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The Christian Family in Today's Society Viewed in a Biblical Perspective

David P. Scaer

For Martin Luther the church, the government, and the family were life's basic units. Though the Small Catechism had for its first purpose the education of the clergy, its instructions were intended for the family head, who was entrusted with its religious welfare. Luther in his Letter to the Bohemian Brethren suggested that, in the absence of regular clergy, the father as the head of the family as a religious community could preach, baptize, and marry, but not celebrate the Holy Communion. In the absence of a regularly established church, the family becomes its own church. Luther did not see the family as a competing church, but as a nucleus of like-minded believers carrying out their calling as confessing Christians within a regulated structure.

I. *The Current Situation*

In a recent issue of the *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* David Zerzen calls attention to C.F.W. Walther's aversion to conventicles or private prayer groups. This aversion came from his own personal participation in them as a university student. The worshipping family cannot and should not be seen as "another type of church" or indeed the true church in the sense in which Pietism understood the conventicles. The family cannot be seen as coterminous with the church, but it is the place where the church meets the world. The battle between the kingdoms of light and darkness are more likely to find its battlefields in the family. The ideal worshipping family may be just that, an ideal, which in its perfect form is out of anyone's reach.

The contemporary family structures, as we know them now, have not evolved over the twenty centuries since Christ or the five centuries since Luther. It is not a difference between a nineteenth-century Victorian family and one at the end of the twentieth century. The revolution has come about in the last twenty-five years. The family in 1990 is already quite different from what it was in as late as 1965. We can note that the family structure, which was regarded as sacrosanct not only to the church, but also to American society, has been fundamentally altered in a comparatively short time. Today's family is more

likely to be characterized by marriages at a later age, serious marital disharmony to the point of divorce, fewer children, children with step-parents, whether or not they are living with them, and serious conflict between siblings and their parents. With both parents more likely to be working, children are more likely to be raised outside of the home in child-care centers. In the nineteenth-century extended rural family a child was raised not only by his parents but also by his grandparents with aunts and uncles, while in the modern family the child does not even have the advantage of having one parent at home. In addition, 40% of all births are out of wedlock. *U.S. News and World Report* adds the information that births out of wedlock are down 15% among blacks and up 67% among whites (July 13, 1989, page 29). We are not dealing with an ethnic or racial phenomenon. Rather middle class persons are making rational decisions to live life styles which are fundamentally different from that of a generation ago. The big question for the pastor is determining when the family structure has been so changed that it must become an object of his preaching. There are various reasons for children being raised outside of the home: (1) a mother who never wanted to be one; (2) economic necessity; (3) improvement or maintenance of the economic situation. When does the church offer a prophetic word?

The family structure has been so altered that one wonders if the word "family" is apropos. Within this century we have gone from the extended family to the nuclear family and finally to a network of families related through not only brothers and sisters, but also step-mothers and step-fathers, half-brothers and half-sisters, step-brothers and step-sisters. This network of families either is without a recognized center or has several centers. Even if there are no ethical dimensions to the situation, there are certainly social implications. At weddings pastors need to have Solomon's wisdom to determine who sits where and with whom. In a certain sense the church will have to transcend these changes without demanding that these structures be altered as a prerequisite for the preaching of the gospel. Still the church will have to address certain changes where there are moral implications for those who are already members of the church. The man living with his father's wife could not remain a church member, according to Paul's judgment. A time comes for the church to offer a word of law.

Some pastors, if they do not feel inadequate in tackling the problems associated with new family situations, are nevertheless swamped in resolving these difficulties in their own parishes. Pastors are just as likely to experience family crises as are the general public. Call and ordination are no magic solutions. The parsonage comes with no built-in immunity to problems. The church might or even should demonstrate that it is fundamentally different from the world, since we simply cannot endorse and baptize the world's standards without becoming part of it. The clergy can offer assistance on a limited basis from case to case, but they are not going to alter current structures. Adjusting these structures is not a primary purpose of the ministry.

In a certain sense the apostolic words that it is not fitting that we should wait on tables must apply to the clergyman, so swamped by family problems within the parish, that he finds it difficult to carry out his calling as the community's spiritual head, preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. My goal here is to lay down in broad outlines a (not *the*) biblical view of the family and perhaps make it easier to live with new, changing family situations, without feeling the burden of having to change each one. It may be easier to accept our own situations. Luther's picture of the father as the religious head of the family seems like a scene taken out of "never-never land." If Paul's requirement that the clergy rule their own houses well were pushed to the limits, we might all be defrocked. Parsonages and the homes of parishioners are not so distinct. If our own stables are clean, we certainly can find problems among our nieces and nephews. Sin and its foul results are not dogmatic abstractions, but living, personal realities with which each pastor has first-hand experience. Unnecessarily the clergy are likely to be overburdened with guilt about their family situations. Where once a pastor's worth was measured by the number of sons he had in the ministry, today it is measured by how many of his children are still church members and participating in congregational work of any kind. Pastors are caught in the tension between what they understand as the Lutheran tradition and their own family situations. Rare is the pastor who has not seen one of his children leave the church, and increasingly rare is the pastor who sees one of his own sons enter the ministry. What this means is that the pastor is more likely to have a son or

daughter leave the church than he is to have a son enter the ministry. Families with roots sunk deep in Lutheran tradition are undergoing fundamental changes which will have a decisive effect on the kind of church we are. In the first century of the Missouri Synod, a plurality or majority of pastors were raised in parsonages. Now many a seminary graduate is a convert to Lutheranism, frequently through the good offices of his spouse. The Lutheran ethos was nurtured in a stable, traditional setting. This ethos, I am convinced, can and must survive, even where the traditional family boundaries have shifted. Others with good intentions believe—and wrongly so—that we need a different ethos, worship, and cultus for a changing and changed America. The church especially in her worship and preaching must remain the haven of stability in a changing world. If we copy the Evangelical style, we will adopt Reformed theology!

The Lutheran home is no longer automatically the seed-bed of the next generation of Christians. At the Wichita Convention of 1989 *Today's Business* reported the number of children baptized in 1960 was nearly 86,000 compared to 55,200 in 1988. Juniors confirmed dropped from a high of 58,490 in 1970 to 32,025 in 1988. The first concern is not from where future pastors will come, but from where will the Christians come. No statistical expertise is needed to conclude that the readjustment in family structures is having an adverse affect on the church. We are simply going to be a smaller church. From one wise pastor I heard that the stork is our best missionary. Today's storks are nesting much later, hatching fewer eggs, and are being sent to pasture before delivering their precious cargo. With abortion it is now open season on the stork. The command of Jesus that the children should be brought to Him is supported by the statistics which confirm that it is infinitely easier to bring a child into the church and keep it than it is to convert an adult. This is only an attempt to put in perspective the tension with which we pastors live as we proclaim our message. It is the irreconcilable conflict between the world which we experience and the world which God proclaims in the gospel. Statistics can tell us that we have problems which might become worse before they get better, but they cannot inform our preaching or give us a theology of the Christian family. Having set forth this foreboding introduction, I should like to survey the biblical data.

II. *Covenant Theology and the Family: The Reformed Heritage*

Reformed theology makes a virtual one-for-one equation between the church and the family, a fundamental concept of its covenant theology. According to the Reformed understanding of the Old Testament, the family is the basic unit of salvation, a view which is so widespread in our country that it can almost be called an American ideal. People say, "The family which prays together stays together." As attractive as that statement is, it says nothing about true and false religions. All it says is that religion, whatever its content, is valuable for family harmony. This does not approximate Luther's injunction that the family recite the commandments, the creed, and the Lord's Prayer.

The Reformed tradition of the family, which has been adopted as the American ideal, should not be simply taken over by Lutherans. The family for the Reformed gives certain religious privileges to the children which virtually negate the reality of original sin. In Reformed theology the family serves as the basis for the practice of infant baptism, which serves as the confirmation or seal of the covenant relationship which the child has with God through the family. As valuable as the family is in Lutheran theology, it is never *the* reason for baptizing children or including them in the kingdom of God. Baptism in Lutheran theology is not the confirmation of an already existing state or relationship between the children and the parents, but a bestowal of the grace needed for salvation. The advantage that children have within a Christian family is the accessibility of the word of God and its influence. This is Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 7:14 about children being sanctified. Covenant theology is taken one step further by the Church of the Latter Day Saints, otherwise known as Mormons, which understands the concept of church only within the dimensions of the family. If the traditional adage is that *non salus est extra ecclesia* ("there is no salvation outside of the church"), then the Mormon adage would be *non salus est extra familia* ("outside of the family there is no salvation"). Marriage is the ultimate sacrament and children are the necessary good works. Deceased ancestors can be assured the bliss of heaven posthumously by vicarious baptism. Such an emphasis on the family tries to prove that

“flesh and blood can inherit the kingdom of God.” Mormonism is an extreme aberration of the Reformed understanding of the Scriptures, especially the Old Testament, about the place of the family which does not even deserve to be called Christian. It does, however, serve as a good example of what happens when church and family are equated, as is still the case with the conservative Reformed. *Reader's Digest*, which the Mormons have used for advertisements, promotes a glowing picture of the American family as Christian. This ideal family is painted in such radiant colors that many might be led to believe that there are on earth people who are really as happy as the articles picture.

For the Reformed it is the child's relationship with the parents and not faith which is the saving factor. Such covenant theology, fundamental to American Reformed Christianity, is more likely to derive support from the Old Testament than from the New. On that account the Old Testament should briefly be surveyed. Is it really true that the Old Testament gives the rules for a happy family?

III. *Survey of the Old Testament*

Genesis is an ancient version of the story of “One Man's Family.” This is not only the story of Adam's family, but the stories of Noah's, Abraham's, Isaac's, and Jacob's families. Genealogies (Hebrew: *toledoth*) provide the structure for the history of salvation. Church and family were to a large extent coterminous. Those acquainted with Luther's Genesis commentary know that the Reformer pictured Adam enthroned as a high priest when his son preached and “men began to call upon the name of the Lord.” The Old Testament demonstrates that God does not work haphazardly in history, because He attaches Himself to certain persons and family groups, establishing a relationship to Israel. Israel is not simply a conglomeration of people, but an extended family in which all can worship the God of their fathers, who identifies Himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God remembers His promises to Israel and has mercy on them. Within this extended family the descendants of Aaron are charged with the care of the temple and those of David are entrusted with the Messianic promises. The family provides the structure of salvation in the Old Testament.

But having said this, it must be said that the family provides no guarantee of salvation. Cain is forever the symbol of those who apostasize. The prayer of Abraham that Ishmael would live before God is disregarded. "Jacob I loved and Esau I hated" shows how God's grace worked within particular families, but not with such predictability that God deprived Himself of His own free will. Judah is picked over the older Reuben and the younger and the more favored Joseph and Benjamin. David's love for Absalom could not save that beloved son from becoming a treacherous traitor. If the Old Testament tells us how God worked through families for the world's salvation, it also tells us that the "Christian" family in the sense we may rightly or wrongly picture it is elusive even for God's chosen saints. Adam's preaching and beseeching could not save Cain. The miracle of salvation from the flood did not prevent Noah from being ridiculed by his youngest son. The brothers Esau and Jacob became enemies. The sons of Jacob and the fathers of the twelve tribes were incestuous, adulterous, and murderous. The sons of Eli, Samuel, David, and Solomon were hardly examples of good "Christian" upbringing. Even in the Old Testament, the so-called traditional Christian family was an ideal, rarely realized. The Old Testament teaches that God endorses the family as the basic unit in society by making it the place for His saving activities, but inclusion in the family is never the permanent, non-erasable mark of salvation.

IV. *The Gospels*

A. *Mary, Joseph, and Jesus: Detachment*

Any topic dealing with the Christian family should pay serious attention to the relationship which Jesus had with His family. Matthew traces the lineage of Jesus back through Joseph to Abraham. Luke also traces the lineage of Jesus, not through Joseph, but through Heli, the father of Mary, to Adam. For Matthew, Jesus must be seen as belonging to the family of David in particular and the family of Abraham in general. For Luke, Jesus is a member of the universal family of humanity with its origins in Adam, the universal father. All can claim Jesus as his or her brother. Both Matthew and Luke are aware of the importance of family as a unit of salvation in the Old Testament and both see Jesus as the conclusion and fulfillment of everything which God had originally intended

to do. The promised son of Eve has come, and Adam and all his offspring have been vindicated. Matthew's Gospel begins with Joseph's contemplating how his relationship to Mary can be broken through divorce and then adopting her child as his own. Luke provides a picture of an extended family. The cousins Elizabeth and Mary are the Holy Spirit's instruments, with sons destined to do great things for God. Family connections do matter.

As a family Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fulfill the religious obligations attached to the birth of all the first-born in Israel (Luke) and as refugees they escape to Egypt (Matthew). Jesus, like Joseph, is known as a carpenter and at the age of twelve attends His first passover in Jerusalem (Luke). In what sense this family was ideal is debatable, at least in the sense in which Roman Catholics view it. Roman Catholics are more likely to see a salvific relationship between the child and His parents and refer to it as the Holy Family. For them it was a family whose chief and most notable characteristic was celibacy. Though traditionally Joseph was seen as a widower with children from a previous marriage, popular Roman thought is gradually seeing him as ever-virgin in the sense that his spouse was. Either alternative, his widowhood or voluntary celibacy, would make digestible fodder for the modern marriage counselor. Just what kind of family was this? With the traditional view that the widower Joseph brought four sons and at least two daughters into the marriage, Mary would have the honor of being the mother of Jesus and also the less distinctive honor of her being step-mother of four step-sons and at least two step-daughters. The other alternative would be that Joseph like Mary never experienced normal marital relationships, relationships which were given as command and promise to Adam and Eve. Mary and Joseph would have been exempt from the command to be fruitful and multiply. This command, Mormons believe, was fulfilled and is even now being fulfilled by Jesus. Here are two clearly opposing views of the family. For Roman Catholics celibacy is the ideal and for Mormons sexual relationships are, even for Jesus! For Lutheran theology, the family may be the occasion for the church but does not in itself have any salvific significance. This, I believe, fits the biblical data best. Our canonical gospels do not provide us with the biographical data about the childhood and youth of Jesus from which a family picture

might be reconstructed. If His was "the holy family," to borrow a term from Roman Catholic piety, then the relationships of that family would be worthy of emulation. The apocryphal gospels attempted to fill in the gaps, but their picture of Jesus is so bizarre as to render them virtually useless for purposes of historical reconstruction. Perhaps by God's providential grace, authentic accounts of that family are limited, so that we are not tempted to live exactly as Jesus did. His life within the family was not all that different from any other youth in the same kind of situation.

Detachment perhaps best describes His relationship to His family. This would be true of Him in the temple, as it would be of His refusal to let His immediate family have an audience with Him. Whereas the Old Testament saint lived his life and made his accomplishments within the family structure, Jesus did not. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and his twelve sons are called patriarchs precisely because they were the heads of families. The life of Jesus is remarkably different. His real home is not Nazareth with Mary and Joseph, but in the Jerusalem temple with God as His Father. The evangelists agree in seeing that Joseph is not the father of Jesus, though Joseph provides Jesus with His claim to Davidic descent. Apart from its being the locale of the incarnation, nothing very positive is said of Nazareth. Joseph and Mary resemble more guardians than parents, almost in the manner of the law in Galatians 3:24. His baptism by John the Baptist is really the "birth" day of Jesus, because by being baptized He publicly states His commitment to God as His Father. God correspondingly acknowledges Jesus as His Son: "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." One of the significant contributions in the slightly altered church year of *Lutheran Worship* is the inclusion of the baptism of Jesus as a festival during Epiphany. At that time He reaches maturity, as it were, and it becomes evident in His preaching that He is the real Son of God and not merely the son of an obscure married couple in Nazareth. One could argue that His baptism by John surpasses or is at least equal to His conception and birth in importance. Just as our birth from God is not our physical birth but our baptism, so Jesus' birth from God is His baptism. Life in the family of Mary and Joseph was custodial care until that time when Jesus by His life and death would demonstrate that not they but God was His real parent. Jesus has flesh and blood, but He comes from

and is of another world. His real family is not that of Mary and Joseph, but a heavenly family in the presence of the Father and the Spirit. His mission is so broad that it cannot be embraced by any earthly family, including the one in which He was brought up. It cannot even be contained by the Jews, His own people.

This detachment from His family can be noted at several times. At Cana Jesus speaks to Mary as if she were not His mother, a moment which was anticipated by the mysterious words of the boy Jesus telling Mary that His Father was in Jerusalem and not in Nazareth. Jesus expected the same attitude of His followers. When a candidate for discipleship offers the excuse that he must first bury his father, Jesus responds that the dead should bury their own dead. Regardless of the precise meaning of this hard saying, family relationships not only do not further the kingdom, but in certain cases are obstacles. The one who loves mother or father more than he or she loves Jesus is not worthy of Him. Regardless of the full meaning of the Johannine word from the cross, that the Beloved Disciple and the mother of Jesus should regard themselves as son and mother, the underlying significance is that Jesus, in the new reality which He accomplished by the atonement, no longer looks at the woman who gave Him birth as His mother, though the church must. The coming of the kingdom will create strife in families to the point that the unbelieving members will turn over the believing ones to death. Within the context of such sharp words, the attitude of Jesus to His family is understandable. Jesus practices what He preaches. He does not wait to bury His mother before He begins to preach the kingdom. The words "let the dead bury their own dead" He applies to Himself, as He does to anyone considering discipleship. When a hearer of the words of Jesus cries out that the mother of Jesus is blessed because she gave Him birth, He responds: "Blessed rather are they who hear the word of God and keep it." In refusing His immediate family an audience with Him when it is requested, Jesus points to His disciples as His brothers, sisters, and mother. It is not that Jesus is repudiating family relationships, but He is redefining them. Jesus does not say the He has no mother, no sisters, no brothers, but rather that the new family will be defined by those hearing the word of God, that is, the believers, the

church. The New Testament is not totally devoid of information of the relationship which Jesus had with His family, even in His adult years.

The biblical evidence, so far as I see it, shows Jesus as the oldest of five brothers and at least two sisters. The names of the sisters are not given us, but his four brothers' names, according to the synoptics, are James, Joseph, Simon, and Jude. While not listed prominently in the gospels, they are not, on the other hand, non-persons. Comparing these names with the genealogy in Matthew, it seems safe to conclude that James was named for the father of Joseph, that is, his grandfather, and that Joseph is named for his father. Considering the urging of the kinfolk of Zachariah and Elizabeth that the son of their old age be named for the father and not John, this suggestion seems plausible. The family of Jesus may have been among those who rejected Him in the synagogue at Nazareth, but this is unlikely since their lack of comprehension is not depicted as downright unbelief and rejection. His words, "a prophet is never without honor except in his own fatherland," may suggest that His claim to messiahship fell on deaf ears among those of His own flesh and blood, but this idea is not supported by other accounts. His family was as much a missionary enterprise as is any Christian family.

B. *The Family of Jesus and His Ministry*

His family is placed by the evangelists at a number of significant junctures in His ministry. The first, the changing of water into wine at a wedding in Cana, is described almost as if it were a family occasion. The mother and brothers of Jesus were there, apparently from the beginning of the festivities. He arrives on the third day. It is possible and perhaps not improbable that Jesus' family was there to celebrate His sister's marriage, as the synoptic gospels describe Jesus as having brothers and sisters. Cana was one of the closest, if not the closest, village to Nazareth, lying to its north on the route to Capernaum, the center of His Galilean ministry. The mother of Jesus played a prominent role, indicating a close relationship to the married couple. At the conclusion of the wedding, Jesus leaves Cana for Capernaum with His disciples, mother, and brothers. On one canvas, as it were, John places the old and new families of Jesus. Present

for His first miracle are those who are His brothers by natural birth and those who will become His brothers by faith.

The synoptic evangelists each contain the episode of the mother, the brothers, and presumably the sisters of Jesus asking for an opportunity to speak to Him. Matthew places the episode (12:46-50) right before the chapter with the parables. At the conclusion of His preaching the hearers refuse to see Jesus as anyone else than the son of Joseph and Mary (13:53-58). Mark has a similar arrangement and places the request of His family for an audience before the parable of the sower (3:31-35) and places Jesus' rejection of the view that He is only the son of Joseph and Mary after the raising of Jairus' daughter (6:1-6). Luke places the request for a family audience after the parable of the sower and the discourse of the light under the bushel and before the calming of the storm (8:19-21). Historical reconstruction of the gospel data is in every case fraught with danger, but our curiosity compels us to ask when Jesus repudiated His family.

The family of Jesus is not placed with those who are opposed to His mission; rather they are among those who earnestly desire to participate in His ministry. John's suggestion that the family of Jesus went with Him from Cana to Capernaum shortly after His first miracle may possibly parallel Mark 3. Thus it may not be inappropriate to place the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth and then His subsequent rejection of His family some time in the first year of His ministry in Capernaum. In some sense His family had an appreciation of both His messianic self-understanding and His rejection by the Nazareth synagogue. They did identify with Him in His ostracism. They shared in His flight from Nazareth to Capernaum, which, however, did not entitle them to a special place in His ministry. One thing is clear: His rejection of His family comes at a time when they still feel a close relationship to Him because of this kinship, entitling them, they believe, to a place in His ministry. In both Matthew and Mark His repudiation of His family comes after the choice of the twelve. Mark is more picturesque. His family sends word to Jesus that they are outside and desire an audience with Him. "Jesus looked around Him at those who were seated in a circle and said, 'Behold my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God, that one is my brother and sister and mother'"

(3:34-35). Matthew informs the reader that Jesus was specifically speaking about His disciples: "He stretched out His hands on [or over] His disciples." The true family member is the one who does the will, not of "God," as Mark has it, but of "My Father in the heavens" (13:49-50), as Matthew has it. Luke places the same event after and not before the parable of the sower, as Matthew and Mark do. Those who are His mother and brothers are not those who do the will of God, as Matthew and Mark have, but those who hear the word of God and keep it.

Each of the evangelists present this episode in a slightly different way, but they see the same significance in it. The family relationships, which were so vital in keeping God's Old Testament people together in the past, will be replaced. The church is the new family of God in which Christians are to find their closest and most intimate relationships. Matthew sees the disciples of Jesus as His new family; however, He goes on to expand the dimensions of this family by saying that whoever does the will of His Father belongs to His family. Mark does not put the disciples in any type of special relationship to Jesus, but includes anyone who does God's will. Luke also has no interest in the disciples as the new family of Jesus. He also makes no mention of doing the Father's will. The one who belongs to the family of Jesus is the one who hears and keeps the word of God. If Luke knew Matthew—and I am convinced that he did—then he has provided a notable service to the church in telling us what the will of God is. Luke has no reference here or in his version of the Lord's Prayer to doing God's will. His reference to hearing and keeping the word of God is parallel, I believe, to Matthew's "teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." While not minimizing faith as essential and necessary for inclusion in the family of God, continued hearing and adherence to all the words of Jesus are necessary for those who see themselves as members of the family of Jesus. Is not Luke by referring to hearing and keeping the word of God giving us a picture of the worshipping congregation who has heard the word of God in the preached and read gospel and is intent on believing it? While we are accustomed to thinking of St. Paul as the originator of the concept of the church as the household of God, the concept itself originates in the preaching of Jesus.

While it is popular to see the family of Jesus as unbelievers, that is, people not fully convinced of His special relationship to God, perhaps just the opposite is true. They are no less or no more understanding of His mission than His disciples, those whom He has designated, at least according to Matthew, to take the place of His natural family. If it is said that the members of His family were not fully cognizant of His ministry, the same could be said of His disciples. Strikingly His family is among those who see the resurrected Jesus, observe His ascension, and are gathered as His church even before Pentecost (Acts 1:14).

The crucifixion is not without meaning, since the mother of Jesus rather than the disciples maintained the death vigil with Him. Whereas John tells us that the mother of Jesus is at the cross, Matthew and Mark are probably referring to the same woman with the reference to Mary the mother of James and Joseph, who are probably the brothers of Jesus. Thus three evangelists support the view that Mary was at the cross of Jesus. While her devotion to her Son was a motivating factor in her being there, her belief in Him as Messiah should not be automatically ruled out. The record in the Fourth Gospel of the new relationship established between Mary and the Beloved Disciple needs its own consideration: "Behold, your Son"—"Behold, your mother." But the synoptic evidence alone suggests that the church and the family are not as inimical as might be suggested by some of the harsher words of Jesus about forsaking the family for His sake. Jesus does not really forsake His family in the sense of abandonment, but rather He receives them back to Him within the new relationship of the church. The harsh words of Jesus that the dead should bury their own dead, spoken to the man who wished to bury his father before following Jesus, are mitigated by His words to the Beloved Disciple that he should care for His mother. The relationship of blood so prominent in the Old Testament for God's messianic purposes has been superseded by a new relationship characterized by doing the will of God, which is hearing the word of God and keeping it. While relationship through blood is no longer the guarantee of inclusion within God's saving purposes, neither does it mean automatic exclusion. The New Testament demonstrates this fact. James, the oldest of the four brothers of Jesus, is mentioned in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Galatians, 1 Corinthians, the epistle

with his name, and the Epistle of Jude. He succeeds Peter as the leader of the Jerusalem church, authenticates the apostleship of Paul, writes what is probably the earliest of the New Testament writings, and, according to Josephus, dies a martyr's death around 62. Paul in Galatians gives him a title of honor by calling him "James, the brother of the Lord." His inclusion in 1 Corinthians 15 before the phrase "the other apostles" and his inclusion with Peter and John in Galatians as a pillar of the church can lead only to the conclusion that he was elevated to the rank of an apostle some time after the resurrection. The same is also probably true of Jude, who is mentioned also in Matthew and Mark and is the author of the New Testament epistle with his name. At this point we can make an observation which, I think, not only characterizes the Lutheran understanding, but also fits the biblical evidence which has been presented in a preliminary way. This observation is that, while we cannot with the Reformed see the family relationship as bestowing a special grace, the family can and does become the place where the church of God is realized. Perhaps Mary is blessed among women because she is the mother of the Lord, but a higher blessedness is hers because she is among those who hear the word of God and keep it. The response of Jesus to the woman who cried out, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the paps which gave you suck," namely, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it," was not intended to repudiate His relationship with His mother. Rather it is an invitation to all who have faith to come into the closest possible relationship with each other. Jesus' rejection of His family should not be isolated from the context of the New Testament. It is really only part of the greater theme of the rejection of the Jews in favor of the Gentiles. This rejection should not be stated too harshly. Like the Jews, His original family members are received back into a relationship with Him firmer than any which they had previously experienced.

The Gospel of John presents its own challenges. While the other evangelists specifically identify the mother of Jesus as Mary, John surprisingly never does. Mary is simply referred to as "His mother." The great incarnation passage about the word becoming flesh makes no mention of her by name. While 6:41 refers to Joseph as His father by name, it refers to His mother without using her name. The mystery is even further

compounded when, at the foot of the cross, she is called literally "the mother," "His" not being included in the text (John 19:25-27). Although undoubtedly presupposed, still the absence of "His" must be noted.

The view that Jesus did not have any brothers and sisters and thus the care of His mother had to be entrusted to another person is simply without foundation. Her presence in the post-ascension church with the brothers of Jesus (Acts 1:14) should put to death that view once and for all. Rather we have here the reality of the promise of Jesus that they who do the will of God are His mother, sisters, and brothers. The Beloved Disciple is to receive the mother of Jesus as His mother, and she in turn is to receive Him as her son. The promise of Jesus that the church is the new family of God has been realized in an amalgamation of His natural family and His disciples. The sharp division between church and family, faith and blood has been overcome. Jesus may have had to repudiate His mother to make clear the difference between the church and the family, but this hardly gives the church the right to adopt the same attitude. On the contrary, she loses the identity which was naturally hers as the mother of Jesus to become the mother first of the Beloved Disciple and then of all who place themselves alongside of him. He becomes her guardian, as a son provides for his mother, and she in turn is to regard him as a son even though there is no relationship through blood.

IV. An Unnecessary but Personal Addendum

I have fond memories of my father distributing roses to all the women in the church on Mother's Day back in Trinity Church in Flatbush. At the seminary I was taught that such liturgical infractions as celebrating Mother's Day were unforgivable either in this age or the age to come. Jaroslav Pelikan then pontificated that in a modern age Mother's Day had become liturgically appropriate. My father was not the liturgical felon I had supposed him to be. Many pastors fear Mother's Day. Should they suspend the liturgical calendar for something as modern and recent as Mother's Day, especially in the way in which my father celebrated it by making no distinction between those who were mothers and those who had no children, some of whom, indeed, had never been married? The unmarried women in that congregation in Brooklyn, New York, were women upon whom spinsterhood

had been forced because of the care of parents and not women who made a rational choice between family and career. In distributing flowers to all the women on Mother's Day, my father was acting in accord with the teaching of the gospels that the church brought a new reality in which our relationships as mothers, sons, daughters, sisters, and brothers really have little or nothing to do with our original family relationships. In the church all women who have heard the word of God and kept it are mothers and sisters of Christ. Mother's Day could be a celebration of that new reality.

This essay has examined the evidence in the gospels relating to the Christian family today. Space does not allow an examination of Acts and the epistles. The concept of the church as a family replacing and in some cases including the ordinary relationships of our earthly families receives further support there.