship relationships were highly developed.

The kinship system was unilineal and patrilineal: lineage was traced through one parent, namely, the father. Children belonged judicially to him though the role of the mother in the family was still of importance. Marriage was endogamous and, therefore, contracted between kin. In this way women, children and property were kept within the lineage. Marriages with outsiders were forbidden. The family configuration was composite and extended. It consisted of a man plus his wife and their children (nuclear family) plus another wife or wives and their children (composite family) plus married sons and their families, plus married grandsons and their families (extended family). The leadership in this configuration centred on the patriarch (the oldest male father) and the sign of belonging was the covenant sign of circumcision administered to all males in the family.

This same sociological pattern continued throughout the wilderness wandering, but now the extended family was further extended beyond households (which included servants and guests), nomadic camps (several households travelling together), and individual clans, to an association of clans who were, or regarded themselves as being, related to each other.

In the Settlement there was a shift from a pastoral, nomadic society to an agricultural one where non-kinship relationships were more highly developed while high kinship relationships continued. The family was increasingly seen with reference to a particular clan of which there were twelve in clearly defined geographical territories. Leadership within the family was still patriarchal but within or between the clans a charismatic figure became a new unifying head.

When the monarchy was established, some of the roles of the extended family or clan were taken over by the state (e.g. social security, social and economic order and some religious functions). Though political centralization increased, clan ties persisted and finally led to a divided nation. The king's position also tended to eclipse Yahweh's role as the 'patriarchal' head of Israel as a family. The prophets represented Yahweh's opposition to pos-

¹ This section relies largely on C. R. Taber's 'Kinship and Family', *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume* (ed. K. Crim, New York, 1976), pp. 519-524.

sible ways in which kings usurped his leadership. In the post-exilic community endogamy was enforced more strenuously while the basic family unit continued to be in the patriarchal pattern.

The predominant structure of the family in twentieth-century western societies is the nuclear family. The patriarchal tradition continues to be reflected in marriages where the bride accepts the surname of her husband, but this is changing. Increasingly, legal changes recognize the rights of women and traditional sex roles are no longer as sharply defined.

All of this seems to be accompanied by an increasing lack of family identity, a search for relationships in a social order in which kinship relations tend to be minimal. This means that for the average person the biblical picture of the family seems more distant. Appealing to the patriarchal pattern, therefore, as an antidote for what is ailing the family is not only unconvincing but inappropriate. The key to humanizing the family and recovering meaningful relationships does not lie in copying a particular social pattern, but in discerning the relationship of the family and the nation to God in successive covenants.

Covenant theology in relation to sociological factors

The primary expression of Yahweh's relationship to his people in the Old Testament was covenant. But there were different kinds of covenants.

In Genesis 12, 15, and 17 we have the Abrahamic covenant when God's people were viewed as an extended family. The sign of this covenant was circumcision.² The form was that of *promise* through Yahweh's gracious initiation and Abraham's response of *faith*. The promises of land and posterity were blessings conveyed through the patriarchal son, though the favoured son was not selected by merit but by lineal mores (Isaac the first-born) and free choice (Jacob instead of Esau, Judah instead of Reuben). This was clearly an unconditional covenant.

Exodus 19–24 presents us with a different kind of covenant. This was the Mosaic or Sinaitic covenant. The people of God were now a nation of twelve clans in a patrilineal society. The covenant form seems best explained by reference to the Hittite suzerainty treaty,³ an agreement between

unequals in which the suzerain graciously offered a conquered vassal certain blessings under specific conditions. Hence an integral ingredient of this covenant was law: the Decalogue, the Covenant Code of case law and later the Holiness Code (Leviticus). The sign of this covenant was the passover with probable antecedents in both the pastoral and agricultural feasts. This was a family celebration in which the children both participated and were taught the mighty acts of Yahweh. This was a conditional covenant in which the blessings or curses were related to obedience or disobedience respectively.

The third covenant in the Old Testament is the Davidic (2 Samuel 7, Psalm 89). In keeping with patrilineage a covenant relating to the monarchy was expressed in a dynastic succession from father to son. This meant that the covenant form, succession, was not based on merit as with the charismatic judges. The promises to David were not nullified by disobedience. This covenant was again unconditional and its sign was the anointing with oil. So one family was the appointed and anointed saviour of the nation. At least this was what was articulated in the covenant even though the historian of the Deuteronomic History interpreted what happened to the nation and the monarchy in terms of the Sinaitic covenant.

Finally, there is the new covenant (Jeremiah 31–32; Ezek. 36). Was this a conditional or an unconditional covenant? It focused on an inner transformation by the Spirit to do the will of God and emphasized the importance of forgiveness. The family was left in the background here and anticipated the New Testament view of the relationship between God and people related not to sociological but spiritual factors.

Before drawing some conclusions from this brisque survey of Old Testament covenants, let's look at what the New Testament says about the family.

New Testament view of the family

The radical statements of Jesus

Three statements of Jesus express a very different approach to the family.⁴ Mark 13:12–13 is an apocalyptic vision of the end and the tribulation when 'brother will be set against brother, a father against his child, children against their parents. Only the one who endures to the end will be saved.' The *eschaton* involves family division. This means a separation of family from faith and tribe from

² Rolland De Vaux suggests that circumcision was (probably) originally a Canaanite marriage initiation rite which Israel copied but to which it gave a new religious interpretation. *Ancient Israel* (Toronto and London, 1961), pp. 46ff.

³ Cf. Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary* (tr. D. E. Green, Philadelphia, 1971).

⁴ Cf. Roy Harrisville, 'Jesus and the Family', *Interpretation* 23 (1969), pp. 425–438.

religion against all assumptions of the Torah that these belong together. In the past the legal system encouraged and occasioned a faith-as-family structure. Jesus' vision of the end departs from this tradition.

In Luke 14: 26, Jesus gives a radical call to discipleship: 'If anyone does not hate father, mother, wife, children, brother or sister, even his own soul (self), he can't be my disciple.' This involves a concrete decision to separate from one's family. In both Judaism and the Old Testament the family was considered the source of life (kin have the same life). The family is the 'soul' of life (cf. 1 Sa. 18: 18) and allegiance to family was considered almost as high as allegiance to God. But for Jesus, discipleship supersedes family allegiance.

The final passage focuses on discipleship *vis-à-vis* funeral obligations (Mt. 8: 21-22). Someone apparently wants to follow Jesus but makes a preliminary request: 'Let me first go and bury my father.' To this Jesus replies, 'Follow me and let the dead bury the dead.' Now according to Jewish law a person had an obligation to bury a relative. This was considered so paramount that it took precedence even over religious duties. So once again discipleship supersedes family allegiances.

From his consideration of these three passages Roy Harrisville concludes: 'These three utterances mark the end of family as religion or faith as nation and their underlying legal system.'⁵ J. J. von Allmen presses the matter further. For him Jesus enunciates God's call to people to embrace the kingdom. With the presence of the kingdom the family ceases to be decisive.⁶ Unlike the earlier covenants with Abraham, Moses and David, the new covenant is not limited in the New Testament to family and nation, biologically or ethnically. The new covenant focusses, rather, on the ruling of God in the lives of believers and disciples.

Tradition teaching and Jesus' extension of it

But there is another dimension in the teaching of Jesus which moves in a different direction. Five times in the synoptic gospels Jesus urges children to honour father and mother. In two of these passages (Mt. 15: 4-7 and Mk. 7: 9-12) there is an additional attack on those who would attempt to place religious offerings ahead of family obligations. Such people are called 'hypocrites'. Jesus' words clearly intensify the obedience-to-parents-commandment above any cultic interpretation of duty to God.

The centrality of the family in the first-century church

In addition, throughout the whole of the New Testament the value of home and family is extremely important. The healed were not urged to be followers, but were sent home. Clearly within the family of God there continued to be room for the human family. In fact, households originally formed the centres of worship. But the church as extended family was no longer based on kinship but on a commitment of faith. Yet it is clear from Ephesians 5 and 6 that the family continued to be vital for the church's corporate fellowship and public witness. The whole church was to manifest the harmony of love, submission, obedience and respect that was to be natural in a household. As this was nurtured in the church, there would be a developing of trust arising out of commitment to Christ. These qualities, so necessary to the church's life, were to be communicated through the family with due recognition that authority, love and care came from God and faith and obedience were the appropriate responses of believers.

The radical call to discipleship and the centrality of the family

Jesus' radical call to discipleship would certainly have been interpreted by his contemporaries as being in conflict with the central place of the family in Judaism and Old Testament religion.

But a careful understanding of the intended relationship between the law and the Sinaitic covenant allows a different interpretation. When law and covenant are separated one ends up either with legalism (law without covenant) or casuistry (covenant without law). Against the former, Jesus claimed that filial piety (faith as family) was not a good in itself; to have the law was not, by itself, a prerequisite for discipleship. On the other hand, one should not put honouring God against honouring parents as though the commandment concerning the latter had been voided. Jesus was saying that you can't ask the question of when parents can be disobeyed and then look in Scripture for the answer. That's casuistry. Of course, there may be times when there does seem to be an apparent conflict between choosing between parents and God. But that conflict can't be resolved through a casuistic handling of Scripture.

In contrast to both legalism and casuistry, Jesus holds law and covenant together. The relationship that exists through the covenant is concretized by the law. That's the relationship between the covenant at Sinai and the law expressed through the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 434.

⁶ 'Family' in *A Companion to the Bible* (ed. J. J. von Allmen, New York and Oxford, 1958), pp. 110ff.

various codes. But the new covenant is not without law; it is the law within. The result is that, within the new covenant, the disciple acts concretely and leaves the judgment up to God. One no longer has a legal verification but acts in freedom, yet this freedom is one of accepting one's dependency as a disciple. So discipleship and the community of disciples transcends all other loyalties. This is what Jesus implies when, in Mark 3: 31, 35, he says that his real mother, brothers and sisters are those who do the will of God.

The continuing importance of the old covenants

The New Testament is in continuity with the Torah story. The theology implicit in the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants continue to speak to us and our families.

The calling of Abraham, his response of faith and then the receiving of a promise is not tied exclusively to the sociological configuration of the original context. In John 6, Romans 4 and Hebrews 11, this is a paradigm for the first-century church. The unconditional nature of God's acceptance, central to this covenant, continues to be a key to humanizing our family relationships today. We, in our families, need to know that we are unconditionally accepted by one another, there are no limits to our love or feeling of being loved. This

dimension arises out of and is furthered by our experience of God's acceptance.

The choosing of the Israelites as a 'kingdom of priests', 'God's own possession' was conditional upon their being obedient (Ex. 19). This covenant was also picked up in the New Testament, especially in 1 Peter 2: 9-10, in identifying the nature and purpose of the church. There is no faith that does not incorporate obedience. Within the family we cannot separate trust from faithfulness. Where husbands and wives keep faith with each other, children have a model for obedience.

Hebrews 5: 8 and 9 emphasize not the faith but the obedience of Jesus in his redemptive activity on our behalf. He inspires us to obedience, not as a way of earning his grace but of responding gratefully to him for it. That response will inevitably, if it is real, be reflected in our family relationships.

The paradox of our being both unconditionally accepted and conditionally related to God (and within our families) is continued by the new covenant with its openness to both the law and the Spirit within, as well as the promise of a relationship that nothing can destroy. Loyalty encompasses both the conditional and the unconditional and remains a central value for the survival and maturing of the family. This is especially true when such loyalty is nurtured by God's *hesed* or loyalty, a term related to both kinds of covenant.