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Professor Sarah C Williams, Commission Member, reflects at the launch of the Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households what the scriptures tell us about what it is to be human, and the role of families and households in human and societal flourishing.

Perhaps the hardest thing for us as Christians is living with the tension between the ideal and the real. Nowhere is this tension felt more acutely than in the family. We have an ideal perception of the family and then we have the reality of actual family life. We live in the tension between the two as individuals—but also as cultures. As a historian, I would like to make sure that our study doesn't skirt around this tension, but instead brings it into focus. I hope we can faithfully recover the language of culture—the definitions, symbols and narratives that shape cultural perceptions of the family—as well as paying careful attention to the structures and patterns of family life, in different contexts and at different moments in time.

I've spent much of my life, with the Victorians. The Victorians had difficulties navigating the tension between the ideal and the real. The early Victorians revitalised the Protestant Reformation idea of the family as a godly commonwealth. It was an idea rooted in scripture—the household at the centre of society, acting as a pivotal site for the moral reformation of the community as a whole. They recovered a good ideal — that provided a necessary corrective to the hierarchical patterns of society and the family at the heart of 18th century culture. But, by the late 19th century, this ideal had lost its moorings in scripture. Ideas of the family were layered with images and symbols of British nationhood. The family had become an iconic display of wealth and respectability, dislocated from the common good and bound up with nationalism, colonialism and power. The later Victorians did violence to the text of scripture when it came to the family. Over 80 Victorian family Bibles were produced in less than 50 years. In many of the passages that did not conform to Victorian domestic sensibilities were bracketed out, or printed in tiny type, or labelled in parenthesis: 'To be omitted from family reading'. Listen to this introduction from one popular mid-nineteenth century bookseller, a Benjamin Boothroyd from Huddersfield: 'As the manners and the customs were so very different from ours, things which delicacy forbids us to mention, I have given the sense of such passages, rather than a naked, verbal version...I hope it will be found that my version contains nothing but what may be read in a family, without occasioning modesty to blush, or to raise any unpleasant and unhallowed thoughts in the minds of youth.' By sanctifying their own cultural stereotypes, the Victorians prevented scripture from challenging their ideals and anchoring them in something deeper and bigger than their own cultural expression of the moment.

Professor Sarah C Williams