

The Family in Early Christianity: "Family Values" Revisited

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FOR SEVERAL YEARS NOW, "family values" have come to represent a volatile substance deposited at the crossroad between American politics and religion, with the Bible as the fuel waiting to be ignited.¹ "Biblical" family values, sometimes also known as "the American way of life," convey an aura of tranquility, respectability, and moral rectitude: everyone knows where he belongs and what God wants him to do, and everyone is therefore content, as go the lines of a familiar chorale, "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world." But we know that all is not right with the world, least of all in families, with

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¹ See "Whose Family Values Are They, Anyway?" *New York Times*, Sunday, August 6, 1995, 4.1, 3. Some moderate attempts to address the situation at the level of public policy are D. Browning, "Re-Building the Nest: Families and the Need for a New Social Agenda," *Just Reading* 3 (Melbourne: Catholic Commission for Justice, Development and Peace, 1994) 1-12; D. Browning and C. Browning, "Better Family Values." *Christianity Today* 39 (1995) 29-32; J. Wall, "The New Middle Ground in the Family Debate: A Report on the 1994 Conference of the Religion, Culture, and Family Project," *Criterion* 33/3 (1994) 24-31.

talk of orphanages instead of foster care and withdrawal of welfare to mothers and children, and with slogans of "children having children" and "children killing children" which have become familiar. In Chicago, for instance, the *Chicago Tribune* for two years ran a front-page series called "Killing Our Children," which chronicled the violent deaths of children in the city.

Can we as Catholic biblical scholars make any contribution to this anguished situation from our own expertise? In view of the massive upheavals and uncertainties about family life today, it is not surprising that some would prefer a return to what is perceived to be a traditional, and supposedly safer, ethic.² But are the so-called biblical family values that are promised as a remedy really all that biblical? Which is more biblical, "Wives be submissive to your husbands as to the Lord" (Eph 5:21) or "Whoever loves father or mother or son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt 10:37)?

THERE IS A FUNDAMENTAL TENSION in the NT portrait of the family. The famous household codes are the lightning rod for an ethos of peaceful domestic existence in which all members acknowledge their position and responsibilities in an atmosphere of mutual love and deference.³ Since this harmony is based on Hellenistic teaching and Roman sensibilities about the ordering of domestic life as model for public life, the ethos of the private household extends to church community life and civic responsibility as well. Thus, all are to reverence one another as fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers (1 Tim 5:1; 1 Pet 5:5), and ecclesial authority is to be exercised in paternal style, as one would rule one big, happy household (1 Tim 3:2-7).⁴

On the other hand, the sayings and deeds attributed to Jesus about family life are not very reassuring for those who would hold the above picture as normative. In Luke, a precocious twelve-year-old Jesus begins the pattern by seemingly being totally insensitive to parental worry while he fledges his

² Such nostalgia is hardly new. Tacitus (*Dial.* 28) laments that "in the good old days" (*pridem*), every child was legitimate and raised by its mother, who "could have no higher praise than that she managed the house and gave herself to her children" (W. Peterson's translation, *Tacitus: Dialogus, Agricola, Germania* [LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946] 89).

³ Col 3:12-4:6; Eph 5:21-6:9; 1 Pet 2:13-3:7; also 1 Tim 2:8-15, *passim*; Titus 2:2-10.

⁴ The literary relationship of the NT household codes to the Hellenistic topos on household management is now well known. See D. L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (SBLMS 26; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1981); *idem*, "Household Codes," *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament: Selected Forms and Genres* (SBLBS 21; ed. D. E. Aune; Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1988); *idem*, "Neopythagorean Moralists and the New Testament Household Codes," *ANRW* 2/26/1. 380-411.

theological wings in the temple (Luke 2:41-51). Early in Mark's Gospel, Jesus' relatives come to fulfill their responsibility to care for an ailing member, to take him home because he was believed to be out of his mind (ἐξέστη, Mark 3:20).⁵ He responds by accusing them of the sin against the Holy Spirit, the deliberate misjudgment of the spirits (Mark 3:28-30).⁶ When they try again, his answer is a rejection of the demands of blood ties: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother."⁷ This is enough to drive the family away, for in the Synoptics they never appear again, in spite of the fact that they are well known in the locality (Matt 13:55-56 par. Mark 6:3; Luke 4:22; John 6:42). Luke, by giving Jesus' answer to the woman in the crowd who pronounces a blessing on his mother: "Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:27-28 par. *Gos. Thom.* 79),⁸ even adds to Jesus' lack of enthusiasm for his family.

In John, Jesus' family is present at Cana, where, according to some interpreters, he publicly rebuffs maternal authority, even though he accedes

⁵ H. Wansbrough ("Mark iii.21—Was Jesus Out of His Mind?" *NTS* 18 [1971-72] 233-35, taken up by D. Wenham, "The Meaning of Mark iii-21," *NTS* 21 [1975] 292-300) argues that it is not Jesus but the crowd that is out of its mind. This suggestion has not been widely accepted.

⁶ That the Beelzebul controversy applies to the family as well is rejected by some, but others agree. S. C. Barton (*Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew* [SNTSMS 80; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994] 75-77) gives "a qualified affirmative."

⁷ Mark 3:31-35 par. Matt 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21; *Gos. Thom.* 99; *Gos. Eb.* (Epiphanius *Pan.* 30.14.5). Note the softening of the rebuke in Luke 8:19-21; yet contrast Matt 10:37 and Luke 14:26, where Luke's language is stronger. An understandable reluctance to attribute historicity to this motif is noticeable, e.g., on the part of J. Gnlika, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (EKKNT 2; Zurich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978) 1.146, 152-53. I. Ellis, "Jesus and the Subversive Family," *SJT* 38 (1985) 173-88 defends Jesus' interest and participation in family, considering the supposed tension to be a misinterpretation. Most commentators, e.g., W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (THKNT 2; 7th ed.; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1977) 86-87; D. E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St. Mark* (Pelican Gospel Commentaries; New York: Penguin, 1963) 122-23, stress the focus on the disciples as the new community. Mark's portrayal of Jesus' family rejection is widely considered to be Marcan redaction, e.g., by J. D. Crossan, "Mark and the Relatives of Jesus," *NovT* 15 (1973) 81-113. J. Lambrecht, "The Relatives of Jesus in Mark," *NovT* 16 (1974) 241-58 revises some of Crossan's argument but still holds that Mark "changed a possible pre-Markan tension between Jesus and his relatives into explicit opposition" (p. 244); for Lambrecht, as for many, the passage is staged to highlight the teaching on discipleship. Whether the passage is historical or has been developed as contrast to the new family of disciples is not the point here; the point is rather the impact of the portrayal of Jesus on the next generations. On later traditions about the family of Jesus as believers, see H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament 2: History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 200; B. L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 91 n. 11.

⁸ Another way to read this exchange is the traditional reluctance to draw public attention to a respectable woman, who should be talked about in public only in praise after her death (cf. Plutarch *De mul. vir.* 242). But given the rest of the pattern of Jesus' treatment of his own family, this motivation does not seem primary.

to his mother's request.⁹ His brothers appear again five chapters later (John 7:3-5)—as unbelievers, which coheres with the Synoptic image. John's death scene features a rare moment of Jesus' concern for his otherwise rejecting family; here, his mother is present, and he is faithful to the end in his responsibility to provide for a widowed mother (John 19:25-27).

It is not that Jesus is portrayed as being insensitive to the religious requirements with regard to family. He quotes the fourth commandment to religious experts who would dodge its requirements (Matt 15:3-6 par. Mark 7:10-12) and considers it fundamental to a man who seeks to do more than the commandments require (Matt 19:19 par. Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20). He is aware of the kinds of situation that arise in family and household (two distinct terms for us that would translate the same words in Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, or Latin), and he uses them in his teaching. He understands the household dynamics of slaves who are both debtors and creditors in the story of the unmerciful servant (Matt 18:23-35), of slaves who make wise and foolish choices when their master is away (Matt 24:45-51 par. Luke 12:41-46), and of domestic slaves entrusted with a peculium, a sum of money to manage, in the parable of the talents or pounds (Matt 25:14-30 par. Luke 19:11-27). He uses the competitive dynamic between sons vying for a father's attention in two parables about two sons, one about their differing responses to the father's wishes (Matt 21:28-31), and the other about the dissolute son and his unforgiving elder brother (Luke 15:11-24).¹⁰ He also has to fend off an ambitious mother, "Mrs. Zebedee," who tries to broker patronage for the eschatological social advancement of her two sons (Matt 20:28-31).¹¹

The sayings on divorce attributed to Jesus have brought untold difficulties to the Christian community.¹² They are so ubiquitous and varied and

⁹ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 191; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 170-71; C. R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 11, 78, 215; F. J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 81. Biblical references and discussion of the unusual form of address can be found in R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* (New York: Seabury, 1980) I. 328.

¹⁰ Through an analysis of Greco-Roman literature on household management, W. Pohlinann (*Der Verlorene Sohn und das Haus: Studien zu Lukas 15,11-32 im Horizont der antiken Lehre von Haus, Erziehung, und Ackerbau* [WUNT 68; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1993]) argues that the story is meant to be a sweeping challenge to the orderly world of the household, for the father acts totally inappropriately and thus signals a change in the social order.

¹¹ For the role of the (elite) mother in pushing her sons' social advancement, see S. Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (London/New York: Routledge, 1988) esp. pp. 168-209.

¹² Matt 5:31-32; 19:3-12; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18; 1 Cor 7:10-16; Herm, *Man.* 4.1,6; cf. Mal 2:13-16. Cf. J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Matthean Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence," *TS* 37 (1976) 197-226; W. J. Harrington, "The New Testament and Divorce." *ITQ* 39 (1972) 178-87; P. Hoffmann, "Jesus' Saying about Divorce and Its Interpretation in the New

so distinct from their context that their basic content must be taken with utmost seriousness as historical. Here the authority of Jesus intrudes directly and in a startling way into family life.

Nor is Jesus portrayed as lacking in sensitivity to family suffering. In an age of high infant mortality he demonstrates compassion for distraught parents of sick children: the synagogue official with a dying daughter (Matt 9:18-26 par. Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-56), a royal official with a sick son (John 4:46-53), the widow at Nain (Luke 7:11-17) to whose plight Jesus responds without having to be asked (καὶ ὁ κύριος ἐσπλαγχνίσθη ἐπ' αὐτῆ [kai ho kyrios esplanchnisthē ep' autē] v 13); the Syrophenician or Canaanite woman with a sick daughter (Matt 15:21-28 par. Mark 7:24-30), and the father of an epileptically possessed boy (Matt 17:14-20 par. Mark 9:14-28; Luke 9:37-42). In Mark's version of this last story Jesus even inquires about the symptoms and is spurred on by the father's insistent and increasingly pitiful pleas. The scenes in which Jesus sets a child as example of qualifications for entry into the kingdom (Matt 18:1-5 par. Mark 9:36-37; Luke 9:48; *Gos. Thom.* 22) must be seen in light of the social situation of children at the time. The scene in which he takes children into his arms with blessing (Matt 19:13-15 par. Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17), long interpreted with reference to the baptism of children, should rather be seen over against the common practice of abandonment of infants, and with reference to the Jewish and Christian prohibition of this custom.¹³

So it would seem that Jesus is portrayed as a person who takes an interest in the family life of others, in spite of the way he seems to give up

Testament Tradition," *The Future of Marriage as an Institution (Concilium 5/6)*; ed. E Böckle; New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) 51-66; G. MacRae, "New Testament Perspectives on Marriage and Divorce," *Divorce and Remarriage in the Catholic Church* (ed. L. G. Wrenn; New York: Newman, 1973) 1-13; L. Sabourin, "The Divorce Clauses (Mt. 5:32; 19:9)," *BTR* 2 (1972) 80-86; B. Vawter, "Divorce and the New Testament," *CBQ* 39 (1977) 528-42; J. S. Kloppenborg, "Alms, Debt and Divorce: Jesus' Ethics in Their Mediterranean Context," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 6 (1990) 182-200.

¹³ A. van Aarde, "The *Evangelium Infantium*, the Abandonment of Children, and the Infancy Narrative in Matthew 1 and 2 from a Social Scientific Perspective," *God-With-Us: The Dominant Perspective in Matthew's Story and Other Essays* (Hervormde Teologiese Studies, Supplementum 5; Pretoria: Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika, 1994) 261-76. On children in the ancient Mediterranean world, see J. Pilch, "Beat His Ribs While He Is Young' (Sir 30:12): A Window on the Mediterranean World," *BTR* 23 (1993) 101-13; B. Rawson, "Children in the Roman *Familia*," *The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives* (ed. B. Rawson; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986) 170-200 (esp. on *alumni/ae* and *vernae*); T. Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1989); O. L. Yarbrough, "Parents and Children in the Letters of Paul," *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (ed. L. M. White and O. L. Yarbrough; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995) 126-41.

on his own. Yet the Synoptic passage Matt 19:27-29 par. Mark 10:28-30; Luke 18:28-30 encourages the disciples in their renunciation of "houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children, and fields" (Luke: "house, wife, brothers, parents, and children") for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, with the promise of an abundance in return. To be a disciple includes imitation of this pattern of Jesus to separate from family.

But the most difficult sayings about family that are attributed to Jesus in the Gospels warn of deep divisions within the family itself over the issue of discipleship. In the discourse on apostolic mission, Matthew's Jesus warns of persecutions and trials that could be seen as partly historical, partly eschatological. In that context, brother will betray brother, father child, and children parents (Matt 10:21), a dire prediction that Mark saves for his apocalyptic discourse (Mark 13:12).

Jesus' presence will inevitably bring divisiveness that strikes at the heart of household relationships, as he brings not peace but the sword (Matthew), or divisions (Luke). Micah 7:6 had lamented the breakdown of family loyalties, so that the enemy lay within the household. Echoing Micah, the Q passage has Jesus say without the slightest sign of regret that it is part of his mission to set son and father, daughter and mother, bride and mother-in-law against each other (Matt 10:34-36 par. Luke 12:51-53).¹⁴ Not only does his mission pit members of a household against each other but Jesus pits family love and loyalty against discipleship in a disturbing either/or dichotomy: whoever loves father, mother, son, or daughter more than Jesus is not worthy of him (Matt 10:37), or, in the rendition of Luke and *The Gospel of Thomas*, whoever does not hate father, mother, wife, children, brothers and sisters, and even one's own self cannot be Jesus' disciple (Luke 14:25-26 par. *Gos. Thom.* 55, 101).¹⁵ The one called to discipleship is not to look back to say good-bye (Luke 9:61) or even to bury a dead father, one of the most sacred duties of a son (Matt 8:21-22 par. Luke 9:59-60).

¹⁴ But see Luke 1:17, where an allusion to Mal 3:24 (4:6) suggests that part of John the Baptist's mission is to turn fathers' hearts to their sons—but not vice versa as the MT (but not the LXX) goes on to say. A. Milavec ("The Social Setting of 'Turning the Other Cheek' and 'Loving One's Enemies' in Light of the Didache." *BTS* 25 [1995] 131-43) suggests family intergenerational conflict as the historical setting for Matt 5:38-48; Luke 6:27-38; *Did.* 1.3-4.

¹⁵ U. Luz (*Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* [EKKNT 1; Zurich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990] 2. 140-42) speaks of reluctant priorities. D. A. Hagner (*Matthew 1-13* [WBC 33A; Dallas, TX: Word, 1993] 292) links Matt 10:37 to the family divisions in vv 35-36, so that v 37 means that neither the people nor the divisions can get in the way of discipleship. J. D. Crossan (*The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991] 299-302, but more strongly in *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994] 58-60) tries to make the case that the family divisions are deliberately intergenerational, so that the attack is on the exercise of hierarchical power in the family. But as Crossan acknowledges, Mark 3:35; 6:3; *Gos. Thom.* 55; 2 *Clem.* 9.11 also speak of siblings. On intergenerational conflict, cf. *Jub.* 23.16,19.

This deprioritizing of family for the sake of the gospel is to be seen within the tradition of a higher loyalty to philosophy in Graeco-Roman context, and to God in Jewish intertestamental literature, where a fear is manifested that for the sake of familial affection, the clear-sighted will be seduced into security, softness, and betrayal of their higher truth.¹⁶ This prioritization no doubt reflects the experience of many an early Christian, and not only in times of persecution, but the possibility cannot be excluded that within early Christian groups the attitude was fueled by their memory of it as a reflection of Jesus' own attitude toward the members of his family as well as theirs toward him. That Christian churches admitted to baptism on an individual basis persons, particularly married women, who were subordinate members of households is already documented in 1 Cor 7:13-16 and 1 Pet 3:1. Quite likely, some of the suffering for the sake of Christ alluded to elsewhere in 1 Peter (3:16-17; 4:1-4, 13-19) is related to this very point rather than to some outside source of persecution.¹⁷

But a comparison of 1 Pet 3:1-2 ("Wives, submit to your husbands, so that those who are not persuaded by the word will be won over without a word by your reverent and chaste behavior") with Mark 10:29-30 ("Anyone who has left house, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields . . . will receive now a hundredfold of houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields along with persecution, and eternal life in the next world") illustrates well the built-in tension. The wives of 1 Peter are told to "hang in there." The disciples of Mark are presumed already to have left.¹⁸

This is the fundamental tension of the biblical witness: does discipleship consist of the promotion of harmonious relationships within recognized social structures, even in the face of suffering, or does it consist in the jolting

¹⁶ See e.g., 4 Macc 2:10-13 "The Law takes precedence over benevolence to parents and will not betray virtue for their sake; it takes precedence over love for a wife and reproves her for transgression; it overrules love for children and punishes them for wrongdoing; and it exercises its authority over intimate relationships with friends and rebukes them for evil" (tr. H. Anderson, *OTP* 2. 546). Cf. *Jos. and Asen.* 11.4-6. Already Deut 13:6-11 had warned in the strongest terms against letting family lies seduce into pagan worship. For Philo, Josephus, Qumran, Cynics, and Stoics (cf. esp. Epictetus 3.3.5-10), see Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties*, 23-56; for further discussion of the Cynics, see A. J. Droge, "Call Stories in Greek Biography and the Gospels," *SBLSP*, 1983 (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983) 245-57; F. G. Downing, *Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and Other Radical Preachers in First-Century Tradition* (JSOT Manuals 4; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988); idem, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992).

¹⁷ M. Y. MacDonald ("Early Christian Women Married to Unbelievers," *SR* 19 [1990] 221-34), stresses both the importance of the household as mission center and the vulnerability of such wives if they were divorced by their husbands: if poor, they would be destitute and in need of church support; if prominent, they would be under outside social pressure to remarry.

¹⁸ One might question whether sexism is at work here: wives must grin and bear it, but no disciples in Mark's passage leave husbands. Within a century or so, however, that is exactly what the wives in the apocryphal acts are doing.

challenge that overturns and rejects our most cherished human relationships and structures, whether social or conceptual? It is not the conventional cleavage between law and spirit that we are talking about here, for there are claims to freedom in the Spirit and fulfillment of law on both sides. Nor is it adequate to pit the radical challenge attributed to Jesus and the Gospels against the seemingly more prosaic admonitions of the NT letters—give or take a historical Paul somewhere in the middle—because the potential for disruption of household order is also present, for example, in 1 Peter's reflection of a community's willingness to admit wives and slaves independently of patriarchal compliance (1 Pet 2:18; 3:1-2), and the tendency to harmony is implied in such passages as the Johannine love commandment (John 13:34-35; 15:12) or the Matthean exhortation to multiple forgiveness (Matt 18:21-22) and to reluctance to denounce a personal offender to the community, except as a last resort (Matt 18:15-17).¹⁹

Nearly the entire weight of modern NT scholarship assigns the final redaction of the Gospels to the period roughly contemporary with the production of the Deuteropauline letters and 1 Peter, which contain the best of the "family values" material of the NT. At the same time when some Christian authors are advocating harmonious family life conformable to patriarchal hierarchy, others attribute to Jesus seeming rejection of basic family loyalties and allegiances. The question must have presented itself to the first Christian generations after Jesus; How were they to be family in the Lord? By being living examples of *pietas*, or by following the example of Jesus and defying societal expectations of domestic harmony? Both messages must have been coming at them simultaneously, and the Gospel allusions to the breaking up of families must be taken seriously as a reflection of what was happening to many.

II

TO APPROACH AN UNDERSTANDING OF this problem, we must acquire some knowledge of the Christian experience of family in this period. To do that, we must also know something of family life in the world in which Christianity took root. Study of the Jewish family of the Greco-Roman period is still in its infancy,²⁰ as is direct study of the Christian family (except for study of the household codes and the house church, where good progress

¹⁹ For further discussion, see Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties*, 224-25.

²⁰ A fine early example is *The Jewish Family in Antiquity* (BJS 289; ed. S. J. D. Cohen; Atlanta: Scholars, 1993).

has been made).²¹ Study of the Roman family has been a major scholarly pursuit among ancient historians for some years. There is, of course, a huge discrepancy in the amount and character of the surviving evidence. In the case of the Roman family, there is an abundance of literary texts, not only prescriptive but also descriptive of the experience of specific individuals. The weakness of this evidence is that it reveals primarily the life of the elite. In addition to literary evidence, however, there is the spectacular archaeological evidence of such sites as Pompeii, Herculaneum, Ostia, and Ephesus, while the published inscriptions of funerary dedications from family members number in the many thousands. If we take Roman family life in the broadest sense to mean family life, not specifically Jewish or Christian, across the empire in the Roman period, the evidence includes vast papyrological resources and wider epigraphical collections.

For the Jewish family of the Greco-Roman period, there is a good amount of inscriptional and papyrological material, and an abundance of literary texts that describe, prescribe, and debate matters of family life—depending, of course, on the value of mishnaic texts for earlier years. But when it comes to the Christian family, we are at a distinct disadvantage in terms of the amount of available material. What we can know of the Christian family in its first two centuries must be inferred from a few literary texts of various genres, mostly prescriptive, and from the Greco-Roman domestic life which Christians must have shared with others. Only in the latter part of the third century does the evidence furnished by specifically Christian art, epigraphy, and papyrology begin to appear.²²

III

WHAT DID “FAMILY” MEAN to the inhabitants of the Mediterranean shores in the imperial period? Historians agree that whatever the term meant, it did not mean what it means to most modern Westerners. Hebrew בית, Greek

²¹ See P. A. Foulkes, "Images of Family Life in the Scriptures," *The Way* 32 (1992) 83-92 (on both Testaments); L. A. Hennessey, "Sexuality, Family, and the Life of Discipleship: Some Early Christian Perspectives," *Chicago Studies* 32 (1993) 19-31; P. Lampe, "'Family' in Church and Society of New Testament Times," *Affirmation* (Union Theological Seminary in Virginia) 5(1992) 1-20.

²² The only two locations in which pre-Constantinian Christian epitaphs occur in noticeable accumulations are Rome and central Anatolia. On Rome, see A. Ferrua, "L'epigrafia cristiana prima di Costantino," *Atti del IX Congresso internazionale di archeologia cristiana, Roma, 21-27 Settembre 1975* (Studi di antichità cristiana 32; Città del Vaticano: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1978) 1. 583-613. On Anatolia, see G. J. Johnson, *Early Christian Epitaphs from Anatolia* (SBLTT 35; Early Christian Literature Series 8; Atlanta: Scholars, 1995), who observes (p. 1) that "the surviving Christian funerary monuments with engraved epitaphs simply number several tens of thousands fewer than the non-Christian."

oikos and *oikia*, and Latin *domus* can all mean the physical structure of the house, but more frequently what they designate is the household as a broader horizontal concept including slaves and material goods, or immediate family related by blood but not necessarily living under one roof, or the vertical dimension of lineage or family tree. Compare, for instance, these three uses of *oikos* in 1 Corinthians: Paul baptizes the *oikos* of Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16); Aquila and Prisca hold an *ekklēsia* in their *oikos* (1 Cor 16:19); but women are told to ask their husbands their questions *en oikō* (1 Cor 14:35). In the first passage, all the persons of the household are signified; in the second, the physical place with its furnishings and personnel; in the third, not only the physical location but the social construct of private space, which, in more conservative circles, was the context in which it was appropriate for dominant males to recognize the existence of women.

Further, the Latin *familia* means predominantly one of two things: those under the authority of the *paterfamilias*, or those related as *agnati*, that is, through the male line. The first meaning caused great ambiguity about the status of the *materfamilias*, who by imperial times usually came into her husband's family by marriage *sine manu*, that is, without passing over legally from her father's to her husband's *familia*. She was thus not legally under her husband's authority, though she was by tradition subject to him; nor was she in his line of inheritance, because she was not a member of his *familia*. The second meaning of *familia* could include lateral relatives who stood in the line of inheritance, as well as children, both by blood and by adoption, but again, not the wife.²³ In practice, husbands and wives increasingly disregarded the legal strictures and willed property to each other, but the legal ambiguity continued, because it was economically and socially advantageous to a woman's *familia* to keep her as a member.

Two conclusions can be drawn. First, lest we think that Roman usage had little to do with the first Greek-speaking Christians, let us remember that Roman law, including family law, applied to all Roman citizens anywhere in the empire, and that although many of the probable freedmen and freed-women in the Pauline and other early communities spoke Greek, they must have been Roman citizens, especially in Roman colonies like Philippi and Corinth. Thus, they may have been in real cross-cultural situations in which legal and social expectations differed a great deal. Second, the inevitable conclusion must be drawn that none of the ancient terms to which we assign the meaning "family" had what is for us the first and most obvious meaning

²³ R. P. Sailer, "Familia, Domus, and the Roman Conception of the Family," *Phoenix* 38 (1984) 336-55; idem, *Patriarchy, Property, and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy, and Society in Past Time 25; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 74-101.

of "family," the nuclear family. Though the nuclear family certainly existed, it does not seem to have functioned as a social unit in isolation, and therefore, it had no nomenclature. This realization alone should endow us with proper caution in our investigations.

Households and family units included children, slaves, unmarried relatives, and often freedmen and freedwomen or other renters of shop or residential property. The easy access between commercial and domestic space in the surviving archaeological material attests to this, as does the literary evidence. All, including slaves, seem to have participated in family religious festivals. Household ownership and management was not restricted to a single nuclear group and its dependencies; there are known examples of houses owned and occupied by brothers, for instance, presumably each with his own dependents.²⁴ Women headed households, too, both singly and with other women.²⁵ Therefore, it would seem that, in spite of the strictly patriarchal legal structure of families, there was a great deal of variety in the composition of actual households (οἰκίαι [*oikiaî*], *domus*). Family and household in our meanings of the words are not necessarily to be equated with their ancient counterparts.

Formal dining was a regular activity for those with both a spacious house and some level of social prominence, and it was an important occasion for cementing bonds of friendship, loyalty, and patronage with influential guests and hosts. Among both the elite and those who emulated them, the association of dining with political and social status markers was strong.²⁶

²⁴ For instance, the well-known House of the Vettii at Pompeii was owned by two freedmen brothers, Aulus Vettius Restitutus and Aulus Vettius Conviva.

²⁵ Among aristocrats, Ummidia Quadratilla ran her own household to the age of seventy-nine, with her grandson at one time in residence; Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 7.24) was critical of her dinner entertainment. Matidia, great-aunt of Marcus Aurelius, had a house outside Rome where Marcus' daughters were staying in the year 161; after her death, Fronto was involved in a dispute over inheritance (*The Correspondence of Marcus Cornelius Fronto* [2 vols.; LCL; ed. C. R. Haines; London: Heinemann, 1919-20] 1. 301; 2. 94-97). At more modest social levels, examples besides Nympha (Col 4:15), the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12), and Lydia (Acts 16:14-15,40) are women mentioned in Ign. *Smyrn.* 13.2 and Ign. *Pol.* 8.1-2; probably the Jewish Rufina of Smyrna (*CII* 741; discussion by D. Martin, "Slavery and the Ancient Jewish Family," *Jewish Family in Antiquity*, 124-25); several women, Roman citizens, who made their own tax declarations in Egypt (R. S. Bagnall and B. W. Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt* [Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy, and Society in Past Time 23; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994] 11-13); and several other examples from the papyri mentioned in *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (ed. G. H. R. Horsley; Sydney: Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, Macquarie University. 1982) 2. 25-32, esp. Didymaion (P. Wisc. 72).

²⁶ J. D'Arms ("The Roman *Convivium* and the Idea of Equality," *Symptotica: A Symposium on the Symposion* [ed. O. Murray; Oxford: Clarendon, 1990] 308-20) concludes that in

However, the vast majority of urban dwellers lived not in the spacious *domus* seen at Pompeii or Herculaneum but in more crowded surroundings. The multistoreyed apartment houses (*insulae*) of the imperial period were a common and growing phenomenon in all major cities. In some cases, they had comfortable, spacious apartments at lower levels, while the low-rent crowd climbed to their lodgings. But these buildings' shabby construction, crowded conditions, and vulnerability to fire were notorious.²⁷ Many others lived behind and above shops, in one or two dark and poorly ventilated rooms. Only those with spacious houses could afford the luxury of kitchens. The rest prepared food on portable grills or ate regularly at the local "fast food" shop in the neighborhood (*caupona, taverna, or thermopolium*). The rich ate in, the poor ate out.²⁸ For the poor, a formal meal was had only for special occasions sponsored by a civic benefactor or a benefactor of some other kind; thus the regular Christian community meal would have had far greater significance than a meal would among the wealthy. In both cases, however, the daily family meal as locus for social and moral development, an important piece in the myth of the American family, has no apparent ancient counterpart.

Nor can we imagine the distinction between public and private to have worked in the way we experience it, as a sharp division between the public sphere of work and the privacy of family life. Vitruvius lists the public areas of the Roman house of an important person to which anyone had access by right (*suo jure*) and uninvited: the vestibules, the atria, and the peristyles (*vestibula, cava aedium, peristylia*).²⁹ Off of these areas lay all the "private" areas like the *cubicula, triclinia, and balneae* for sleeping, eating, and bathing, those areas to which one had access only with invitation. The same areas that served for entertaining in the afternoon and evening were spaces for children's play and domestic work in the morning. The house was one of the most important places both for conducting business and for the production of salable goods. The house was not the place to escape from work but the place where much of the work was done; it was not the place to be free of a public role but the place to enhance that role by hospitality.³⁰ The modern idea of the sacred privacy of the home does not apply.

spite of the rhetoric of equality and social leveling, social hierarchy prevailed. Cf. Pliny *Ep.* 9.5.3: there is nothing more unequal than the "equality" of not preserving distinctions of *ordo* and *dignitas*.

²⁷ Seneca *De ira* 3.35.5; Juvenal *Sat.* 3.5-9, 190-202; Martial *Epig.* 1.117.7; 7.20.20.

²⁸ I owe this insight and its wording to Dr. Caroline Dexter of George Washington University.

²⁹ Vitruvius *De arch.* 6.5.1.

³⁰ A. Wallace-Hadrill, "The Social Structure of the Roman House," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 56 (1988) 43-97; idem, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 10-12, 17-37; M. Peskowitz, "'Family/ies' in Antiquity:

Christian families were just like all others in many respects, yet different in others. Diognetus says Christians are not different in language, customs, or habitation, but they have an allegiance of citizenship elsewhere—a theme echoed in other Christian writers, and one that must have caused a great deal of suspicion to outsiders who heard of it.³¹ Tertullian says they did not frequent games, circus, theater, or gymnasium,³² which must have made them seem like pretty sober types (but then again, he wrote an entire treatise, *De spectaculis*, to prove why Christians should not attend these activities, which would seem to indicate that not every Christian agreed with him). They followed an ethical system inherited from Judaism through the Scriptures; to the extent that they were serious about following it,³³ they must have been known and admired for their honesty and reliability. Like the Jews, they were forbidden to abort or expose unwanted children;³⁴ rather, they were to raise all children, which must have made them seem foolhardy. They were rigidly monotheistic, which must have made them, like the Jews, seem odd. They frequented the markets, the baths, the shops, the neighborhood streets. Their children continued to attend the same schools and to learn from the same Greco-Roman literary models. Christians kept up their relationships with nonbelieving neighbors and friends.³⁵ Yet a clear sense of a distinct identity was emerging, an identity that found expression in such ideas as

Evidence from Tannaitic Literature and Roman Galilean Architecture," *Jewish Family in Antiquity*, 9-36 [26-28].

³¹ *Diogn.* 5.

³² Tertullian *Apol.* 38.4-5 and *De spec.* passim.

³³ Pliny, in his famous letter to Trajan, says that they took an oath not to steal, rob, or commit adultery, not to betray a trust or withhold a deposit when it was called for (*Ep.* 10.96.7). Yet other texts suggest that not every Christian was perfectly law-abiding, e.g., 1 Pet 4:15; Hippolytus *Ref.* 9.12 on the checkered career of Callistus (which could be largely concocted).

³⁴ Jews do not, according to Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5; Diodorus Siculus 40.3; Philo, *Spec.* 3.110 and *Virt.* 131-32; Josephus *Ap.* 2.20.2; Pseudo-Phocylides 184-85; but to the contrary, see a tax register of 73 C.E. from Arsinoe (Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum 421) cited by R. Kraemer, "Jewish Mothers and Daughters in the Greco-Roman World," *Jewish Family in Antiquity*, 108 n. 51. Christians do not, according to *Did.* 2-2; 5.2; *Barn.* 19.5; 20.1-2; Justin *Apol.* 1.27; *Ad nat.* 1,15; *Diogn.* 5.6; Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 30.2. On ancient child abandonment generally, see A. Cameron, "The Exposure of Children and Greek Ethics," *Classical Review* 46 (1932) 105-14; J. Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon, 1988) 53-179. On ancient abortion and contraception, see R. Crahey, "Les moralistes anciens et l'avortement," *L'Antiquité classique* 10 (1941) 9-23; J. H. Waszink, "Abtreibung," *RAC* 1.55-60; M. Drury, "Les femmes et le vin," *Revue des études latines* 33 (1995) 1-13; K. Hopkins, "Contraception in the Roman Empire," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 8 (1965) 124-51; E. Eyben, "Family Planning in Graeco-Roman Antiquity," *Ancient Society* 11-12 (1980-81) 5-82.

³⁵ They accepted dinner invitations in temples and private houses (1 Cor 8:10; 10:27), and they continued to value social standing (*Herm. Man.* 10.1.4; *Herm. Sim.* 8.9.1; 9.20.2).

heavenly citizenship,³⁶ new race,³⁷ and the analogy of soul (Christians) to body (world).³⁸

IV

ACCEPTANCE OF NEW MEMBERS into the church happened in two different ways: by entire households and by individuals. When large households joined together, on the authority of their male or female head, it is impossible to know how well many of the members knew what they were doing. In the case of the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16), for example, or of the stories of Cornelius' household at Caesarea (Acts 10:24, 44-48), or Lydia's and the jailer's households at Philippi (Acts 16:15,33); in each case, all were baptized together—in the last case, in the middle of the night! Perhaps these whole Christian households were more prone to welcome teaching about family harmony in structured submission than would be those households divided by different beliefs.

When all the members of a large household had accepted baptism, they could presumably become a self-contained "house church," which may have welcomed others if space allowed, but which could also function on its own. In this case, *familia* or *oikos* coincided with *ekklēsia*, as did family leadership and church leadership. Such a situation would have been a laboratory for what was to be the next development in church structure: to see the church as one large extended family and to extend household mores to the whole church.

The other conversion pattern was that of admitting individuals to baptism apart from any family structure in which they belonged; an example is Paul's baptism of Crispus and Gaius, mentioned almost in the same breath as his baptism of the whole household of Stephanas, a different kind of procedure (1 Cor 1:14-16).³⁹ Paul's listing of wives and dependents as individuals, if they were married, implies that they could make their own decisions. It is clear from 1 Cor 7:12-16 and 1 Pet 2:18-3:6 that this was the case for wives;⁴⁰ 1 Peter suggests the same for slaves, which is corroborated by

³⁶ Phil 3:20; Heb 11:9-16; Herm. *Sim.* 1; *Diogn.* 5.4-5,9.

³⁷ *Diogn.* 1.

³⁸ *Diogn.* 6.

³⁹ Crispus, a previous *archōn* of the synagogue (Acts 18:8-9), and Gaius, a host of the church (Rom 16:23), were probably, with Stephanas, among the most prominent members of the Corinthian community (G. Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982] 55).

⁴⁰ Compare Justin *1 Apol.* 2.2; *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas*. In the latter, Perpetua's father is not Christian and is anguished by her fate. No information is provided about the belief

other evidence.⁴¹ Even if Crispus and Gaius, two men with Roman names, were not married, they may still have been legally under the authority of their father, if he was still alive. If they were adult and fatherless, they were legally independent, *sui juris*. But we do not know what effect their conversion may have had on others in their households.

How did family life work in the case of households and extended families divided by different beliefs? Roman domestic religion emphasized the integral role of all household members, including children and slaves, but especially of the *paterfamilias* and *materfamilias*, in daily, monthly, and other regular sacrifice together to the *lares*, *penates*, and other *numina* of the particular house, worshiped at the household *lararium*, of which many examples are preserved at Pompeii.⁴² It is probably for this reason that Plutarch counsels that at marriage, a bride should cease to worship any other gods than those of her husband, so that there will be unity and conformity in worship as in everything else, for, he adds, no god encourages secret rituals done by a woman.⁴³ Family members were free to pursue other devotions alongside those of the family, but conservative opinion was against it. When individual family members converted to Judaism or Christianity, the exclusivity of their religious claims must have constantly caused tense situations that threatened the harmonious ordering of the *domus*.

Tertullian, trying to convince North African Christian women of the late second century to marry Christians, describes such a situation. The unbelieving husband is not likely to tolerate his wife joining a vigil (*statio*) at daybreak (he will tell her to meet him at the baths), or fasting (he will schedule an important dinner), or visiting the poor for the sake of charity (he will have urgent family business that she must attend to with him), or attending meetings at night, especially the all-night paschal celebration, or visiting martyrs in prison, or offering hospitality to visiting Christian strangers in their home. On the contrary, she will have to smell the incense of family festivals and go through a door hung with laurels and lanterns for

of the rest of her family, including a husband. Compare, too, *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and many of the apocryphal acts, in which women's defiance of familial authority to become Christian is a major theme, According to Hippolytus *Ap. Trad.* 41 (B. Botte, *La Tradition apostolique de saint Hippolyte: Essai de reconstitution* [Liturgiewissenschaftliche Quellen und Forschungen 39; Münster: Aschendorf, 1963] 93). Christian couples are to rise or pray at midnight. If a Christian husband has an unbelieving wife, he is not excused but must go to another room to pray.

⁴¹ Still in the early third century, for example, Hippolytus *Ap. Trad.* 15 (Bolte, *Tradition apostolique*, 32-34) prescribes that a slave catechumen must have the endorsement of the owner, if the owner is Christian; if he is not Christian, the slave will be taught to please him in order to avoid scandal.

⁴² See D. P. Harmon, "The Family Festivals of Rome," *ANRW* 2/16/2. 1592-1603; D. G. Orr, "Roman Domestic Religion: The Evidence of the Household Shrine," *ANRW* 16/2. 1557-91.

⁴³ Plutarch *Conj. praec.* 19 (*Mor.* 140d).

monthly and New Year celebrations in which she no longer wishes to participate.⁴⁴ In the cases where this situation was full of tension, the acerbic antifamily sayings of the Synoptics must have provided beleaguered Christians with meaning and with the consolation that they were not alone in this experience.

V

THE EXISTENCE of individual Christians in unbelieving households raises for our prevailing "house church" model the question where these individuals went for regular worship and other religious activities. They must have belonged to groups that met in someone else's house or apartment, in a place, and among people, approved perhaps by the head of their own household, and perhaps not. This means that, while we envision house churches made up of families coming together, many house churches must also have had a good number of such individual Christians as well—adult freeborn and freed men and women, single and married, perhaps with their children but without spouses, as well as male and female slaves, perhaps also with children, but without their owners. The idea that everything was done in family or household units is not supported by the evidence.⁴⁵ When such groups had a patron or patroness in whose house they met, the assembly may have appeared to an outsider somewhat like a patron's dinner for his or her clients, except that unattached freeborn women and slaves not of the household would not likely belong to such a group. The indiscriminate mixing of persons of every age, sex, and social status without proper supervision by appropriate patriarchal authority was perennially suspect, for it threatened to undermine the social hierarchy by which power was maintained.⁴⁶

The Christians' regular ritual meal on the first day of the Jewish week took place either in a *domus* or in an apartment complex, but under private auspices. When the venue was a *domus*, the host and (or) hostess, with their closest friends or the most important members, must have occupied the *triclinium*, one of the most conspicuous rooms in the house and the one with the best view. In it were dining couches usually arranged for nine persons to recline in a three-sided arrangement. The rest of the assembly must have

⁴⁴ Tertullian *Ad uxor.* 2.4,6.

⁴⁵ Lampe's comment (twice, "'Family' in Church and Society," 8, 13) that in the first two centuries the church did not exist alongside households but "exclusively in them" cannot be taken to mean that it was composed only of household units.

⁴⁶ Compare Livy's description of the suppression of the Bacchanalian cult in Rome (39.8-18, esp. 39.8.6-7 and 39.13.10); Minucius Felix *Oct.* 9.6; Tertullian *Apol.* 7.1.

spilled out into the peristyle, on either portable couches or chairs, within earshot of a speaker in the *triclinium* who would want to be heard. A visiting apostle or teacher would be placed in the *triclinium* in the position of guest of honor. Thus, in spite of what was said of partaking of the one bread (1 Cor 1:17) at the common table, some hierarchy of importance was inevitably present. Pliny the Younger speaks of a reprehensible dinner host who set out three different classes of food and drink, one for his inner circle of guests, another for his "lesser friends" (clients), and a third for the freedmen. Pliny disapproves of the practice and says that he sets the same fare before all—but implicit in his description is an accepted seating arrangement in which the three groups are separated.⁴⁷ This was presumably the practice to which all were accustomed. Vitruvius comments that people could wander uninvited into the atrium and peristyle of a *domus*;⁴⁸ this suggests that Christians may not have been alone at their meetings. This is perhaps what Paul means by the *idiōtēs*, who cannot understand tongues without an interpreter (1 Cor 14:16).

Whether men and women ate together is uncertain; it probably depended on place, time, and occasion. The traditional custom was for men and women to dine separately on formal occasions; in more intimate situations with family or close friends, the custom was for women and children to sit on chairs by the couches on which the men reclined. In the classic symposium, women customarily left after the meal, before the heavy drinking and philosophical discussion began, though they might stay for lighter entertainment following the meal. Exceptions, of course, were Palpal and other women of questionable reputation.

Among Romans, however, these customs were changing at the beginning of the Christian era. Vitruvius states explicitly that one of the differences between the Greek house and the Roman house was the Greek house's separation of the women's quarters in the back from the men's entertainment area in the front.⁴⁹ The Roman house, on the contrary, did not separate space by gender or by a distinction of public and private function. The same rooms that could be used for entertaining guests in the afternoon could also be used for family activities in the morning. The ideal of women secluded within the

47 Pliny *Ep.* 2.6. See Theissen, *Social Setting*, 153-63. On the importance of Greco-Roman dining customs for early Christian worship, see D. E. Smith, "Table Fellowship as a Literary Motif in the Gospel of Luke," *JBL* 106 (1987) 613-38; idem, "Social Obligation in the Context of Communal Meals: A Study of the Christian Meal in I Corinthians in Comparison with Graeco-Roman Communal Meals" (Th.D. diss., Harvard University, 1980).

48 Vitruvius *De Arch.* 6.5.1.

49 *Ibid.*, 6.7.

doors of the house, held by the Eastern elite,⁵⁰ differed distinctively from Roman practice.

At the beginning of the Roman era, women were beginning to attend men's dinner parties and even to recline with them.⁵¹ Cornelius Nepos, writing from Rome about 35 B.C.E., remarks that Roman men are not ashamed to take their wife to a dinner party, and that matrons take part in all the festivities of their houses, in contrast to the Greek custom, still in force, of allowing women to attend dinner parties only with relatives, and of confining them usually to the women's quarters.⁵² Valerius Maximus remarks that dining positions differentiated by sex are now observed more in civic religious banquets than in private ones—which just goes to show that goddesses care more for discipline than real women do.⁵³ Indeed, Livia reclined with Octavian at their wedding, but for the banquets following military triumphs and other public events, she held separate dinners for the women.⁵⁴ The compromise custom seems to have been for women to be present at men's dinners, but to recline on separate couches.⁵⁵ In view of these comments, the archaeological evidence for separate dining rooms in Roman houses of the period must be assessed with care. They may be men's and women's dining rooms, or they may be simply alternatives, offering different views or exposure to different breezes.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ According to Philo *Spec.* 3.169,171-77 and *Flac.* 2.89, married women were to remain within the outer doors, girls within the middle door (*mesaulon*), that is, in the women's section at the back of the house; see also 4 Macc 18:7; Ps. Phocylides 215-18. All these texts reflect earlier Greek ideals (K. J. Dover, "Classical Greek Attitudes to Sexual Behavior," *Arethusa* 6 [1973] 59-73).

⁵¹ The threat that this represented to tradition-minded men is shown in the assaults on the reputation of women who did so; see Balch, *Wives Be Submissive*, 66-76; K. E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993) 24-79. Even in the "liberated" atmosphere of imperial Rome, the best way to discredit a woman was to raise questions about her chastity.

⁵² Nepos *De vir. illust.* preface 6-7.

⁵³ Valerius Maximus 2.1.2 (early first century C.E.).

⁵⁴ Dio Cassius 48.44.3; 55.2.4,8.2; 57.12.5.

⁵⁵ Athenaeus *Deipn.* 14.644d; Lucian *Symp.* 8-9; perhaps Petronius *Sat.* 76-69.

⁵⁶ Examples of apparent double dining rooms at Pompeii include the House of the Vettii, the Labyrinth, and the House of Meleager. L Richardson, Jr. (*Pompeii: An Architectural History* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988] 322, 398, and passim) assumes that in each case, a double dining room indicates that one part is a "ladies' dining room" in a house owned by people who had not yet adopted the new way. Wallace-Hadrill ("Social Structure of the Roman House," 93 n. 147) explicitly disagrees with Richardson on this point. Richardson adduces as a supporting text Petronius *Sat.* 67, in which Trimalchio's wife Fortunata is not present at the first part of the meal and is called for. The reason for her absence is not propriety, however, but managerial duties for the dinner, and when she enters, she reclines where Scintilla, a woman guest, is already reclining. The other example usually brought forward is Cicero *Verr.*

So the alternatives for women's participation in house church meals seem to be the following: reclining or sitting in separate dining areas, sitting next to reclining men, or reclining alongside men. The picture is complicated even more by the known examples of women heads of households and the lack of comparative data by which to get an idea of the way they functioned socially.⁵⁷ Among Roman elites and their imitators at many different social levels, probably by the late first century, women were reclining alongside men in both West and East. It is difficult to imagine that this would be the case among more traditional and less romanized groups, especially in a movement with Eastern roots, but it is equally difficult to imagine that women would be completely excluded from the men's activities at a house church meal; nothing in the sources suggests this. Rather, in more traditional groups, especially in the East, women and children probably either sat or reclined in separate groups in the peristyle or sat next to men's couches. In those houses both sufficiently affluent and sufficiently traditional to have a parallel women's dining room, the *materfamilias* probably hosted the most important women there. At any given time, there were probably several different ways in which people were grouped for the weekly festive meal, different even at different places in the same city, depending on physical arrangements, status identification, and degree of romanization.

In more traditional settings, it is highly unlikely that families were grouped together. The presence of individual converts without families in any large numbers would also facilitate gender and status groupings at the assembly rather than family units. The image of the family at Sunday worship together does not fit the ancient pattern.

The other likely venue for a gathering of the Christian community is the *insula* or apartment building, the place of the so-called tenement church. While it is fairly certain that such Christian groups existed, we know even less about how they existed than we do about house churches in a *domus*. References to Christian groups not identified with a house (e.g., Chloe's people, 1 Cor 1:11) may be to such groups. They may have met in someone's apartment room, under very crowded circumstances, or in a shop on the first floor, or in an available meeting room, perhaps rented for the occasion. A second phase of development, parallel to the transition from *domus* to *domus ecclesiae* in house churches, may have been permanently to secure a

2.1.26.65-68, where Verres' agent Rubrius, at his instigation, disgraces both of them at Lampsacus in Asia Minor by calling for the presence of the host's young unmarried daughter at the drinking bout after a dinner. The host refuses, saying that it is not the Greek custom (compare Vitruvius *De arch.* 6-7,4). On the whole issue, see Corley, *Private Women*, 24-52.

⁵⁷ Acts 12:12; 16:14-15; Col. 4:15; maybe 1 Cor 1:11 and Rom 16:1-2. See the references at n. 25 above.

particular room of an apartment house, as Mithraists took over a ground-floor room of the so-called House of Diana at Ostia in the second or third century. Both archaeological and literary evidence indicate that something like this happened at the sites which later became the churches of San Clemente, San Crisogono, and Santi Giovanni e Paolo at Rome.⁵⁸

In the original form of "tenement church," meetings and dining arrangements must have been less formal than in a *domus*. Leadership, too, must have taken more flexible forms, since the pattern of patronage was not automatic. It is interesting to speculate that in such meetings more collegial forms of both participation and leadership were possible than in meetings under the patronage of a prominent figure. At the same time, such an organization would necessarily be more dependent on the full cooperation of all its members.⁵⁹ These are the gatherings that may more closely have resembled meetings of *collegia*, which constitute one of the suggested models of Christian assemblies. Most *collegia*, however, seem to have sought wealthy patrons, so that the hierarchical pattern based on social status re-emerges.

But how did the weekly Christian assembly affect family life at home? The earliest sources are nearly silent on this question, except in prescriptive terms which give us little indication of the way things really were. One thing is clear, however: the church began very early to see itself as surrogate family, with its male leadership modeled on ideals of civic leadership, in keeping with a long tradition that saw the household as a microcosm of the state and that tied effective public leadership to proven effective family management.⁶⁰ This development may have contributed to undermining patriarchal household authority, since by the middle of the third century it did succeed in undermining the authority of individual patrons in favor of the more

⁵⁸ B. Blue, "Acts and the House Church," *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting 2: The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting* (ed. D. W. J. Gill and C. Gempf; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 119-222; J. S. Jeffers, *Conflict at Rome: Social Order and Hierarchy in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 63-89; L. M. White, *Domus Ecclesiae-Domus Dei: Adaptation and Development in the Setting for Early Christian Assembly* (2 vols.; Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1982); idem, *Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (ASOR Library of Biblical and Near Eastern Archaeology; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

⁵⁹ See R. Jewett, "Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church: The Implications of a Form-Critical Analysis of 2 Thessalonians 3:10," *BR* 38 (1993) 23-43.

⁶⁰ Aristotle *Pol.* 1.2.1252b and *Eth. Nic.* 8.12-7-8; Isocrates *Ad Nic.* 19; Pseudo-Isocrates *Ad Dem.* 35; Seneca *Ep.* 5.4.14; Cicero *Off.* 1.54; *Fin.* 5.65; Philo *Praem.* 113; 1 Tim 3:4-5; Titus 1:6; M. Dibelius and H. Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 53; Lampe, "Family in Church and Society," 20 n. 54; Balch, "Neophythagorean Moralists," 394. 403-4; idem, "Household Codes." 32-33.

centralized patronage of the bishop.⁶¹ Yet ironically, Christianity in the long run enhanced patriarchy rather than undermining it, in spite of certain opposite tendencies present from the beginning.⁶² It was given a special boost by the absolute fatherhood of the monotheistic God "after whom all fatherhood in the heavens and on earth is named" (Eph 3:15). Not that God was presented as a stern and fearful disciplinarian;⁶³ rather, early Christian writers tend to stress mercy and compassion in contrast to severity in their description of God. Punishment was only that of a wise father who must discipline his children.⁶⁴ Yet the image of the male authority was inevitably reinforced.⁶⁵

The local house church or apartment church provided, among other things, a sense of communal life and individual commitment, theological pluralism, a base for mission, and a model of the universal church.⁶⁶ Its communal life must have been less attractive to those from large Christian households, and more attractive to those without large families, those who were members without their families, and the poorer members who lacked other means of social incorporation in a wider context. The appeal to the sense of extended family that the church provided must have been approved and fostered especially by members of these kinds.

The multiplication of different worshipping groups had necessarily to foster theological pluralism. That this happened is evident from Paul's letters to such places as Galatia, Corinth, and Rome in the first generation, and in Rome, Alexandria, and Gaul in the course of the second century. The responses to excessive pluralism, otherwise called heresy, have been much studied; they include centralization of teaching leadership and the canonization of Scripture.

House churches were the nurturing ground for missionaries, both local and visiting. Here local members would hear the call and respond by putting their efforts into evangelization, whether in the neighborhood (Acts 10:24;

⁶¹ L. W. Countryman, *The Rich Christian in the Church of the Early Empire: Contradictions and Accommodations* (Texts and Studies in Religion 7; New York/Toronto: Mellen, 1980); C. A. Bobertz, "The Role of Patron in the *Cena Dominica* of Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition*," *JTS* ns 44 (1993) 170-84.

⁶² E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York; Crossroad, 1983) esp. 105-59; 251-84; idem, "'You Are Not to Be Called Father': Early Christian History in a Feminist Perspective," *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 151-79.

⁶³ It is the thesis of Saller (*Patriarchy*, 102-32) that the modern stereotype of the stern Roman father is greatly exaggerated for modern polemical purposes.

⁶⁴ M. Pilch, "'Beat His Ribs,'" 101-13.

⁶⁵ Tertullian *Marc.* 2.13; Cyprian *Laps.* 35; Novatian *Trin.* 3,1; Clement of Alexandria *Paed.* 1.7,8. I owe these references to Jerry Andrews.

⁶⁶ Lampe, "'Family' in Church and Society," 8-12; D.W. Riddle, "Early Christian Hospitality: A Factor in the Gospel Transmission," *JBL* 57 (1938) 141-54.

Col. 4:5-6; Heb 12:14), in their own homes (1 Tim 6:1; 1 Pet 3:1), or abroad (Acts 13:1-3). In these groups, too, visiting missionaries received support, encouragement, and material assistance (Acts 20:7; Rom 15:24; 16:1-2).

Local church groups also understood themselves to be smaller units of a larger body. In the local groups, people learned to be aware of what was happening in other parts of the Roman world to those who shared their faith (Acts 14:26-27; 1 Thess 1:7-9; 2:14-16; Col 4:8,16). Increasingly, church leadership was modeled on familiar forms of government, though the transition to imperial modeling was to take several centuries.

VI

TO RETURN TO THE PROBLEM posed at the beginning, what was the reception of the very different messages coming through to families in the earliest Christian writings about family life? It might seem that those portrayals of family life that stress unity, harmony, and patriarchal structures had greater appeal, and perhaps even originated in house churches which were composed of one or more households that were completely Christian, whether they met in a *domus* or in an *insula* in which they lived as small family groups. Here all the values represented in the general paraenesis of the NT letters could be extolled, and perhaps even lived.

By contrast, the biting pessimism about family members being worthy of trust that is characteristic of many of the traditions attributed to Jesus would not have been well received in such homogeneous circles. Since family leadership and church leadership were so closely associated, such criticism of family would have been seen as a questioning of legitimate authority. We know what happened in some of the cases in which church leadership was questioned: Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and 1 Clement tell us that every attempt was made to suppress the questioning. Other unspecified incidents of encouragement to unity in the Pauline letters may be not only about petty disagreements but about crises of local leadership.⁶⁷

It would seem that the criticism of family and the urging to outside loyalties would have expressed better the experience of individual converts who had made the difficult decision to act alone in joining a Christian community. They must often have found it to be true that family members could not be relied upon for support, and that, ultimately, loyalties had to be chosen and sides taken, sometimes against family and friends.

⁶⁷ Especially Phil 2:1-18; 4:2-3.

This would be a neat picture—in fact, too neat. The pebble that shatters the picture is 1 Peter, in which the paraenesis to wives, and probably also to slaves, is addressed to persons who do not belong to households that are all Christian—quite the contrary, for wives are explicitly told that their virtuous behavior may convert their husbands. Slaves are told to be obedient even to unjust owners, after the example of Christ who suffered unjustly.⁶⁸ Thus, with many students of the household codes we must conclude that those codes were intended to allay fears of Christian subversion of the social order, whether they are primarily addressed to a suspicious outside audience or to insiders for their instruction.⁶⁹ Part of the propaganda present in paraenetic discourse is that good example will win people over. Not only honest traders and conscientious craft workers but also submissive wives, obedient children, and slaves were living advertisements for the truth of the faith; they were home missionaries. Whether the household codes are heard primarily by insiders or outsiders, they bolster the defensive posture of the church, which seeks to protect vulnerable members, and thus ultimately the whole church, from attack by outsiders, especially by authoritative unbelieving family members who resent the church's exclusive claims over the thoughts and lifestyle of believers.

What, then, are we to make of the other side of the picture, the portrait of the skeptical Jesus who has nothing good to say about family and who directly predicts that family members cannot be counted upon? One major import of these sayings is that the group of disciples must now function as a family: family is not abolished but extended. The boundaries of kinship are not removed but reset. Those who will fulfill the role of true family members are those bound together not so much by blood or social structures as by Baptism and Eucharist.

Seen this way, the two semantic worlds of household paraenesis and sayings about discipleship are not as diametrically opposed as we may have thought. The tradition of radical discipleship exemplified by the Synoptic Gospels warned Christians not to set down roots in a fickle set of relationships that might reject the demands of the gospel. On the other side, 1 Peter and the Pastorals deliberately portray the church as a household. Colossians and Ephesians draw the reader into a vision of a universal church in which

68 It is not out of the question that abusive Christian owners are envisioned. On the topos of the advantages of slavery, see D. Kyrtatas, "Slavery as Progress: Pagan and Christian Views of Slavery as Moral Training," *International Sociology* 10 (1995) 219-34.

69 J. H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Social-Scientific Criticism of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy, with a New Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); Balch, *Wives Be Submissive*.

the interests and concerns of Christians must be as wide as those of Christ.⁷⁰ Church structures of the next few centuries would attempt to make the church into a kind of welfare state in which, from birth to grave, all essential needs are taken care of, education, marriage, pastoral care, relief from hunger, health care, and burial. Each tradition, each in a different way, issued a challenge to widen one's perspective, to go beyond the narrow expectations of family for the sake of a greater mission. Seen this way, the early Christian agenda did set out to undermine the foundations of society and create a new social order of wider horizons.

If biblical scholars can make any contribution to the present debate about "family values," perhaps it can be to bring an awareness that the mid-twentieth-century nuclear family is not normative, that the golden age of biblical families was not all it is cracked up to be, but that the family is a very strong social structure, strong precisely because it is so flexible. It was in fact more flexible in early Christianity than in its contemporary idealized version. Its forms are changing, as they always have been. The family must look outward and be part of something greater than itself. Only then will it achieve its end of fostering the most basic qualities of faith, hope, and love. These are the family values worth striving for.

⁷⁰ 1 Pet 2:5,18; 4:10,17; 1 Tim 3:15; 2 Tim 2:20-21; Eph 2:11-22; Col 1:15-23.