

Church and Family 1:

Church and Family in the Scriptures and Early Christianity

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We hear much today, particularly from conservative American Christians, about the need to restore the Biblical view of the family. It is assumed by these spokespersons that the “Biblical family” is a male-dominated nuclear family consisting of a working husband, a non-working wife, who is full-time “mother”, and several dependent children. What is really being assumed here is that the Bible endorses a conservative version of the late Victorian, Anglo-Saxon patriarchal family. Such rhetoric about the “Biblical view of the family” lacks a sense of the socio-economic history of the family over the last three to four thousand years. It is taken for granted that this Victorian ideal of the patriarchal nuclear family was created in the Garden of Eden and has remained static ever since, until a recent period in the twentieth century when, for some inexplicable reason, it began to be “undermined” by feminism, gay rights and delinquent children. It is not necessary, then, to reflect upon the norm itself the forces that are challenging it, but simply to restore what is presumed to have always been, as the expression of God’s will.

In reality, no such nuclear family existed in Biblical times. This is a rather recent development created primarily by urbanization and industrialisation. Subsequently, I will outline some of the stages of the transformation of the family that has shaped the pattern which Americans assume to be normative today, although it actually corresponds to less and less of the actual household units in which most Americans live. In the Bible one has several different perspectives on the family, none of which readily correspond to the modern nuclear family.

If by restoring the Biblical view of the family one means, for example, restoring the sort of family envisioned in the earlier strata of the Old Testament, this would mean restoring an entire

tribal form of economics. Such a family consisted of several hundred people and was, in fact, a clan or small tribe. It was headed by the patriarchal head of the family who was the clan sheik. His family consisted of several wives, as well as concubines, their children, his slaves, and their children, other relatives such as his mother, and friends and hangers-on. Under him also were his married sons and his daughters-in-law, his sons' concubines and slaves and their children and married daughters and sons-in law and their dependents. This large clan unit was first based on desert nomadic shepherding, and later adapted itself to settled agricultural life.

Although the women of this Hebrew family were dependents in legal matters, they were by no means shut up in a harem, nor did their role consist solely in child nurture and housekeeping. Rather, they were valued primarily as economic workers who produced much of the goods consumed by the family. In the Book of Proverbs, the "good wife" is praised, not for her good looks or her mothering qualities, but for her efficiency as the manager of this domestic industry. She is described as like "a merchant vessel who brings her goods from afar." She considers a field and buys it, and plants a vineyard from her own earnings. She manages a large household of servants who spin and weave the clothes worn by the family. The wife also sells the goods produced in her household to merchants and thus derives further income for the management of her household. She is clothed in fine linen and purple. Her arms are strong and she is filled with dignity and strength so that she can laugh at the days ahead.

Nothing is said about her husband's activities, except that he is "known at the city gates where he takes his place with the elders of the land." The wife is, in effect, the primary income producer, thus freeing the husband for political activity. Such a woman was indeed a formidable personality, so much so that the Book of Proverbs constructs a theological metaphor which compares this type of Hebrew wife to God as God's immanent Wisdom which creates, rules and reconciles the universe. Presumably when our contemporary conservative Christians talk about restoring the Biblical model of the family, they do not have in mind the polygamous slave-holding clan of the patriarchal narratives nor the powerful economic manager of the Book of Proverbs.

When we turn to the New Testament, written over a far shorter period of time than the Hebrew Scriptures, the situation is no less

complex. Much of the New Testament writings, particularly the gospels and the historical Paul, were subversive toward the patriarchal family, as it existed at that time in the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures. In the Christianity reflected in these texts, the church functioned as a counter-cultural community which claimed priority in the lives of its members and dissolved the primacy of one's commitment to the family. In order to follow Jesus, one must "hate," or put aside, one's primary commitment to one's mother and father, spouse and children. As Matthew 10:37-39 puts it:

He (or she) who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and he (or she) who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

Or in Luke's version of the saying (14: 26-27):

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his (or her) own father, mother, spouse and children, brothers and sisters, he cannot be my disciple.

In a story that is found in all three synoptic gospels, the church, as the true family of Jesus' followers, is contrasted with the blood-related family and kinship group. In this story, Jesus' mother and brothers come to where he is preaching and demand to speak to him. But Jesus repudiates this claim of the kinship family upon him with the words:

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking round on those who sat about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

(Mk 3: 31-35 cf. Lk 8: 19-21 and Matt 12: 46-50)

Here the Christian community is seen as a new kind of family, a voluntary community gathered by personal faith, which stands in tension with the natural family or kinship group.

This tension between church and family continues in Paul. Paul does not demand that his followers remain unmarried, but he would prefer that all Christians remain as he is; namely, unmarried (1 Cor 7,7). For Paul, the appointed time of world history is drawing to a close and the Kingdom of God is at hand. So one should not concern oneself about the business of marriage and procreation, which are the affairs of the world, but give one's primary attention to one's relation to God. In the coming Kingdom all such family relations will be dissolved, so they should not claim primacy in Christian concerns here and now. Paul is also concerned with the problem of households divided when a husband or

wife becomes Christian while the spouse remains an unbeliever.

In both the Jewish and the Greco-Roman worlds, it was axiomatic that the religion of the household should follow that of the head of the family. A family was not just a social unit. It was a religious unit united around its household ancestral gods. The family religion, in turn, tied the household to the public order or the state. The public cult, rooted in the household gods of the tribes that came together to make the city or the nation, represented a joint household religion linking all the families together in one community. Therefore, for one to depart from one's family religion, the religion of one's ancestors and one's nation, was really to engage in an act of subversion toward the family and the public order. This was doubly heinous when dependents in the patriarchal family, a wife, daughter or son, or a slave, departed from the family cult and followed a different religion.

This conflict was heightened with Christianity since it did not allow its followers to be initiated into its cult and still follow the old religion as well, as did mystery religions. As an exclusive faith, Christianity declared the other religions to be false and their gods mere idols or even demons. Such exclusivity was also found in Judaism, but, for the people of the Greco-Roman world, Judaism was the ancestral religion of a particular ethnos, or nation. So it could be allowed its particularities within its own community, providing this did not take a political form of rebellion against the Roman super-state. But Christianity was both exclusive and universal. It had denied or rejected its ethnic roots. It was the religion of no particular national group, but made its claims upon individuals regardless of family or nation. Such a concept of religion was inherently subversive, disrupting the order both of the household and of the state.

It is important to see the close connection between these two relationships, to the family and to the state. We are familiar with the idea that Christianity was persecuted as a religion subversive to the state, although we tend to think of this as a mistake, since Christianity's claim was spiritual, not political. But we have failed to see the equally important charge that Christianity disrupted the family, based on the close ties between household and state for ancient society. To follow a religion contrary to one's family, a religion moreover which declared the official religion to be false and demonic, was to strike at the heart of the social order of both the family and the state. It meant that wives could dissolve their allegiance to their husbands, children to their parents, slaves

to their masters. These persons, in turn, no longer revered the state, whose prosperity was founded on the favor of the ancestral gods. Thus we cannot minimize the seriousness of the assault on society posed by early Christianity.

Most Christians in the first and second century believed that this conflict between Christian faith and the family and state should be expressed boldly and unequivocally. The Christian would be ready to die, if needs be, rather than to concede the claims of the household and state gods. The literature celebrating this position is found in the story line of the gospels, as well as the popular martyr narratives and the apocryphal Acts of the apostles. In this literature, rejection of the claims of the family and that of the state are closely tied together, particularly when the Christian believer is a woman, a wife or a daughter. For example, in the mid-second century Passion of Sts. Perpetua and Felicitas, two women, one nobly born and another a slave of her household, are united as sisters in their common determination to die for their faith. Perpetua has just had a child, while Felicitas delivers a child in prison. Perpetua is begged by her aged father to consider her duty to her infant son, but she spurns these demands upon her in order to express the primacy of her loyalty to Christ.

In the Acts of Paul and Thecla, Thecla (a young woman of Iconium), engaged to be married, is converted by Paul. She immediately rejects the claims of her fiancé and family upon her and takes off to follow Paul. Her enraged husband-to-be complains to the governor that the Christian faith has subverted his marriage rights. For the rest of the narrative, representatives of Thecla's family, her mother and her fiancé, as well as agents of the state, pursue her and try to punish her for her rebellion against the combined authority of family and state. She is thrown twice to the lions and miraculously escapes unharmed. At the conclusion of this narrative, she is commissioned by Paul to preach. For Christians well into the Middle Ages the figure of Thecla remained the authority for women's right to preach and to claim a religious vocation independent of the demands of the family and public authority.

It is likely that this story of Thecla goes back in oral form into the late first century. (See Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Legend of Paul and the Apostle. The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*. Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1983.) It, as well as the martyr narratives, represents a certain type of radical Christianity that goes back to the earliest Christianity. This Christianity was simul-

taneously ascetic and apocalyptic. It believed vividly that the present social order was soon to come to an end, and that this demanded a dissolution of one's allegiance to the state, as well as a rejection of sexuality and the ties of marriage. It was charismatic and prophetic, believing in the living presence of the Holy Spirit expressed in charismatic speaking and miracles of healing. Its heroes and heroines were prophets and martyrs. Although it is militantly ascetic, it should not be confused with gnosticism, which moved in a different, quietistic and spiritualist direction. Unlike Gnosticism, it has never been regarded as heretical. Rather, the official church claimed its literature and heroes, while trying to dampen its enthusiasm and relegate its martyrs safely to the past.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is replying to a series of questions which are occasioned by this kind of ascetic and apocalyptic Christianity. Should Christians who are not yet married get married? Should those who are married abstain from sexual relations? Should the wife or husband married to an unbeliever separate and divorce? Paul is hard put to reply to these questions since, in fact, he shares much of the perspective of the militant ascetic and apocalyptic faith from which these questions come. But he is also concerned to modify the confrontation between this faith and the family. So he suggests a series of compromises, often tentatively and eschewing full claims of authority. It would be better for married Christians to abstain from sex but, since this might lead to immorality by the less-believing partner, one should concede to the demands of sex, although also allowing for times of abstinence as well. Still, complete celibacy would be the ideal. If one is unmarried, better not to marry. If yoked to an unbeliever, stay with him or her, if they consent. However, if the unbelieving partner desires to separate, it is right to do so. A sister or a brother is not bound to the unbelieving spouse.

Paul's efforts to find a middle ground between the claims of family and the claims of faith were not successful. Instead, we see in the literature of the next several generations of Christians a polarization between two positions, one exalting the claims of faith against family and state and the other increasingly modifying the early radical vision of faith in order to accommodate the claims of the family and the state.

The first or radical position is reflected in the gospels as well as in the martyr literature and the popular Acts of the apostles that I have just mentioned. This literature, as we have seen, affirmed the primacy of the claims of the faith against those of the family and

the state. The individual is absolved of his or her dependency and loyalty to these institutions in order to be faithful to a higher loyalty. The mother may deny the claims of an infant son upon her; a daughter may repudiate the demands of a father; a bride-to-be those of her parents and her husband. In some of these popular stories women who are already married are depicted as leaving their husbands in order to follow Christ.

Once having departed from the family and the conventional social institutions, women, youth and slaves join a new community of equals. The hierarchal ties of family and society are done away with. There is no more master and slave, no more dominance of male over female. The difference between ethnic groups, Jew and Greek, Greek and Scythian, are dissolved. All are one in a new family, a new humanity defined by Christ. Thus not only is the Roman matron, Perpetua, praised for rejecting her family and the state, but the social gap between her and her slave woman is overcome as well. The free-born Perpetua and the slave woman, Felicitas, became equals and sisters.

It is not accidental that many of these stories revolve around women, women as wives, as daughters and as slaves. For the first four centuries of its existence Christianity moved up the social ladder primarily through women, children and slaves. The male heads of families were the last to be converted precisely because, for them, the claims of the ancestral religion of city and state were the religious base of their authority and public offices. Families which were all Christian began to develop in the lower ranks of society, but, among the upper classes, even in the fourth century, it is common for the women and female children to be Christians, while the husband and older son remain pagan. Thus the conflict between the Christian faith and the pagan world continues to divide not just Christians as a group from the outside world, but households as well, separating Christian wives, daughters and slaves, from pagan heads of family. The pagan paranoia toward Christianity, which flared up in waves of persecution in these centuries, was rooted in this fear that Christianity subverted the social order, not just its public political form, but as its most intimate base in the family.

Over against that radical Christianity, which affirmed and even exulted in this conflict, urging Christians to remain firm against state and family even to death, there arose a more conservative view which sought to modify the conflict. Not surprisingly, this

more conservative view reflects the position of a growing established leadership associated with bishops and with a patriarchal conception of established order in both society and the church. One finds this conservative voice of the institutional church reflected in the apologists of the second century and also in the household codes of the post-Pauline strata of the New Testament.

The apologists seek to modify the confrontation with the state by lifting up an ideal of Christians as ideal private citizens. The Christian is docile and obedient to the state. The Christian is scrupulously moral in all business dealings. He or she observes the strictest code of sexual morality. Therefore, the state should not see the Christian as subversive, but as the ideal citizen whose good private morality is the ideal base of public virtue. The apologists do not deny that Christians reject the public cult and its goods as false and demonic, but they seek to privatize this religious difference. They veil or conceal the apocalyptic vision of Christianity which saw the present world order as soon to be overthrown by God.

This effort to privatize the religious differences between pagan and Christian, while claiming personal morality as public virtue, did not entirely succeed. The pagan world continued to believe that Christianity was politically subversive precisely because it did not separate the private from the public. For pagans, religious belief was a public political act of allegiance to the gods upon whom the prosperity of the state rested. To deny the existence or divinity of those gods was to subvert the transcendent foundations of the state. Moreover, the stance of the apologists contained a kind of concealed contradiction, since they continued, privately, to hold on to an apocalyptic faith that denied the official gods and hoped for an imminent intervention of God to overthrow the pagan state.

The household codes of the New Testament attempt a similar compromise between the claims of faith and the claims of the family. It is important to recognize that the original context of these codes did not have in mind the Christian family, but rather the divided household in which a Christian wife, daughter or son or slave was in potential conflict with the claims of authority of the non-Christian head of the household as father, master and husband. Like the apologists, the household codes seek to modify this conflict by de-politicizing or spiritualizing it. The Christian woman or slave is seen as inwardly free. The equality of male and female, slave and free, is exalted to the spiritual and escha-

tological plane. But, on the social level, the wife, daughter or slave should express this new spiritual freedom by redoubled submission to the patriarchal authority of husband, father or master.

As the first Epistle of Peter puts it, the Christians, although aliens and exiles in this world, should all the more maintain the strictest conformity to outward standards of conduct so that the gentiles (or pagans) will not accuse them of wrong-doing. "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution," whether emperor or governors. Servants be submissive to your masters, not only to the kind and gentle, but also those who are harsh and cruel. Likewise, wives obey your husbands, so that those who are unbelievers may be won over by the good behaviour of their wives. Clearly what is in view in these texts is not the Christian household, but the household divided and potentially disrupted by Christian wives and slaves asserting their liberty against pagan masters and husbands.

However, like the apologists, the efforts of the household codes to privatize and spiritualize the radicality of the Christian vision is only partially successful. No matter how docile and submissive the wife or slave might be outwardly, she was nevertheless in spiritual revolt against the authority of her master or husband by choosing a religion which was not only different from his, but which made her regard herself as an alien and an exile in this world awaiting an imminent overthrow of the social system. Good outward moral behaviour could assuage this contradiction, but not ultimately change the perception of pagan society that such a Christian faith struck at the root of its authority. The wife or slave who conceded, however assiduously, the outward claims of obedience, had nevertheless removed herself inwardly from all claims of this authority upon her life.

As Christianity moved from the late first to the fourth century, we see this conflict between faith and family resolved in opposite, complimentary ways. On the one hand, the radical vision of an egalitarian Christian counter-culture is institutionalized in monastic Christianity. Here Christian women, as well as men, continue to claim that faith takes precedence over all worldly institutions of state and family. They dissolve the ties of marriage, reject procreation or worldly occupations and live apart in a separate community where all become equal and share in a communal lifestyle. But such an ideal of life is no longer proposed to all Christians, but now only to an ascetic elite.

On the other hand, we see in the household codes of the New Testament, and in the political theology of the Constantinian state, the Christianization of the patriarchal family and the Roman Empire. The hierarchy of husband over wife, master over slave, emperor over subject, is taken into the Christian community itself and sanctified by Christian theology. In Ephesians 5, the headship of husband over wife becomes a symbol of the headship of Christ over the church. The wife should submit to her husband, as to Christ. The husband should love his wife as Christ loves the church. Such “love patriarchy”, while it modifies traditional patriarchy by proposing a high ideal of husbandly benevolence toward dependents, nevertheless fundamentally discards the original Christian vision of equality in Christ. Its pattern is paternalistic, not mutual. The exhortation to the husband to “love your wife as Christ loves the church, ” is not paralleled by the exhortation to the wife to love her husband in like manner, but rather by a command to submit to her husband as the church submits to Christ.

A similar pattern is suggested in the relationship of slaves to masters in 1 Peter 2, 18-25. If the husband and master is not kind and loving, but harsh and cruel, this does not allow his dependents to criticize or rebel against his authority. Rather, the sufferings of Christ now become a model for patient endurance of unjust violence.

For one is approved if, mindful of God, he or she endures pain while suffering unjustly.....For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

In these texts we see the revolutionary suffering of the cross of Christ converted into a theology of voluntary victimization. The cross of Christ is no longer a symbol of truth and justice which enables the Christian to stand against an unjust world, but it has become an example of patient and unprotesting acceptance of unjust suffering. This corruption of the theology of the cross into a theology of victimization takes place at the most intimate level, in the relationship of women and slaves to the patriarchal head of the family. Starting with the most intimate of relationships, and moving out to all social relationships, the cross becomes a symbol of unprotesting submission to unjust violence and oppression, rather than a protest against it in the name of an alternative human community. The Kingdom of God becomes an antidote

and compensation for this endurance of suffering, rather than a vision of an alternative world.

In a similar way Eusebius of Caesarea, in the fourth century, Christianized the relationship of emperor and subjects. The emperor becomes the political representative of the Word of God, the vicar of Christ on earth. The Christian should obey the emperor as a visible embodiment of the reign of Christ over the world. In this Christianization of the patriarchal family and the Roman emperor, the Christian church ceases to stand against the dominant social order as a representative of an alternative human community where "God's will shall be done on earth." The radical egalitarianism of early Christianity is spiritualised, as a reward to be enjoyed after death, and marginalized into a separate, elite, monastic community set apart from the historical order of family and state.

Thus the hierarchical patterns of power of the family, state and social class fail, to be transformed by Christianity, but rather are resacralized as expressions of obedience to Christ. By making the Christian egalitarian counter-culture a monastic elite outside of and unrelated to the family, the Christian church backs away from the possibility that this radical vision itself could lay claims upon and transform the power relationships of society and family.

The Sense of an Ending

John Navone SJ

Life stories have a beginning, a middle and an ending. Our sense of the ending depends on our basic faith concerning the ultimate meaning and value of our life story. The entire life story of Jesus Christ and its particular ending in the resurrection equips Christian faith with its sense of the ending of both our individual life stories and of the universal story that is history. The resurrection expresses the belief that the Storyteller's *Creator Spiritus* of life-giving love, which enabled Jesus Christ to find his true story, also