THE FAMILY QUARREL
DEFINING AND DEFENDING THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF FAMILY

by Joe Dallas


SYNOPSIS

The definition of family has become one of Christianity’s most controversial doctrines. In a time of international revision of marriage and family roles, widespread acceptance of cohabitation and high divorce rates, believers express uncertainty about what does or does not constitute a family, hesitancy about the importance of the family concept, or unwillingness to recognize and honor that concept in their own lives. A general confusion seems to have grown, in both church and culture, regarding the meaning and importance of family.

Adding to the confusion is the controversy stirred when an objective definition of family and marriage is commended. Since we cannot hold a specific view without directly or indirectly negating other views, we’re left considering whether to keep our views to ourselves or express them in hopes of productive dialogue. But to engage in such dialogue regarding family runs the risk of being viewed as judgmental, exclusionary, or even bigoted.

Three primary questions are thereby raised. First, does Scripture offer a concise definition of the family? Second, is that definition critical as a doctrinal/moral issue within the church? And finally, are we called to promote and defend that definition outside the church?

While the answer to all three seems clearly to be “yes,” we’re left with the challenge of implementing greater clarity within the church, and more reasoned boldness when addressing the culture.

It is a strange thing that if the old evangelistic doctrines should appear for one moment to be beaten in debate, they always conquer in results. —CHARLES SPURGEON

In the 1993 movie Mrs. Doubtfire, Robin Williams, disguised as a grandmotherly housekeeper, offers comfort to a child who fears her parents’ divorce means the end of her family: “There are all sorts of different families, Katie. Some families have one mommy, some families have one daddy, or two families. Some children live with their uncle or aunt. Some live with their grandparents, and some children live with foster parents. Some live in separate homes and neighborhoods in different areas of the country. They may not see each other for days, weeks, months, or even years at a time. But if there’s love, dear, those are the ties that bind. And you’ll have a family in your heart forever.”

It’s a common sentiment, growing in popularity and benign in tone—that love makes a family, so the people you love can become your family unit, one that’s determined primarily by emotion, less by blood, and barely (if at all) by objectively defined gender or function. Here the German poet Johann
Schiller's two hundred-year-old oft-quoted phrase, "It is not flesh and blood but the heart which makes us fathers and sons," finds new breath in contemporary parallel efforts such as Gigi Kaeser's photographic campaign for gay/lesbian parenting titled Love Makes a Family and author/songwriter Carol Lynn Pearson's lyrics, "But that's not the thing that makes us want to sing/A family is more than that./And this is what I'm thinking of/A family's really a family when it's got love."

While this view rightfully salutes the bonding felt when love is shared between partners or members of a group, it's also problematic for believers who hold the traditional Judeo-Christian concept of the family, a concept determined by objective elements like blood, gender, and/or clearly prescribed roles.

After all, if it's love that makes a family, then what are we to do with the traditional definition of marriage as being monogamous and male-female in form? For that matter, why bother with the institution at all? If love, rather than matrimony, lays the family foundation, then what's a license got to do with it? Ditto for the allegedly unique roles fathers and mothers play in childrearing, because if love equals family, then children are just as effectively raised by nonrelatives, distant relatives, or relative strangers, so long as they're loved. So if love's the final arbiter, should our current understanding of family be preserved, or amended to flex with the times, or discarded altogether?

WHEN VAGUE IS IN VOGUE

Tensions rise whenever the merits of an objective (and exclusive) definition are weighed against a more inclusive, subjective one. To say, "There's only one way," can seem divisive, whereas the more egalitarian, "Whatever seems right to you is OK" approach gets the "nice" award. In polite conversation, it's natural to favor subjectivity, avoiding, when possible, the social discomforts that come when an uncompromising position is taken.

But the more crucial the topic, the clearer the mandate for defending objective exclusive truth. Here the arguments over the definition of family are much like modern debates over an exclusive versus inclusive concept of God. "I'm not religious; I'm spiritual," many affirm today, claiming there are multiple paths to God, and many ways to conceptualize Him/Her/It. On this point the Christian can hardly agree, remembering that Jesus Himself said, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6 ESV), so believers now face the challenge of promoting an objective, specific definition of God and salvation in a time when subjectivity regarding both is in vogue.

A similar challenge is posed when revisions of the family are called for. When "Love makes a family" is argued, we can hardly agree, remembering the precision with which the family is defined in Scripture, leaving us with the challenge of promoting an objective, specific definition of marriage and family when subjectivity regarding both is in vogue. Social tensions notwithstanding, this is a topic on which we can ill afford being coy. The ramifications for childrearing and cultural stability are many, the stakes enormous. A mutually agreed upon concept of family determines our nation's approach to same-sex marriage, polygamy, couples living together apart from wedlock, transsexualism, adoption, custody of children, and divorce. In short, the "family" quarrel—the cultural debate over how it's defined and preserved—is no small matter, requiring a clear and rational Christian response. Three primary questions are hereby raised: Does Scripture offer a concise definition of the family? Is that definition critical as a doctrinal/moral issue within the church? Are we called to promote and defend that definition outside the church?

THE FAMILY IS A CONCEPT
In response to the first question, we’ll begin by noting that a high view of Scripture yields a high view of family. Two parts of this are noteworthy: how the family is defined, and the honors heaped on it in both the Old and New Testaments.

The definition of family springs from the first negative thing God said about man: he was inherently incomplete, indicating he was built to partner, commune, and reproduce (Gen. 1:18–23). His relationship with God and his surroundings were intact, but by God’s own design, Adam was wired for more. His union with Eve became the more, so an initial point we can make when defining family is that it was conceived in response to human need.

A second observation concerns marriage, from which family life springs, and its original three-element design: heterosexual, monogamous, and built for permanence, as detailed in Genesis and reaffirmed by Christ (Gen. 2:24; Mark 10:6–9). On the heterosexual element of this design (which is currently the most controversial of the three), C. S. Lewis observes:

*The Christian idea of marriage is based on Christ’s words that a man and wife are to be regarded as a single organism—He was not expressing a sentiment but stating a fact, just as one is stating a fact when one says that a lock and its key are one mechanism, or that a violin and a bow are one musical instrument. The inventor of the human machine was telling us that its two halves, the male and the female, were made to be combined together in pairs, not simply on the sexual level, but totally combined.*

Created design dictates that two halves do not necessarily make a whole, and that the whole as a permanent and exclusive male-female complement constitutes marital union. By this standard a number of actions fall short. Homosexuality violates the gender contrast design; fornication (sexual relations before or apart from marriage) indulges erotic privilege without covenant responsibilities; polygamy and adultery violate the monogamous intent; and divorce aborts the permanent union that marriage was meant to provide.

Scant biblical allowance is made for deviation, and where it exists, it’s notable for its brevity. Polygamy was practiced by a number of Old Testament patriarchs (Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon, for example), but serious consequences often followed, and while it was tolerated in Old Testament times, God’s displeasure with it is clarified both by Christ and Paul (Mark 10:8; 1 Tim. 3:2). Likewise, Jesus asserted that divorce, though granted under Mosaic law, is a tragic option only to be considered if a spouse has committed adultery (Matt. 5:31–32).

The biological component regarding children isn’t rigid, in that the biblical definition of a family recognizes adoption or stepparenting (Moses in Exod. 1:15–22; Samuel in 1 Samuel 1, 2:1–11; and Esther in Esther 2:15). Single parenting is neither affirmed nor condemned, since circumstances beyond a mother or father’s control may necessitate it. And while it offers less than the two-parent ideal, it exists within the scope of the family concept.

To be sure, marriage and children are options, not mandates. Nothing in Scripture indicates all people should marry or, for that matter, that all married people should reproduce. Any number of reasons—such as physical disabilities, life situation, or personal preferences—may validate a person’s singleness, or a couple’s childlessness. But when examining the biblical notion of family, we conclude that marriage is required to be monogamous and heterosexual and intended to be permanent, with limited allowance made for its termination. Children are ideally raised by both biological parents, but can also be reared by one parent, stepparents, or adoptive parents as well. These are the mechanics of family life prescribed in Genesis, the Law, the Gospels, and the Epistles.
So important are these mechanics that their violation elicits at the least a sharp rebuke from Scripture; at most, severe consequence. Hebrew laws regulating duties between family members are explicitly detailed (Deut. chaps. 21–23, for one of many examples); neglect of parents is condemned by Christ (Mark 7:11) and cited by Paul as a denial of the faith (1 Tim. 5:16); honor toward parents is demanded in both Testaments (Exod. 20:12; Matt. 15:4); and the ability to properly lead within the home is seen as a prerequisite for leadership in the church (1 Tim. 3:4–5). The importance Scripture assigns to family relations would be hard to exaggerate.

But the general honor afforded them is crucial as well, because it helps explain the subject’s importance. The family is both ordained and defined by God, sealing its importance in and of itself. But it holds symbolic importance as well, as it expresses His nature, and symbolizes His relationship to His people. This further elevates the family, from a critical and functional unit to a divine illustration.

Numerous prophetic and instructive passages, for example, reference marriage as symbolic of God’s union with His own. Both Israel and the church enjoy this honor in being referred to as His betrothed, or His bride (Isa. 50:1; Eph. 5:23–33; Rev. 21:9). And while marital union may be the family relationship most often typifying divine principles, other family ties are utilized as well to represent God’s nature and commitment to us.

The father-child relation is employed when God the Father is cited as gentle provider (Matt. 7:11); all-knowing caretaker (Matt. 5:32); disciplinarian (Heb. 12:7–8); and doting, compassionate parent (Ps. 103:13); while a mother’s nurturing qualities connote God’s watchful gentleness (Isa. 49:15). To understand the family is to better understand God; indeed, Jesus seemed to presume this when He utilized earthly fatherhood to boost His listeners’ understanding of their Heavenly Father (Matt. 7:7–11).

There exists, then, a clear and objective definition of the family, which the Bible views as inherently important and divinely symbolic. No serious student of Scripture could deny that family matters.

THE FAMILY IS A CRITICAL CONCEPT

“Excommunication” is a painful last resort, defined by The Encyclopedia Britannica as a ‘form of ecclesiastical censure by which a person is excluded from the communion of believers, the rites or sacraments of a church, and the rights of church membership.’ Noting its necessary severity, Jonathan Edwards remarked that excommunication is not designed by man for the destruction of the person, but for his correction, and so is of the nature of a castigatory punishment, at least so far as it is inflicted by men; yet it is in itself a great and dreadful calamity, and the most severe punishment that Christ hath appointed in the visible church. Although in it the church is to seek only the good of the person and his recovery from sin there appearing, upon proper trial, no reason to hope for his recovery by gentler means yet it is at God’s sovereign disposal, whether it shall issue in his humiliation and repentance, or in his dreadful and eternal destruction; as it always doth issue in the one or the other.

So when answering our second question—Is family definition critical as a doctrinal/moral issue within the church?—we should recall that the first excommunication mentioned in the New Testament happened in response to a believer’s violation of family covenant, and his church’s cavalier response.

Paul was alarmed when told of a Corinthian Christian’s openly incestuous relationship with his stepmother, and outraged over the church’s casual attitude. So in 1 Corinthians 5 he rebukes his readers for allowing a form of fornication “not so much as named among the Gentiles” (v. 1); for their smug self-
satisfaction over their tolerance (v. 2); and for their seeming ignorance of a basic reason for Christian purity: our bodies don’t belong to us but are rather temples of the Holy Spirit (vv. 19–20). When ordering them to excommunicate the unrepentant fornicator, Paul makes two general appeals: Don’t you know? And if you know, why don’t you do?

We could use another letter from Paul today! According to a 2003 poll conducted by George Barna, forty-nine percent of respondents who identified themselves as “born again” considered living together apart from marriage to be acceptable, thirty-three percent condoned abortion, thirty-five percent felt OK about sex before marriage, and twenty-eight percent saw no problem with pornography. In response, Barna noted, “Even most people associated with the Christian faith do not seem to have embraced biblical moral standards. Things are likely to get worse before they get better—and they are not likely to get better unless strong and appealing moral leadership emerges to challenge and redirect people’s thoughts and behavior. At the moment, such leadership is absent.”

In the absence of such leadership, confusion over right versus wrong, plus a casual attitude towards wrong itself, thrives. What’s needed is clarity. After all, if the question of Francis Schaeffer’s book title How Then Shall We Live? gets no clear response from the pulpit, it should surprise no one when everyone does what’s right “in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6 ESV).

Paul no doubt considered this when he told Corinth’s believers to distance themselves from any Christian who engaged in fornication (1 Cor. 5:11) and when he told the Ephesians to live in such a way that sexual immorality would never be named among them (Eph. 5:2). Add to this his comparison of the marriage union to that of Christ and His church (Eph. 5:32), his prescriptions for marital and parent-child roles (Eph. 5:22–6:4), and his insistence that a man’s fidelity to family responsibilities is in direct relation to his profession of faith (1 Tim. 5:8) and qualifications for leadership (1 Tim. 3:5), and it becomes ever clearer that the definition and value of the family is a critical concept over which three simple points need to be raised, loudly and regularly, from the pulpit: “This is what constitutes a family.” “These are the roles and responsibilities involved.” “This is why family matters.”

THE FAMILY IS A CRITICAL CONCEPT DESERVING CULTURAL PROMOTION

Our third question—Are we called to promote and defend the biblical definition of “family” outside the church?—is perhaps the trickiest. On the one hand, C. S. Lewis warned against imposing Christian marital standards on a secular society: “The Churches should frankly recognise that the majority of the British people are not Christians and, therefore, cannot be expected to live Christian lives.”

Paul himself, likewise, said that he was in no position to judge unbelievers who were guilty of sexual sin (1 Cor. 5:12), yet a promotion of a beneficial concept seems a far cry from placing judgment on people who reject that concept. Here Chuck Colson’s explanation of common grace seems applicable: “As agents of God’s common grace, we are called to help sustain and renew his creation, to uphold the created institutions of family and society, to pursue science and scholarship, to create works of art and beauty, and to heal and help those suffering from the results of the Fall.”

If it can be shown that biblically commended family roles work best for believers and nonbelievers alike, then the biblical definition of the family is worth cultural promotion. A number of secular studies attest to the wisdom of the biblical definition of family, and to the benefits that children in particular reap when that definition is adhered to.

MARRIED COUPLES COUNT
After studying 174 primary school children, 58 of whom were being raised by heterosexual “cohabiting” (unmarried) couples, 58 by same sex couples, and 58 by married heterosexual couples, Sotorios Sarantakos, an Australian sociologist, offered this conclusion: “In this study, married couples seem to offer the best environment for a child’s social and educational development.”

Measuring the children’s functioning in several areas—language, math, sports, sociability, learning attitude, parent-school relation, gender role, school-related support and parental aspirations for the child’s achievement—children of the married couples did the best.

FATHERS COUNT

When analyzing more than one hundred studies examining the impact of biological fathers on the children, Ronald Rohner and Robert Veneziano concluded, “Overall, father love appears to be as heavily implicated as mother love in offspring’s psychological well-being and health.”

Swedish researchers came to a similar conclusion when publishing their findings under the title, “Children Who Have an Active Father Figure Have Fewer Psychological and Behavioral Problems” in the February 2008 issue of Acta Paediatrica. After surveying reports on 22,300 sets of data from 16 studies comparing children raised with and without fathers, they remarked, “Children who lived with both a mother and father figure also had less behavioural problems than those who just lived with their mother. The review looked at 24 papers published between 1987 and 2007, covering 22,300 individual sets of data from 16 studies. 18 of the 24 papers also covered the social economic status of the families studied.”

These findings aren’t unique. Studies cited by The National Center for Fathering and the NYU Child Study Center conclude that fathers contribute uniquely to their children’s development in ways that cannot be replicated or substituted.

MOTHERS COUNT

Just as research confirms the unique role of fathers in child raising, it predictably has similar points to make regarding motherhood. For example, the Early Child Care Research Network found that nonmaternal care of babies and preschool children, as opposed to early bonding with their biological mothers, has been linked to behavioral problems at older ages.

In addition to the emotional and behavioral losses incurred in a mother’s absence, her parenting style is complementary to, but distinct from, a father’s, which led the NYU Child Study Center to remark, “In summary, proponents of the essential-father point of view see the parenting contributions of mothers and fathers as linked to their sex, with mothers generally emphasizing connection, relatedness, safety and care, and fathers emphasizing autonomy, action, risk-taking and following rules.” All of which led David Popenoe to conclude, regarding the importance of both parents, “We should disavow the notion that ‘mommies can make good daddies,’ just as we should disavow the notion of radical feminists that ‘daddies can make good mommies’—The two sexes are different to the core, and each is necessary—culturally and biologically—for the optimal development of a human being.”

BIOLOGY COUNTS

When examining the ties between biological parents and their offspring, the results are also clear and unsurprising: where childrearing is concerned, biology counts. A Child Trends Research brief noted, for example: “An extensive body of research tells us that children do best when they grow up with both biological parents in a low-conflict marriage…. Thus, it is not simply the presence of two parents, as some have assumed, but the presence of two biological parents that seems to support child development.” Similarly, a brief for the Center for Law and Social Policy claimed that “children do better when raised by
two married, biological parents who have low conflict relationships.”

Judy Jones, director of the nonprofit organization Help Stop Parental Alienation Syndrome, concurred: “Children that are deprived of frequent contact with both their mother and their father have a greater risk of drug abuse, dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy, and many other behavioral and emotional problems.”

The inescapable conclusion one draws from these studies was articulated nicely by David Blankenhorn, president of the New York–based Institute for American Values and a self-defined “liberal Democrat,” who nevertheless criticizes the rush to revamp our definition of marriage and family when he notes:

Marriage is a gift that society bestows on its next generation. Marriage (and only marriage) unites the three core dimensions of parenthood—biological, social, and legal—into one pro-child form: the married couple. Marriage says to a child: The man and the woman whose sexual union made you will also be there to love and raise you. Marriage says to society as a whole: For every child born, there is a recognized mother and father, accountable to the child and to each other.

If the traditional family unit provides the best framework for emotional and mental development, then the stable children raised within that framework will become the stable adults most likely to provide a similar framework for the next generation. The ripple effect cannot help but produce cultural stability, testifying to a design explained in Genesis and confirmed in 2010 and beyond.

None of this negates the good that’s reaped by adults and children in less traditional settings. Here we agree in part with Mrs. Doubtfire, in that any combination of people who truly care for each other will benefit all involved. So the family quarrel isn’t an either/or proposition. The question isn’t whether nontraditional groupings provide any benefit—they do; they will.

But which grouping provides maximum benefit? What’s functional may not be destructive, but neither is it the ideal. And when discussing a culture’s productivity and future, nothing less than the ideal should be striven for.

The family was conceived by the Creator in response to His creation’s needs and as an earthly, tangible representation of His nature. Its members, when combined, provide a mosaic in which the observer notes elements male and female, gentle and authoritative, innocent, knowing, and inexpressibly creative. God is both honored and represented when family ties are in place.

But to be in place they first have to be defined and understood, so clearer, more comprehensive teaching on the subject within our churches is called for. Likewise, fidelity to what we’re taught in Scripture about chastity, monogamy, and family responsibilities is tragically lacking, and until sufficient attention is paid to the disconnect between what we preach and what we live, we can hardly expect the culture to take us seriously when we promote standards we’re not applying to ourselves.

But the definition of the family, when understood and lived out, can then be promoted with integrity to a world grappling with questions of intimacy, emotional need, and the complexities of human sexuality. The answers we provide will no doubt raise hackles—just consider what happens whenever a public figure confesses to a traditional understanding of marriage and family! But they’ll raise awareness as well, and can become a vehicle through which people hungry for love and security can find answers. Episcopal Bishop William Frey alluded to this when he recalled the early church’s impact on Greco-Roman society, an impact made in part by its understanding and promotion of family values: “One of the most attractive features of the early Christian communities…was their radical sexual ethic and their deep commitment to family values. These things…drew many people to them who were disillusioned by the
promiscuous excesses of what proved to be a declining culture. Wouldn’t it be wonderful for our Church to find such countercultural courage today?”

Wonderful, yes. And, more importantly, entirely possible.

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**notes**


9  Lewis, 112.

10  Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, How Now Shall We Live? (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1999), xii.


12  Ibid.


16 http://www.education.com/magazine/article/Ref_Many_Meanings_Family/.


18 http://www.education.com/magazine/article/Ref_Many_Meanings_Family/.

19 Cited in Stanton and Oligney.


