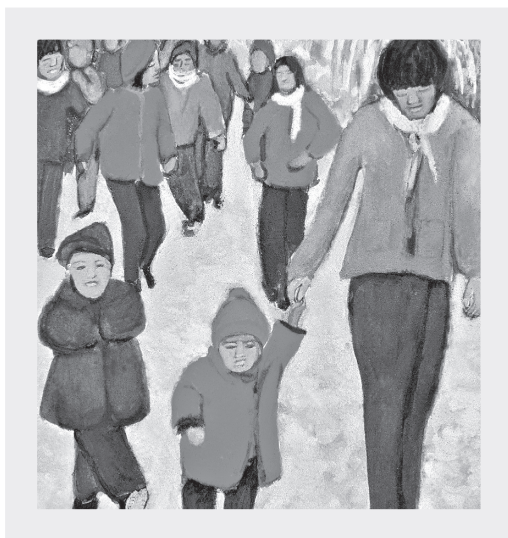
Mark A. Yarhouse &
James N. Sells

FAMILY THERAPIES

A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal



An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

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A Christian Understanding for Family Therapy

> *Happy families are all alike;*
> *every unhappy family is unhappy in their own way.*
>
> *Leo Tolstoy,* Anna Karenina

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It is safe to say that pain, injury, tragedy, injustice and sin leave a unique scar on families who seek therapy. Disillusionment, heartbreak, hurt, hopelessness and confusion are common characteristics of couples and families who seek assistance from counselors, psychologists and pastors. As with most who seek family therapy, Tolstoy experienced the despair of life within family. He witnessed the birth of thirteen children and the death of five. He experienced and expressed through his writings the joy of marital intimacy with his wife, Sonia, and the depths of despair in marital conflict and separation. It is in his great work *Anna Karenina* that he gives his treatise on marriage and family. Written in 1875, at a time when European aristocracy was seeing marriage as passé and even silly, he presented a view of human life that is made meaningful through the experience of marriage and family relationships. To Tolstoy, the DNA of civil society was a successful marriage that could provide illumination on life so to prevent tragedy from creating despair, and bliss from creating naiveté.

We, like Tolstoy have a high view of marriage and family, and a view that the Christian faith has a unique significance in understanding the potential of relational life. Furthermore, we believe that the effectiveness of the counselor, psychologist, therapist and pastor who seeks to bring aid to families

or couples in crisis is better equipped when he or she can utilize the central themes of the Christian tradition with the best practices drawn from mental health theory, research and technique. In this first chapter we seek to articulate how the great themes of biblical Christianity—creation, fall, redemption and glorification—interacts with the essential challenges of marital and family existence: *family function, family identity* and *family relationship.*

Defining the Range and Reach of Family Relationship

There is much discussion today about the family—about what makes up a family, who counts as family, public policies to support the family, family values and so on. It is humbling to think of writing about a Christian understanding of the family because there is so much discussion and debate associated with the topic. Any strong claims today seem to leave some people feeling like they do not belong or have any place, and yet not saying anything of substance about something as important as the family seems like no viable alternative to us either.

We would like to begin with a discussion of a biblical view of the family. By this we mean to ask what we can know about the family based upon a reading of Scripture. We must start with the essence of family that transcends culture, circumstances and time. The examination of the family cannot be limited to North America, the twenty-first century, or upper-middle socioeconomic class. The initial examination and understanding of family must begin with a "transcendent family," the basic-existence biological and sociological relationship that endures over time and across cultures.

When we look to the Old Testament for an initial understanding of the family, we find that the word used in Hebrew is *mišpāḥâ,* a word that "blurs the distinctions between family and tribe and between family and nation" (Moynagh, 1995, p. 372). It includes what contemporary Western culture thinks of as family, at least with respect to a nuclear family or family of origin, but also includes "servants, resident aliens *(gerim)* and stateless persons, widows and orphans, who [lived] under the protection of the head of the family" (Kingdon, 1988, p. 251).

In the New Testament the words for family include *patria,* a word suggesting a "group similar to subtribe in the Old Testament," and *oikos* or household (Williams, 1996, p. 245; see 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 1:16). According

to Williams, men in the New Testament were generally presumed by Paul to be the head of the household, although there are notable exceptions, such as Lydia and Nympha. Further, in the New Testament understanding, the kingdom of God corresponds to a family with God as Father (Gal 1:3-4), followers of Christ as children of God (1 Jn 3:1-2), and the idea that Gentiles are adopted into God's family (Rom 8:15) (Williams, 1996).

Family in the biblical narrative is a central organizing theme. The story line of the Old Testament develops around two types of family lineage. The first is through the lineage of Abraham in which Abraham and Sarah's heirs are the key actors in the depiction of God's sovereignty, God's judgment, God's mercy and, ultimately, God's faithfulness to the family with whom he made a covenant or promise.

The second family lineage is that of David and the subsequent kings of Israel and Judah. This "family story" describes the history of Israel and Judah through the lives of their leaders. The significance of this history is its culmination of God's promise to David that the messiah would come through his descendants (2 Sam 7:10-13; 1 Chron 17:11-14; 2 Chron 6:16).

The storyline of the New Testament does not follow a family lineage in the same manner as the Old Testament. First, marriage and family are frequent metaphors to describe God's relationship with his people, Jewish and Gentile. Second, family is also the organizing metaphor to define the nature of relationships between members of the church community in which the followers of Jesus are described as members of one family.

As these references in the Old and New Testaments suggest, it is best to draw conclusions about a biblical view of the family by locating the family in the broader narrative of Scripture. It seems to us that the overwhelming evidence in the Holy Scriptures is that the importance of family is found in their function, not in their structure. That is to say, the emphasis is on how families are engaged to complete God's redemptive theme with his people, rather than on what families are supposed to look like. Christians have historically recognized that there is a redemptive theme throughout Scripture, and we believe that it is this theme of redemption that must inform our discussion of the family. We also believe that such a redemptive focus provides us with a balanced view of the family—one that neither overvalues nor undervalues the family. This balance is achieved when we locate the topic of redemption by thinking

of the family with reference to the four “acts” of the biblical “drama”: creation, fall, redemption and glorification.

Creation

It is in the creation narrative in Genesis that we first read about humanity: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’” (Gen 1:26). The story of creation also tells us that human beings “have no independent existence” (Erickson, 2001, p. 168). We “came into being because God willed that [we] should exist, and acted to bring [us] into being” (p. 168). To be human is to be completely and utterly dependent upon God, whether or not we recognize it.

Also implicit in the notion of being made by God is an understanding that not only are we created by God and dependent on God but that *we are thus distinct from God.* As Jones and Butman (1991, p. 43) put it, “if we were made by God out of nothing, then *we are different from and separate from God,* though we are continually dependent on him as the ultimate ground of our very being.” The two notions of being distinct from God and being dependent on God are important considerations:

> For Christians, separateness from God and others is real and good. We belong in relationship to God and others, but this relatedness is not meant to consume and destroy our separateness. Union with God is a theme of Scripture, but nowhere are we taught that we cease being ourselves in the process of this union. (Jones & Butman, 1991, p. 43)

The separateness we experience in our relationship with God is seen in even the most intimate of human relationships. In marriage two persons become one but neither loses his or her personal identity. We will also see this in other family members as well: family members will participate in the life of the family and form a family identity, but each person will remain distinct and valuable in the eyes of God.

Not only are we distinct from God and our existence dependent upon God, but our *purpose* is dependent upon God as well. Our purpose, our value, all of it is derived from God. We will want to explore the idea of purpose and value a little later, but we want to suggest that purpose is first found within the context of our family of origin.

Further, God’s creational intent for human relations was to place hu-

man beings in a family by bringing man and woman together in monogamous union (Gen 2:21-24). As Kingdon (1988) puts it, "it is evident that the family unit is a basic part of the structure of creation. From the beginning it is God's purpose that mankind should increase by families, not as isolated individuals" (p. 251).

It should be noted that human beings also bear the image of God *(imago Dei),* and that while there are a number of proposed meanings for how human beings image God, one proposed understanding of how human beings image God—a model espoused by Karl Barth and Emil Brunner—deals specifically with our capacity for relationships. It is actually that we are made male and female, and that this gender difference, the diversification itself, was seen by Barth as a way in which we bear the image of God (Jones & Butman, 1991). That we are gendered selves also suggests we relate to one another as gendered beings, and in the context of heterosexual marriage human beings become one with one another as gendered selves: "We image God in his inner oneness by our capacity to become one with another who is separate and different from us, our spouse" (p. 48).

It is commonly noted that two major themes emerge from the creation story: responsible dominion and loving relatedness (Jones & Butman, 1991, p. 48). Responsible dominion refers to our vocations and callings, and it is primarily through our relationships and work settings that we show ourselves to be stewards of what God has given us.

Loving relatedness refers to ways in which we image God in our capacity for meaningful relationships, as suggested above. The most intimate relationship is that of marriage, but other meaningful relationships have a great capacity for closeness and intimacy and also reflect this love and sharing in a relational context. In fact, the "relational view" of the image of God is not just that human beings have this capacity for relationships, but that the image of God is the relationship itself: "We are said to be in the image or to display the image when we stand in a particular relationship. In fact, that relationship *is* the image" (Erickson, 2001, p. 173).

We have begun to suggest ways to think about the family in light of creation. And we want to extend this discussion by raising questions for our consideration. For example, *What was God's creational intent in placing human beings in families?* Certainly there is the obvious purpose of procreation: that families are the relationships through which human beings bear

children and raise them as members of a culture or society. So families are a good of creation and are the means by which the human family is extended through generations.

Families are also the first relationships by which we image God. If we recognize the relational view of the image of God, then the relationships formed in our families of origin are based upon our capacity for loving relatedness and image God as an aspect of the very relationships formed therein.

Jack and Judith Balswick (2007) discuss this idea of imaging God through our family relationships by referring to this as a trinitarian perspective on the family. They draw upon the Christian concept of the Trinity—the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit—to argue for certain qualities and characteristics in family life. For example, they suggest that a husband and wife join and become one in marriage but also retain their individuality, in a way that is comparable to "God being one, yet composed of three distinct persons" (p. 18).

Anderson and Guernsey (1985) develop the theme of covenant to explain family relationships as both social and derived from divine love by God for his people. We will return to this in our discussion of redemption.

We also know that families have been affected by the Fall. While families reflect God's creational intent, they also reflect the reality of our fallen condition. We turn now to a discussion of the Fall and the implications for family relationships.

The Fall

We have seen the importance of loving relatedness and responsible dominion as understood from creation. But the created good is also tarnished by the Fall. Christians recognize that sin entered into humanity through the Fall. Human beings are now confronted with sin and guilt and depravity (Erickson, 2001).

Sin is evident in many ways. It is both a condition and the behaviors that express that condition. As a state or condition, it affects all of creation. There are no aspects of the created order that go untouched by the Fall. Indeed, even the natural world labors under the weight of this fallen state (Rom 8:22). We will return to this momentarily, but sin certainly affects the family and the relationships therein.

At the level of the individual, we see evidence of sin in our own divided will. Paul talks about his own struggle with the part of him that wants to obey God and the part of him that is drawn toward disobedience. This disobedience, this "missing the mark," is a split will that is expressed in what we do and what we fail to do. Our sinfulness can be expressed through our actions and through the failure to act.

When we think about the effects of the Fall on the family, we want to first recognize the unique place of the family in God's providence. As Kingdon (1988) suggests, the family is not only a part of God's creational intent but it is the means by which God communicates his covenant (p. 251). Recall that the covenant God makes with Abraham is to bless all people through his lineage. The family becomes a "theological as well as a biological and social structure" (p. 251).

Not only is the family the intended social relationship for humanity and the means by which the covenant promises are fulfilled, but it is also a place of both great provision and great risk to the vulnerable. It is important to consider ways in which the family and our understanding of the family are affected by the Fall. Distortions make it probable now to not only isolate and blame others but to make the family into an idol.

We can see the effects of sin on the family in many ways. There are the effects of others' sin on us. We see this within our own families. The incompleteness and sinfulness of others has an impact on us in our family relationships. Some people are raised in homes that have been damaging to them, in some cases through emotional, physical or sexual abuse. Although such abuses are not common, there is a sense in which what makes families so powerful in shaping experiences for good is that they are also capable of contributing to such significant pain.

There are also the effects of our own sin in our family relationships. We contribute to the ways in which our family relationships are not all that they could be. We can become focused on our own interests in ways that further distort or take advantage of relationships.

It was mentioned above that sin affects the very structures of creation, including the family. We can ask whether a family is functioning properly because we recognize that a family as a structure and as part of God's initial creational intent can sometimes be kept from functioning as it was intended.

Redemption

Thankfully, the biblical drama does not end with the Fall. God does not abandon us to our fallen condition. Rather, God set in motion a plan for the redemption of a chosen people. A Christian understanding of redemption extends beyond people, however, touching all of creation itself; all of the created order will be redeemed.

The plan of redemption can be traced to the period immediately after the Fall, but it comes to a culmination with the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is in this sense that the victory over sin is complete, and we begin to see more clearly the effects of that victory in the lives of those who trust in Jesus for their salvation. At the same time, the victory is not yet complete. We live in the "in-between times" as one theologian put it. We are in the "now" and the "not yet" of a life that is redeemed and set apart for God's purposes.

How do we see the work of redemption in the family? Let us begin by acknowledging with Anderson and Guernsey (1985) that while the family is a social unit, it "finds its quintessential form in the particular quality of divine love that was expressed through redemptive history" (p. 36). It is both the first form of community and is held together by the very covenant agreement that lays the foundation for redemptive history.

At a more applied level, we see in Scripture some moments of reflection on the family that can be important for our consideration. Again, we want to be cautious here. Scripture does not outline the steps we need to take to insure a better family life. It is not a manual for enhancing family life in contemporary society. However, in places we catch a glimpse of what families can be in the lives of believers.

We know that God's providence refers to his governing activity and fulfillment of his plan for various aspects of creation. God's providence extends throughout the universe and has been affirmed by Christians in relation to nature, animal creation, human history and the rise and fall of nations, and the events in the lives of individual persons (Erickson, 2001).

In some ways the family can be seen as a providential structure of creation. God's continuing work of providence is probably most readily experienced by most people through the family. The family, while incomplete and fallen, is still a structure that is part of God's provision to care for and

provide a place for persons to grow into greater maturity and (ideally) to learn about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The various models of family therapy discussed in part two of this book are theories for how to best understand family functioning by identifying what is dysfunctional in a family that is presenting for counseling services. These models then offer a map of some kind to guide the family toward better functioning. They cast a vision of sorts for how to improve family relationships. We can recognize this as redemptive work, but we want to think carefully about what each theory is saying about family functioning, family dysfunction and ways to bring about change in the family.

Glorification

The story of creation, the fall and redemption will come to a crescendo with Jesus' return. Christians refer to this as glorification, the fourth act of the biblical drama. As Erickson (2001) indicated, glorification can be considered for the individual, for the Christian community and for all of creation.

It is interesting to consider the implications of glorification for the family. Perhaps an understanding of glorification will help to confirm why the church is "first family" and should not be idolized on this side of heaven.

Jesus was once asked about marriage in heaven. The purpose of the question was to trick Jesus by having him comment on a theological topic that had been a point of division among religious leaders of that day. But for our purposes what is particularly interesting is Jesus' claim that there would not be giving and taking of husbands and wives in heaven. Does this mean that there is no marriage in heaven? No. Rather, marriage will not exist between two human beings as we understand marriage today—marriage will be between the church, the bride of Christ, and Jesus, the bridegroom.

It is in this sense that we all will be married to Jesus in heaven. Such an understanding might inform how we approach our understanding of marriage today, that is, that again while family is important for a number of reasons that include procreative purposes, it is not our first identity. Our primary identity is that we are part of a body that is itself wed to Christ. Single or married, we are all part of the Bride, and we are to find our primary identity in that standing.

A Redemptive Focus

If we were to summarize the many characteristics of the Christian view of the family, we might want to examine and apply to families the Hebrew concept of *shalom*. To facilitate our understanding of the concept of shalom, we draw on the Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, who, in his book *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (1983), developed his understanding of shalom as a kind of undercurrent throughout his book.

Shalom as a kingdom principle has to do with living in proper relationship with God, with oneself, with others, and with nature or one's physical surroundings. For the family, we begin by living in right relationship with God, which means we take delight in God and we come to have a heart for the things God has a heart for. According to Wolterstorff, shalom involves "right harmonious relationship to God and delight in his service" (1983, p. 70). Wolterstorff shares this image with the reader: the prophets in Scripture speak of a time when humanity "will no longer flee God down the corridors of time . . . when they will no longer turn in those corridors to defy their divine pursuer . . . when humanity acknowledges that in its service of God is true delight" (p. 70). What a helpful image: that humanity is running down this corridor and fleeing God. If we do anything, it is to turn to defy God. We do this in our families, too. In other words, families are not exempt from the effects of the Fall. And we can live in our families in ways that essentially defy who God is and what his purposes are in our lives. The prophets, then, are speaking of a time when this will no longer happen. And God, in his mercy, let's us begin to delight in service to him today. So we want to begin thinking about families in terms of how we may be of service to God, how we might delight in such service in our families.

In addition to delight in relationships with God and with ourselves, shalom includes "right harmonious relationships to other *human beings* and delight in human community" (p. 70). According to Wolterstorff, shalom is not achieved when we act like "a collection of individuals all out to make [our] own way in the world" (p. 70). This speaks to the call on us to address injustices and oppression, to live in right relationship to others, and, beyond this, it means to enjoy and delight in one another (p. 70). So as you position yourself in the world, in your professional role, and as you continue to establish supports and meaningful relationships with others,

ask yourself this, *How will what I do and the way I do it reflect delight in relationships with others in my family?*

In terms of nature or delight in our physical surroundings, we are talking about what happens when we "shape the world with our labor and find fulfillment in so doing and delight in its results" (Wolterstorff, 1983, p. 70). We see the family as a place for labor and investment of self and time and relationships, and we would want family members to be able to delight in their family life together, in the home they share. We would want the relationships formed in the home to reflect a kind of fulfillment that family members each experience as they came to a deeper and more meaningful understanding of God's call on their lives. So family members might ask themselves, *How will what I do and the way I do it in my family lead to fulfillment and reflect delight in service of others in the name of Jesus?*

To speak of redemption is to necessarily speak to the created good of human relationships as well as the fallen state in which we live and relate to one another and the future humanity moves toward. When we talk about helping families move in a better direction, we are recognizing that there was some creational intent to how we were to relate in families and that those ways of relating are incomplete and partial after the Fall. But the ways we are to relate also point to something beyond our here-and-now relationships, to transcendent reality that is both now and soon to come.

Reflecting Redemption: Family Functioning, Identity and Relationships

We will discuss a redemptive focus with reference to three considerations of importance to Christians and to the field of family therapy. These are *family functioning, family relationships* and *family identity.* We want to express our appreciation for the work of Mark McMinn and Clark Campbell, whose book, *Integrative Psychotherapy,* was helpful to us insofar as they developed the themes of function, structure and relationship as aspects of the *imago Dei.* We extend those meanings to incorporate our discussion of the family from a Christian perspective. We then use these reference points in our Christian critique and engagement of the various models of family therapy and specific family therapy concerns in parts two and three of this book, respectively.

Family functioning. When we consider family functioning we are looking at how models of family therapy suggest that families ought to

function. While it is common within the Christian domain to discuss and debate family structure—such as the egalitarian vs. complementarian view of marriage, our intent is to move beyond that limiting dialogue and discuss marriage and family function as it relates to the broader themes described earlier—creation, fall, redemption and glorification. We want to come to a fuller and more complete understanding of what the various models suggest is the best way for a family to function in light of the family's kingdom mission. We believe that each model of family therapy makes either an explicit or implicit claim about how families ought to function and ways that functioning can be improved through participation in family therapy.

Families that function under optimal circumstances are prone to fewer tensions and greater success, satisfaction and opportunities. Likewise, families that function under duress are prone to conflict, violence, separation, divorce, and mental and physical health ailments. We would also be remiss if we failed to note the obvious: healthy, functional families are good for adults and children alike. The data is overwhelming that both men and women are more likely to thrive and prefer to be in families. In a seminal meta-analytic study of 130 empirical investigations of the effect of marital status on human well-being, Coombs (1991) found that marital status was a significant predictor of physical health and personal well-being. Both men and women, when connected to others in a secure, stable, trustworthy environment with those they love and are loved by are more likely to live longer, with fewer negative health problems, to manage their health problems with stronger resources, and report a higher level of satisfaction in every stage of life (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). In other words, it is the function of love, trust, security, honestly, vulnerability, stability and so on within family relationships that has an effect on both the psychological and physical well-being of its members.

It is also true that adults tied intimately to families report less sleep, less free time, less financial resources to spend on themselves, more necessity to compromise in vital decisions. The summation of the data suggests that family remains, for most adults, a commitment that stretches and enriches them, that drains and renews them.

The data also indicates that successful marriages and thriving families are the result of relational skills demonstrated routinely in the small challenges of life and exhibited extraordinarily in the face of the severity of

life challenge (see Blankenhorn, 2007). Furthermore, every marriage and every family, despite its heritage and pedigree of generations of success, is challenged, threatened and taxed to the point of collapse. Coping with crises brought on by death, disease, economic calamity, childhood wounding, sexual infidelity, natural disaster and so forth is reported by many to be the greatest challenge faced in life. Enter the marriage and family therapist. The pages of this book are aimed at assisting those gifted with the care of people who have injuries to the space between themselves and their most needed and cherished others.

How would a family functioning as God intends relate, and how might we help existing families more closely approximate functioning most closely associated with Christianity? The bulk of this book will explore, then, how well existing models of family theory reflect these assumptions, as well as how well they direct families toward these kinds of qualities and characteristics. At the close of part two of the book, we will turn to whether there is a distinctively Christian approach to the therapy Christians provide to families.

The presence of family function within each theory can be ascertained by the expressed focus articulated by the theory, that is to say, the aspect of family functioning that the theory focuses upon. Those theories that have as their immediate goal explicit functional characteristics will tend to emphasize the immediate containment of negative characteristics that are having an effect on family functioning and operation. In the same way, approaches that are oriented toward function will emphasize the presence of behavioral characteristics and values that are exhibited in the present which indicate healthy functioning. For example, a healthy functioning family will have effective communication as a characteristic. Therefore, a family theory that possesses a strong affinity for the function or impact of words would focus a noticeable amount of time toward developing positive communication skills and eliminating destructive communication patterns.

So we want to ask, *What is valued in each particular model or theory of the family? How do we know when a family is not functioning as it should? What map should a family follow to function better?*

Family relationships. When we consider family relationships we are talking about how family members ought to relate to one another. *What do these relationships look like? How is the "space between" members of a family defined?* Each model of family therapy prescribes something about how family members ought to relate. Thinking relationally

rather than individually brought about the "systems revolution" that led to the formation of the marriage and family profession. Each theory, to varying degrees, has defined itself through the manner in which it addresses issues that emerge relationally—that is, between people, rather than intra-psychically.

Scripture does not offer a comprehensive view of family relationships. But we do see directives to parents to instruct their children in Deuteronomy and instructions to families in Leviticus. We see other glimpses of family life throughout Scripture. Of course, many examples are not held up as models for family functioning. One does not turn to the story of Cain and Abel or of Jacob and his brothers as models of sibling relationships. But when we read of Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1:16-18), for example, we are moved by Ruth's commitment to the family of her deceased husband. Or when we read about Timothy's upbringing, we are reminded by Paul that he is indebted to his mother for his knowledge and character in Christ (2 Tim 1:5). We also read about mutual regard and love toward one another in marriage (Eph 5:21-33).

Tragically, our culture provides messages, themes, values and expectations that run counter to efforts at relational resilience and success. The devotion of Ruth to Naomi in the Bible provides an example of this commitment:

> Where you go, I will go;
> Where you lodge, I will lodge;
> your people shall be my people,
> and your God my God.
> Where you die, I will die—
> there will I be buried.
> May the LORD do thus and so to me,
> and more as well,
> if even death parts me from you! (Ruth 1:16-18)

We need to be reminded that Ruth's commitment was not to marriage, but to the family of her deceased husband. The tie between her and Naomi was a volitional one. She married the family, and to that family she would remain, even after the commitment of marriage was legally dissolved.

We enter into a discussion of family relationships cautiously. Just as we want to recognize diverse views as to what constitutes a Christian view of

the family, we also want to recognize various understandings of distinctively Christian family relationships.

We agree with Roberts (1993) when he wrote:

> to love God with all one's heart and one's neighbor as oneself is what it *is* to be a fully functioning, fully formed, healthy person. This is what the Christian Word about persons tells us, and it is by this Word that Christians interpret themselves and so become formed as selves. (p. 12)

The questions in the present analysis include the following: *How ought family members relate to one another to aid in the forming of us as "fully functioning, fully formed, healthy" persons who love God and neighbor and self?* If a family were facilitating this formative process—and we believe families either do facilitate this kind of fully functioning personhood or they approximate it to one extent or another and in some cases fail altogether—how would family members be relating to one another?

Although not exhaustive, we believe family relationships would begin with acknowledging *dependence upon God.* Family relationships—relating to one another in the context of daily family life—lead to vulnerability, and vulnerability can lead us to greater dependence upon God (Roberts, 1993).

Christian family relationships also reflect a kind of dependence upon God that brings the Christian to an understanding that they are to follow God's leadership through studying and implementing God's revealed will. Further, God leads families and places parents in a position in this world to be the central figures in enacting that leadership in ways that are in keeping with God's will. Parents are to turn to God as a source for guidance, wisdom and discernment.

This very act of following God and relating to God models for family members how they are to think about their relationship to others in the family. Most family theories have neglected the role of the individual, perhaps to some extent in response to the focus on the individual found in the medical model and much of psychology. And in these contexts, mental health has often focused narrowly or exclusively on the self as the unit of concern and sought to actualize the potential of the self, often with respect to one's own interests and desires. A Christian view would begin by anchoring this sense of self in relation to God, because the Christian claims that self-actualization is a word that is too "thin" to stand within the Christian tradition. To actu-

alize one's self and one's potential means to take delight in one's standing as created in God's image and for his purposes, for his service.

A Christian view of the family also extends far beyond the interconnectedness so often underscored in systems theory. A Christian view recognizes that systems approaches simply describe the reality that family members are interrelated in such a way that changes to one person will affect the others in the system. Of course this is true, but it is also a "thin" view of our relatedness. A Christian understanding of interrelatedness speaks to the ontological reality of our family relationships. We can begin to see our true "self" only in relation to others, and the family provides a social context in which we are to come to know and relate to others and learn more about ourselves.

In one sense we do not have to be in a family to experience this. As Roberts (1993) reminds us, the apostle Paul writes of how the Christian suffers when others suffer and rejoices when others rejoice (1 Cor 12:26). However, the family provides us with the earliest opportunities to experience this interconnectedness that is found in our relationships to others precisely because of a more fundamental relationship that we share together in relation to God as our Creator.

A Christian view of family connectedness will also recognize the importance of *mutuality,* in which family members have obligations to one another made important because of the covenant made in relation to God. The valuing of mutuality has been mentioned by other authors, such as Jack and Judith Balswick (2007), who see it as necessarily tied to the trinitarian perspective mentioned earlier.

Perhaps it is in the context of valuing mutuality that we can say that we find ourselves valuing improved communication and problem-solving in families—not in and of themselves, but as expressions of mutuality. We want to see families know how to listen to and affirm one another. There is also a sense in which all families are made up of fallen and incomplete individuals, and conflicts will be an inevitable part of relationships in a family context.

But in addition to mutuality, the Christian also sees the value of *self-denial,* a concept not often discussed in contemporary models of family therapy. But the Christian sees within family life an opportunity to grow into maturity by seeing one's worth in relation to God and ultimately as part of the larger family of God. In this the Christian learns that what he

or she wants is not ultimately the measuring stick of what he or she ought to have or has some claim to in this life. Rather, personal wants and desires are always subject to the larger purposes of God, and the Christian family can be a training ground for the kind of denial of one's personal wants that opens the door to greater maturity in Christ. It is precisely because I am in relationship with others and with God that I might say *no* to my own interests on behalf of another and out of obedience to God.

The family as seen through a Christian lens also models *perseverance* or *resilience*. Marriage and family life is difficult. While a competing view might look at familial ties as potential obstacles to personal satisfaction, a Christian view recognizes that it is precisely through these conflicts that family members both witness and model perseverance. Roberts (1993) reminds us, "child rearing is an excellent school for learning virtues like patience and self-control" (p. 223). So is marriage, for that matter. A Christian understanding of the family recognizes that family relationships provide unique opportunities to grow in virtues that ought to characterize us as persons. Indeed, "Christian teaching emphasizes that living *through* one's trials with God's help makes one into a mature person, builds Christian character" (p. 37). But it takes a certain amount of perspective-taking to identify opportunities to grow in patience and self-control, among other virtues.

An understanding that we live "between the times" also helps us have realistic expectations for families. They exist in a fallen world, and they are comprised of individual members who are likewise fallen. So it should come as no surprise that Christian family therapists might find presenting problems both in the individual and as a result of patterns of relating among family members.

The only sure thing when it comes to something that can be trusted is the God who made us. Even the healthiest of families can only offer so much by way of security:

> Since Christianity regards human nature not just as relational but as God-related, we are freed to acknowledge that there is much in life to be anxious and distrustful about, even if our family members are as trustworthy as humans can be expected to be. Christian realism about the likelihood of finding security within the bounds of earthly relationships reveals the need for a trusting relationship with one who is trustworthy even when all else in life has fallen apart. (Roberts, 1993, p. 94)

Finally, we see Christian relationships as characterized by *integrity*. Family members are in this sense to be responsible to one another. This means, among other things, that family members make commitments and honor those commitments, taking seriously their family tasks, roles and responsibilities (Jones & Butman, 1991). In this sense the family becomes a place in which early efforts to be honest, responsible and faithful can be understood and enacted.

In our own cultural context we see value in encouraging the qualities mentioned above so that they come to characterize families in contemporary society. We are not saying that these family qualities are clearly derived from Scripture and hence applicable to all families at all times. Rather, they are principles that seem consistent with God's revealed will in Scripture and also relevant and applicable to our cultural context. This is not an exhaustive list, and it is certainly conceivable that other qualities might come to the foreground in other cultural contexts.

Family identity. Identity refers to definition. It refers to how we are characterized and recognized by our distinction and uniqueness. When we consider family identity we are referring to the role a family plays in ordering the world. Families provide individuals with definition and identity—a sense for who they are and what ultimately matters in life. Whether they acknowledge it or not, each model of family therapy suggests ways to make sense of the world; each family shapes the way individuals within the family come to understand themselves and the world around them.

As Moynagh (1995) suggests, Jesus was brought up in a home that modeled what would have been expected of families throughout the Old Testament, that is, "His parents successfully pass on to him the faith" (p. 373). There is a real sense in which family identity will be founded upon what it means to be a Christian. This is not merely intellectual assent to doctrines about the person and work of Christ, although it certainly can mean a deeper valuing of Christian doctrine, but it also means a life together in which family members relate to one another *as Christians* and by doing so create a larger more encompassing family identity as followers of Christ.

As good as families are, we also want to recognize a perspective that is quite unique to a Christian worldview, but one that is lost on many Christians today. That is, the people of God, the body of Christ, are to be considered our "first family," as Clapp (1993) put it. Clapp actually makes two

declarations, one negative and the other positive. The negative declaration regarding the family is that

> The family is not God's most important institution on earth. The family is not the social agent that most significantly shapes and forms the character of Christians. The family is not the primary vehicle of God's grace and salvation for a waiting, desperate world. (p. 66)

The positive declaration is this:

> The church is God's most important institution on earth. The church is the social agent that most significantly shapes and forms the character of Christians. And the church is the primary vehicle of God's grace and salvation for a waiting, desperate world. (pp. 66-67)

While we agree with much of what Clapp is saying here, we might place our emphasis on how the family is to be valued by Christians—not for its own sake—but in part because the Christian family is one part of the larger body of Christ and a part of the church. It is the part that provides stability and role modeling, love and nurturance, boundaries and consequences, and so much more. Lessons learned early in life in the family are then played out over and over again in the life of the believer in the context of the larger body of Christ.

In the end, the biological family, while so important in so many different ways, is not ultimately the most important institution in and of itself. It is *part* of the most important institution, that is, the church. God, through the covenant made with his people in the Old Testament, essentially establishes the primacy of those who follow him, and Jesus confirms that priority throughout the New Testament. The bride of Christ, the church, becomes "first family" to those who find salvation in Jesus.

This understanding of the family has tremendous implications—for those who are married and for those who are single. For example, for married persons it means that we may relate to one another in marriage and to children in the family, but that those relationships all occur as a microcosm of the larger relationships we sustain in the body of Christ. We are not family in isolation; rather, we are family interconnected to others who are also part of the larger body of Christ.

This view of first family also has implications for those who are single. Although we will not be able to address this in great detail, it is important to affirm that Christian singles are "first-class" citizens of the most im-

portant institution established by God to further his purposes. The local church can fail to communicate this truth and live it out when singles are made to feel that they are "second-class" citizens because they do not exist in the family form that is idealized in many church contexts.

The question we want to ask about family identity is *What does it mean to form a family life together as Christians? How do we understand our family identity in relation to the larger community of believers?*

In Closing: A Lesson from Father Stanley

N-IV-16: it stands for North of the Cross, row 4, 16 graves in from the aisle. It is the burial site of Father Stanley Vesely at St. Procopius Abbey, in Lisle, Illinois. He was not famous—except that there is a baseball field named in his honor. There is really no reason for you to have ever heard of him. He was no authority on marriage, family, psychology or counseling such that he should be noted in a marriage and family text. All but 14 of his 89 years were lived in a monastery. That hardly qualifies him for the opening chapter to a textbook on counseling families. But maybe, imbedded somewhere in his life's story was evidence of the key principle for successful relationship. We suggest that Father Stanley's life represents a model for family and for the treatment of families that is fundamental to the purpose of this book, the purpose of our work with couples and families, and your purpose in studying how to assist them to thrive in relationship together.

In 1927 Stanley entered seminary with the intention to become a priest. Behind the church was a cemetery. Being the master of pun, he would say with a smile that at age 14, "I entered the cemetery . . . I mean seminary." In truth, he entered the service of God, and he made the decision to intentionally, purposefully join others in relationships that would shape his character and identity in significant ways. There, amidst the trees and headstones, he declared to God that this place would be where he would live and serve and die and be buried. That decision, and the thousands of decisions to follow through on that initial commitment, would shape who he became in the context of the relationships to which he committed himself. In 2003, 76 years after making that promise, it was completed.

Father Stanley possessed a mental frame that was unusual in his day—and rare in ours. It was one in which the dedication of self toward an institution and toward others surpassed a love for self. It is this dedication

of self toward institutions and toward others that we want to highlight as critical for our understanding of families today. We see successful married relationship as patterned after Father Stanley's triumphant life. "Here is where I will dedicate my life, and these people will be those to whom I serve, and allow to serve me." Marriage, in our frame, is most likely to thrive when the mentality of lifelong commitment is made toward each other. It is as if we are saying, "I will die here, with you holding me at age 89, after a life of service." This dedication, this frame, informs so many decisions in our day-to-day lives, and as a couple raises a family, the decision, the frame, continues to be a resource that informs decision making for the life of family relationships.

Such a life commitment, made at 14, 24, 44 or 64, will be difficult. One can only imagine the sadness that Father Stanley experienced with the comparison of his life path to those of his peers and extended family. He would know of others who made different choices than he made; whose lives were fulfilled by the choices they made and that perhaps part of him would have wanted to make, but did not. The weights from our life choices are a heavy burden at times, sometimes because of the difficulties encountered because of those choices, other times simply because the choices also represent closing doors to other ways to live, other opportunities for growth. It is common to make comparisons. Singles compare their lives and dreams to those who are married. Married couples compare their lives to singles and to other couples. Family members make comparisons as they think about other couples and their children and the values and priorities and experiences of others. Who hasn't struggled when reading through an end-of-the-year Christmas letter from a family that seems to have made the best choices and have had the best experiences imaginable?

Couples also come to us, and will come to you, along with their families wanting assistance with their burdens that emerge with life commitments. The choice to join with another in forming a family is one that will bring pain which can be severe and frequent. Just as many must have aided Father Stanley in his commitment to keep his vows to God, so you and we aid families in maintaining theirs.

Such an understanding of the family brings us back to Father Stanley because the qualities and characteristics of the family will likely be reflected in the intentional, purposeful ways we are to relate to one another as believers. As Father Stanley made his vow to live intentionally with oth-

ers and they with him, we can look at how we are to live with one another in committed, purposeful relationships we refer to as family. So we come to the question, *To what end are we seeking a redemptive focus in our work with families?*

Conclusion

Our intent in this opening chapter is to create an image of marriage and family that is not often articulated within most family therapy textbooks. In these opening pages we hope to cast a vision from a redemptive perspective as to what the family can be. We fully respect the restraint required of us as professional clinicians to not dictate or manipulate others who come to us for assistance toward directions that they wish not to go—such as refusing to work with a family because the adults see their relationship as being temporal while we see it as something that should be enduring. However, we are under no obligation to uncritically embrace the maps that guide us in assisting families, particularly when they do so based upon the assumption that they are merely temporal. Our goal is to offer a text that critically engages the existing models of family therapy and begins to cast a vision for a distinctively Christian understanding of the family and of ways to support and sustain families in their many forms.

We recognize that there is no one perspective on the family with which all Christians will agree. But we give general consideration that we believe many if not most Christians will agree and then ask for grace from those who might emphasize other considerations that we chose not to add to this present discussion.

We look at Scripture and see that God works in so many different forms of family toward his purposes. This is the redemptive focus of this book. God may have in mind a family form from creation, but he also recognizes our fallen condition and, because of the redemptive work of his Son, Jesus, he is at work in our lives however broken they may be.

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