

The Biblical Basis of the Church as Family

Christians can now survey a rapidly expanding body of literature dealing with the question of male and female roles in family, church, and society. But to a large extent we still lack sufficient attention to the teaching of the Bible on the *connections* between two key institutions, the family and the church. Such connections lead to some definite conclusions about roles.

In our day, people who hold a high view of the authority of the Bible differ on the question of male and female roles. On the one side people like James Hurley, Susan Foh, and George Knight, III, argue that the Bible prescribes differing roles for men and women both in marriage and in the church.¹ On the other side people like Patricia Gundry, Aida Spenser, and Gilbert Bilezikian argue for a virtually complete uniformity of roles both in marriage and in the church.² In

¹ James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective: A Study in Role Relationships and Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981); Susan T. Foh, *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979); George W. Knight, III, *The Role Relationship of Men and Women: New Testament Teaching*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985).

² Patricia Gundry, *Heirs Together: Mutual Submission in Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988); *idem*, *Woman Be Free! The Clear Message of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988); *idem*, *Neither Slave Nor Free: Helping Women Answer the Call to Church Leadership* (San Francisco:

8 THE CHURCH AS A FAMILY

the middle, however, are a third group, less well defined, who advocate a differentiation of roles in marriage but not in the church.

I myself belong to the first of these three groups. But in this booklet I wish to focus only on one strand of argument, namely the connection between family and church. I cannot rehash the arguments with regard to Genesis 2; Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-21; and 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. Rather, assuming that Ephesians 5:22-33 presents us with a permanent model for irreversible roles in marriage, I want to show that such irreversibility carries over into the context of the life of the church. But my argument could be turned around in reverse: if it were true that *identity* of roles is desirable in marriage, it would also be true that we have an argument in favor of *identity* of roles within the church.

The Bible teaches us to call God "our Father" (Matthew 6:9). We who are redeemed by Jesus Christ are children of God (Galatians 4:1-7). These two Biblical affirmations are among many in which the Bible employs an analogy between a human family and the church. By means of this family analogy God makes some of his most precious promises to us concerning his present love, our future inheritance, and our intimate fellowship with him (for example, Romans 8:12-17; Hebrews 12:5-11; Revelation 21:7).

The practical implications of these "family teachings" are so deep and so many-sided that we can never fully fathom them. Let us here concentrate only on one strand of implications—namely, the implications for our conduct towards one another within the Christian community. The Bible invites us to use these family teachings to draw some particular inferences about the respective roles of men and

Harper & Row, 1987); Aida Besançon Spencer, *Beyond the Curse* (Nashville: Nelson, 1985); Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: A Guide for the Study of Female Roles in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985).

In addition, people like Paul K. Jewett, Virginia Mollenkott, and Krister Stendahl embrace egalitarian conclusions, but do so by arguing that Pauline texts are in tension with one another on this question (see Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975]; Virginia Mollenkott, "A Conversation with Virginia Mollenkott," *The Other Side* (May-June, 1976), pp. 21-30, 73-75; Krister Stendahl, *The Bible and the Role of Women* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966]). Such an approach inevitably involves an attack on the divine authority of portions of Scripture, and introduces all the autonomous subjectivities of postulating a canon within the canon. I will not address this approach directly in this pamphlet, but my conclusions may help to show that Paul is not really in conflict with himself, as they claim.

women within the church. In brief, the argument runs as follows: Just as husbands and fathers ought to exercise godly leadership in their human families, so wise, mature men ought to be appointed as fatherly leaders in the church (1 Timothy 3:1-7). A particularly important role also belongs to more mature women (1 Timothy 5:9-16; Titus 2:3-5). Like wise mothers of the church, they are to train their spiritual daughters by example and word. But just as in the case of marriage (Ephesians 5:22-33), the respective functions of men and women are not reversible in all respects. Men — and not women — are called on to exercise decisive fatherly leadership as elders.

THE PEOPLE OF GOD AS A FAMILY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Now let us look in detail at the steps in the argument. First, consider the variety of New Testament teaching comparing the people of God to a family.³ The confession that God is our Father belongs to a most fundamental strand of New Testament teaching, beginning with Jesus' model prayer in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:9) and continuing through the many instances where God is called "God the Father." The Bible never simply means that God is the Creator of all human beings. Having God as Father implies having intimate family fellowship with him (Romans 8:14-17) and reflecting his holy character (1 Peter 1:14-17). Christ, the only Son of God, has God as his Father in a unique sense. In addition to him, only Christians — that is, those who have received the Spirit of Christ — are rightly able to cry, "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15). Those outside of Christ have the Devil as their father and want to carry out their father's desires (John 8:44; cf. 1 John 5:19).

Thus Christians are called "sons of God" and "children of God," in pointed contrast to non-Christians who are outside God's family (1 John 5:1-5). To be called a child of God has many implications. We have intimate fellowship with God the Father (Romans 8:15). Jesus Christ is our elder brother (Romans 8:29). We are legally adopted out of a situation of bondage (Galatians 4:1-7). We are no longer slaves

³ In a more thorough analysis of New Testament teaching, it would be proper to attempt to delineate the distinctive contributions of the various New Testament authors. Paul emphasizes our legal adoption and our present and future participation in God's inheritance. John emphasizes that God has brought us to a new birth and transformed us into people characterized by faith and love. But these distinctive emphases are complementary contributions to a unified body of divine teaching with a single divine Author.

10 THE CHURCH AS A FAMILY

(Galatians 4:7; Romans 8:15). We are to receive the full inheritance from God as coheirs with Christ (Romans 8:17). We are conformed to the pattern of death and resurrection-life established through Christ (Romans 8:11-13). We share in the common family Spirit, the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14-15). We are remade in God's image (Romans 8:29). We are born from God (1 John 5:4; John 1:12-13). As obedient children, we are to imitate the good character of our Father (Ephesians 5:1; 1 Peter 1:14-17).

Because God is our Father in this intimate sense, and because Jesus Christ is our brother and our all-sufficient advocate to the Father, we do not need any other human intermediary to bring us into contact with God. In relation to God the Father, we are brothers to all other Christians. We are to be servants to one another, and no one of us is to lord it over the others (Mark 10:42-45). Hence Jesus specifically criticizes the use of honorific titles that might contradict our status as children and undermine our sense of intimacy with God:

But you are not to be called "Rabbi," for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth "father," for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called "teacher," for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23:8-12)⁴

Jesus' own emphasis on humility and service, as well as the larger context of Matthew 23 where Jesus is criticizing the Pharisees, indicates that Jesus is not setting forth a legalistic rule about the mere verbal use of the words "father" and "teacher." Rather, he is criticizing an attitude of the heart. We must always recognize the fundamental character of Christian brotherhood. Our common status as brothers implies that we should submit to Christ and serve one another.

In fact, then, Jesus' teaching is complementary to other teachings in the New Testament epistles that do assign a special role to pastors and teachers (for example, Ephesians 4:11). The most fundamental relationship is the Father-son relation between God and Christian believers. But God's fatherly care ought to be reflected in the care that Christians exercise towards one another within the church. For example, Christ is our Teacher in a most exalted sense (Matthew

⁴ Here and elsewhere, Biblical quotations are taken from the *NIV*.

23:10; John 13:13-14). From the fullness of his wisdom and his teaching gifts, he has distributed gifts to the church and thereby makes some people into subordinate or assistant teachers (Ephesians 4:7, 11). Christ is our Shepherd in a unique sense (John 10:11-18). He also imparts gifts to human beings who then become undershepherds (1 Peter 5:1-4). God the Father and Christ are the ultimate models that we ought to imitate (1 Peter 1:14-15; Romans 8:29). But in a subordinate sense we are supposed to imitate the good examples set by more mature believers (1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 3:17; 1 Timothy 4:12; Titus 2:4, 7).

GOD'S HOUSEHOLD IN 1 TIMOTHY

The theme of family relationships is particularly prominent in Paul's first letter to Timothy. Paul repeatedly invokes the analogy of a family in order to enable Timothy better to understand the appropriate order and responsibilities within the Christian church. Paul calls Timothy his "son," expressing both his affection and the discipling relationship between them (1 Timothy 1:2, 18). He advises Timothy to treat an older man "as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters" (1 Timothy 5:1-2). If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should look after her (1 Timothy 5:4). But if the immediate family is lacking, the larger Christian family should care for her (1 Timothy 5:5, 16).

The overseers or elders ought to be respectable family men:⁵

Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to much wine, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) (1 Timothy 3:2-5)

The requirement concerning "managing his own family well" is particularly important, because the same wisdom and skills necessary

⁵ "Overseers" (*episkopoi*) and "elders" (*presbuteroi*) designate the same people, according to J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Macmillan, 1913), pp. 95-99, and many other New Testament scholars.

12 THE CHURCH AS A FAMILY

for good family management apply also to the management of God's church.⁶

Finally, the Apostle Paul explicitly indicates the prominent role of the family theme in 1 Timothy 3:14-15:

Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.

In fact, these verses summarize the thrust of the whole letter. The phrase "these instructions" is most naturally understood as referring to the contents of the letter as a whole. Thus the letter as a whole has the purpose of indicating "how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household."

The reference to "God's household" could theoretically involve either of two ideas: namely, the idea of communion with God in the "house" or "temple" of God, or the idea of a household managed by God. In some contexts within the Bible the idea of God dwelling among his people as a temple is emphasized (1 Corinthians 3:10-17). But in the context of 1 Timothy the idea of household order and arrangements is obviously the most prominent. The order of the church is analogous to the order of a human household. Members of the church are to treat one another as they would members of their own family (1 Timothy 5:1-2). They are to care for one another in need (1 Timothy 5:5, 16). The overseers are to be men skillful at managing the household of God, as demonstrated by their earlier skill with their own immediate families (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

⁶ In certain limited ways both men and women must exercise skills in management. In 1 Timothy 5:14 women are instructed to "manage their homes." Proverbs 31:10-31 indicates in some detail the virtuous character and the scope of a wife's management. But such management is not identical with the responsibility of fathers. Ephesians 5:22-6:4 makes it clear that while wives exercise authority over their children and over business affairs, husbands exercise authority over their wives as well as over these other areas. Thus the scope of authority is different in the case of husbands and wives. Such a distinction in scope is to be understood when we compare 1 Timothy 3:4-5 with 1 Timothy 5:14. In the subsequent argument I aim to show that the same distinction extends to the church, since the church is the household of God.

APPLICATIONS OF THE HOUSEHOLD IDEA

In 1 Timothy the fundamental household analogy is not merely confined to one or two incidental illustrations or colorful flourishes of rhetoric. Rather, it is used as a basis for arguments and inferences concerning Christian responsibilities. The central role of the analogy is particularly clear in 1 Timothy 3:4-5: "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" Paul in effect presents an argument: good family leadership must be one of the criteria for appointment to a position of overseer, because the very same skills and competences are required for overseeing "one's own house" and the Christian "house." Paul does not expect Timothy simply to take Paul's word for the fact that such-and-such a criterion is suitable for elders. He expects Timothy to see the wisdom — yes, the inevitability — of this criterion on the basis of the validity of the analogy. Indirectly, Timothy is presumably even being invited to use the same argument himself, if someone else should have doubts about the matter.

Similarly, in 1 Timothy 5:1-2 we can see the beginnings of an argument. "Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as you would a father; treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity." The key comparative words "as" and "like" might possibly be interpreted as introducing mere illustrations. But all the illustrations are of exactly the same type, in that they all use the analogy between the church and family relations. In view of the general statement about conduct in "God's household" in 1 Timothy 3:14-15, the comparisons in 5:1-2 are to be seen as so many ways of fleshing out the implications of being a member of God's household. We can perceive the obligatory nature of the inferences. You *must* treat the older men like fathers, the younger men like brothers, etc., not only because in some very general sense you must love them, but because you are part of the very same spiritual household. Conduct toward any other member of the household must take into account not merely sweeping general obligations to love, but the concrete distinctions introduced by differences in status within the household: treating some like fathers, others like brothers, others like mothers, others like sisters. Hence 5:1-2 presupposes the structure of an argument: *The church is like a family; therefore you must treat fellow church members like fellow family members.*

The household analogy appears, then, to be one constituent element in Paul's own approach to articulating the nature of Christian

church order. In fact, it might easily be one means by which the Holy Spirit led Paul himself to grasp the teaching that he presents in the pastoral letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). Of course, we do not know for certain. Paul received spectacular special revelations from the Lord (Acts 9:1-8; Galatians 1:16; 2 Corinthians 12:1-7). But he was also one who had "the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). Through the wisdom and insight that the Holy Spirit had given to Paul, he understood the basic principles of Christianity in tremendous depth. Under the gentle superintendence of the Spirit he was able to give inspired teaching in his letters even on matters that his spectacular experiences had not directly addressed.⁷ Moreover, the Apostle Paul wanted all Christians to arrive at a deep, principial understanding of the Christian faith. The Corinthians were rebuked for being carnal, not having the mind of Christ as he does (1 Corinthians 3:1-4). In Romans 12:1-2 Paul urged upon all the necessity of growing in a grasp of the will of God: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will." Similarly he said, "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ — to the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:10-11).

How, then, do we know what sort of order is appropriate for Christian communal life? We know, in part, because Paul tells us in his letters. But how did Paul himself know? And how does he expect us to apply his teachings in circumstances slightly different from the ones that he addressed in his letters? Paul had such wisdom partly because he had deeply absorbed the fundamental teaching of Christ about God being our Father and about Christ's saving work on the cross. Christ's work reconciled us to God and gave us intimate family communion with God, the communion of sons (Galatians 4:1-7). We are members of God's family. That family structure of God's church has definite implications about the specific forms of love to be exercised within the family (1 Timothy 5:1-2), the specific kind of leadership needed in directing the family (1 Timothy 3:1-7), the specific kind of management needed in dealing with family needs (1 Timothy 3:8-13), and so on.

⁷ The difficult statements in 1 Corinthians 7:12, 25, 40 are, I think, to be understood in this way.

In fact, almost the whole of 1 Timothy may be seen as a catalog of types of behavior and organization needed in a harmonious family. True doctrine is necessary because the family needs to know its own rules (1 Timothy 1:3-11, 18-20). Doctrine is therefore foundational for all the more specific kinds of organization and mutual relations within the family. Mercy and forgiveness bind the *family* together (1:12-17). Protection is necessary from destructive outside interference and for the benefit of the *family's* relations to the larger world (2:1-7). The men in the *family* must not generate strife among themselves, but must be united in petitions (2:8). The women must devote themselves to *family* service and not to frivolities (2:9-10) or to usurping authority over men (2:11-14). The *family* must have wise, competent overseers (3:1-7). It must have wise care for *family* needs (3:8-13). In every respect it must conform to divine order (3:14-16). Proper rules and examples from the leaders are most important (4:1-16). *Family* members must all treat one another with the respect and honor and sensitivity appropriate to their mutual status (5:1 – 6:2). Those *family* members in need must be cared for, preferably by those closest to them (5:3-10). Use of money must support *family* goals (6:6-10, 17-19).

In sum, the theme of God's household runs through 1 Timothy and is validly used as the basis for inferences about Christian behavior, not merely as an incidental illustration.

