



Theology of the Family: Reflections 20 years on

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Families and Households

The title I have been given requires some *pre*-reflection. 'The family' suggests a thing, an essence, a reification. The Catholic Catechism offers such an essence: 'A man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children, form a family'.¹ Are single-parent families, families? There is a murky refusal in the Catechism even to acknowledge the question. Is a couple without children not yet a family? Are two women in a civil partnership who have adopted two children as their own (a relative of mine is in just such an arrangement)? There are surely *diverse* 'families' (as the title of the Archbishops' Commission implies), and definitions must be scrutinised for the assumptions they silently import, and the non-traditional families they may assign to invisibility.

Then there are 'households' (on which the Catechism is also silent). The suggestion that a household is 'a group of people, often a family, who live together'² seems too restrictive, not least because the Office for National Statistics collects statistics on 'single person households'. 'Households' may suggest a link with several passages from the New Testament called 'Household Codes'. But these belong to a time when a gender hierarchy was assumed, with slaves forming an integral level within the hierarchy. So, in this essay 'families' and 'households' will mean 'people's living arrangements, with or without children'.

Sources and Assumptions

There are red lights marking out '*theology* of the family' too. We are to consider 'The theology underpinning our understanding of family life and relationships'. But if 'our' is 'we Anglicans', our understanding of family life, like families themselves, is also diverse, and cannot be conveniently conflated into a single whole. Neither is the function of theology obviously to 'underpin' anything. This is 'foundationalism' – finding justificatory grounds for what is already assumed. Queer theology, feminist and womanist theologies, post-colonial theologies, liberation theologies, etc., are like fresh waters flowing into the theological 'main-stream', deepening it and changing its course. But the desire to 'guide policy-making to enable families and households to flourish' is a laudable one.

In doing Christian ethics (and theology) what is said must share some identity with what Christians have traditionally thought, *and* to be *different* from what has been said before, in order to avoid becoming mere repetition. Hence identity and difference belong together in a necessary dialectic. I assume the 'three-legged stool' of scripture, tradition, and reason. For this metaphor to work each leg must be given equal weight (as it rarely is among Anglicans, these days). Tradition includes history, perhaps especially the history of doctrine. Reason includes the

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1993), https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P75.HTM, para. 2202.

² Cambridge Dictionary online: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/household>.



physical and social sciences. A fourth leg, that of ‘experience’, must be added. Experience includes ‘conscience’, and through them all ‘wisdom’, the profound corporate reflection on all the others. I take for granted we Christians are looking *forward* to God’s reign of justice and to the triumph of love for families and households (eschatology), and not just backwards towards founding texts and authors – what Susannah Cornwall calls ‘originalism’.³ Her recent book, ingeniously entitled *Un/familiar Theology*, suggests that perhaps the most authentic ‘theology of the family’ is one that will be *unfamiliar*, both in being unexpected, and in generating unfamiliar family forms, rather than underpinning existing ones.

‘Twenty years on’? Let’s assume *Living in Love and Faith* [LLF] expertly tells us what we need to know about real social changes in the areas of marriage and families in the last twenty years.⁴ So I shall talk about some of the relevant *theological* developments since the turn of the millennium. Families and households require intersectional analysis, embracing at least politics, sociology, law, psychology, and history. And since ‘The audience is not intended to be an academic one’, I will try hard to address the needs of ‘leaders in the world of family, work in all its varied forms, including those who are parents and carers, church leaders, social workers, teachers, health workers, lawyers and many others’.⁵

Marriages and Families

I have tried elsewhere to commend ‘a theology of liberation *for children*’.⁶ The idea is a simple one. Theologies of liberation begin with oppressed groups of people and ask what must be done to *save* them. How does God’s saving action set them free? 25 years ago Jon Davies once toyed with what he called ‘an insurance policy for a foetus’.⁷ If a child in the womb were, hypothetically, to purchase the best life policy for ensuring their happiness, the evidence would require them ‘to choose as parents two people who are biologically your parents and tied to each other in a permanent covenant, preferably one rooted in a religious rite. Insist that these adults love you, and behave in their relationships to you and to one another according to such Christian virtues as fortitude and temperance’.⁸

It is an imperative – social, legal, theological – that children’s interests come first. But it is less obvious now than it was at the turn of the present century, that children are more likely to thrive in what were called ‘intact households’. Davies bitterly attacked an adult world he saw as mired in ‘appetitive individualism’, neglectful of children’s interests. The best actuarial policy for children, he thought, is the ‘traditional’, heterosexual, two-parent family, with women

³ Susannah Cornwall, *Un/familiar Theology: Reconceiving Sex, Reproduction and Generativity* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 12.

⁴ House of Bishops, *Living in Love and Faith* (London: Church House Publishing, 2020), chapter 5, ‘Society’.

⁵ Bishop Paul, in his letter of invitation.

⁶ Adrian Thatcher, *Theology and Families* (Malden MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 127-130.

⁷ Jon Davies, ‘Neither Seen nor Heard nor Wanted: The Child as Problematic. Towards an Actuarial Theology of Generation’, in Michael A. Hayes, Wendy Porter and David Tombs (ed.s), *Religion and Sexuality* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 326-347, 331.

⁸ Davies, ‘Neither Seen nor Heard nor Wanted’, 332.



gendered as the care-givers and the homemakers, and fathers as the bread-winners, importantly present and in charge. In this scenario the possibility of deep, caring, parenthood *outside* the ‘traditional’ family could scarcely be thought.

Some such traditional families do unquestionably protect children’s best interests, and provide excellent conditions for their flourishing, but this can no longer be taken for granted (if it ever was). Marriage is safer for children than single parent families with live-in partners. But traditional marriage is also the *locus* of some appalling violence, including by Christian husbands against wives, worldwide, as Elizabeth Keopping reports, in a shocking study.⁹ Here the oppressed group is (almost entirely) women. The silence of clergy about the problem, is itself a form of violence – a collusion with evil.¹⁰ Equally shocking is Rachel Starr’s exposure of ‘how Christian beliefs and practices serve to legitimate domestic violence’.¹¹ This is where salvation is *survival* (the sub-title of her book). Covenantal models of marriage, she writes, popular in Protestantism and more recently in Catholicism, have a grave defect. In the Bible they are enacted by violence and take the form of a binding agreement between unequal partners, through which a set of obligations are imposed on the weaker party’.¹² While the idea of covenant, qualified by mutuality, *can* be positive for women, ‘covenantal models of marriage may need to be abandoned as intrinsically violent and inescapably hierarchical’.¹³ Sacramental models of marriage are no less dangerous because the idea of the ‘indissoluble bond’ has made it harder for women to escape domestic violence. If such models are to continue to be channels of God’s grace, in-built notions of gender hierarchy, control, and uxorial obedience must be removed, and mutuality and reciprocity restored to the marital relationship. Her treatment of marriage is a fine example of the combination of identity and difference.

LLF claims ‘a clear biblical picture of marriage emerges when you consider Scripture as a whole, and in particular when you read it in the light of the teaching of Jesus’.¹⁴ Unfortunately this is wishful thinking. It is widely thought today that Jesus was in favour of marriage. In Protestant churches it has become so commonplace that single people often feel alienated in congregations, arousing suspicions about their sexuality. A queer or counter-cultural reading of the New Testament on marriage (and on families and households) offers a different picture. Many New Testament scholars hold that Jesus regarded marriage as a ‘distraction’,¹⁵ although he accepted it as rooted in Jewish society. Paul’s view of marriage was clear: avoid it if you can.

⁹ Elizabeth Keopping, *Spousal Violence Among World Christians: Silent Scandal* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

¹⁰ Keopping, *Spousal Violence Among World Christians*, 83.

¹¹ Rachel Starr, *Reimagining Theologies of Marriage in Contexts of Domestic Violence: When Salvation is Survival* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018), 37.

¹² Starr, *Reimagining Theologies of Marriage*, 73.

¹³ Starr, *Reimagining Theologies of Marriage*, 82.

¹⁴ LLF, 281.

¹⁵ Jennifer W. Knust, ‘Marriage, Adultery, and Divorce’, in Benjamin H. Dunning (ed.), [The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality](#). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 521-538, 523.



He thought marriage was a *distressing* institution to become involved with, as it so often is. ‘Those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that’ (1 Cor. 11:28). It produces both anxiety and divided loyalties (11:33-35). The very *unattractive* picture of biblical marriage may be the reason why Jesus and Paul could not commend it.

Luke’s Jesus is even more forthright by dismissing marriage completely, teaching that a married man who *separates* from his wife for the sake of the kingdom of God gains rewards both in this age and in the age to come (18:29). Luke’s Jesus says:

Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection (Luke 20:34-36).

The context makes clear how radical the rejection is. Jesus is addressing a Jewish group – the Sadducees – who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. In this saying of Jesus people who marry are citizens of this world, not of the world to come. They ‘belong to this age’. Their married status actually *endangers* their partaking in the age to come. The conscious avoidance of these sayings in many churches makes their legacy even harder to deal with.

Advocates of family theologies also find it hard to do justice to the sayings of Jesus which make it clear that families in the kingdom of God are not defined by kin, at all, but by the bonds between men, women and children who are his followers (Mk. 3:31-35; Mt. 12:47-50; Lk. 8:19-21). This position is made clear by the title of Jana Bennett’s book, *Water is Thicker than Blood: the ties of baptism are stronger than the ties of kin*.¹⁶ Admitting the huge problem of the clear priority of spiritual kin over biological kin in the NT, Don Browning plausibly proposed the doctrine of ‘kin altruism’, i.e. ‘the preferential treatment people tend to give to their biologically related family members’.¹⁷ Christian parents are all *de facto* kin altruists, but that doesn’t mitigate the discomfort that close attention to the sayings of Jesus might cause us.

These two strands – the mere toleration of marriage and repudiation of the ultimacy of biological family ties – combine with the clear expectation in the Household Codes of the later NT that the majority of free born Christians will organize themselves in hierarchically ordered marital households. I hold the diversity of views in the NT about marriage and families is a positive pastoral benefit for the church,¹⁸ worrisome only to Christians who, like those responsible for the final version of chapter 5 of LLF, wish away the diversity of the material.

¹⁶ Jana M. Bennett, *Water is Thicker than Blood: An Augustinian Theology of Marriage and Singleness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁷ In several places, most influentially in Don S. Browning, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Pamela D. Couture, K. Brynolf Lyon, and Robert M. Franklin, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 71.

¹⁸ Adrian Thatcher, ‘Marriage, the New Testament, and Pastoral Ministry’, *Theology*, 124.6, December, 2021, 420-427. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X211056793>



Principles and Practices

Many of the 'non-academic readers' of the Commission's output will have sharp practical experience of traumatised people, broken relationships and households, damaged children. Theological reflection offers several principles (i.e., not rules or idealizations). Here are a few of them:

1. No-one is ever beyond the healing embrace of God. The form or mode of divine attentiveness to distressed creatures is redeeming love. *Ubi caritas ibi deus est*. Wherever love is, there is God. The *tone* of that love is exemplified in Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia*.¹⁹
2. The realization of redeeming love is partly through the achievement of justice. The doing of justice is a biblical requirement since God is just. Justice has a formal meaning: to render to each their due. Justice as an ethical principle requires that '*Persons and groups of persons ought to be affirmed according to their concrete reality, actual and potential*'.²⁰ Institutions ('groups of persons'), especially marriage, require constant revision to ensure they deliver justice to the people affected by them.
3. 'Marital values' give marriage its authority. Divine authorization of marriage provides no guarantee that it will provide necessary or sufficient conditions for the achievement of love, or of justice (or of fulfilment). Indeed the more patriarchal a marriage is, the less likely it is to produce either. The damage done by patriarchal marriage is deflected and concealed in many churches throughout the world by their uproar over homosexuality. Rather, heterosexuality (and its unexamined models of domineering masculinities) is the far greater problem.
4. Marital values include open regard (potentially life-long); reciprocity, equality, fidelity, generativity, and mutuality.
5. Marital values are found in relationships other than legally and ecclesially recognised marriage. Anglicans are slow to recognize this. Pope Francis takes a more pastoral approach, citing poverty as an understandable reason why couples live together before marriage, acknowledging some unmarried couples are delaying, not avoiding marriage, and observing that 'respect also can be shown for those signs of love [among such couples] which in some way reflect God's own love'.²¹ A Synod of the Russian Orthodox

¹⁹ https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf

²⁰ Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 209 (author's emphasis).

²¹ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (2015), para. 294.

https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf, accessed 11 January, 2021.



Church in 2000, acted against rigorism about cohabitation and ‘remind[ed] pastors that the Orthodox Church also respects common-law marriage’.²²

6. The provision of means of escape from violent relationships, whether marital or not, is a social and moral necessity, not to be impeded by qualms about divorce or biblical exhortations about submission. Pastoral guidance to victims of violence to remain in violent relationships is shocking, based on abusive theology.²³
7. There is no template in the bible or tradition of a rightly structured household for all time. Children require loving, attentive parenting. Ageing parents and grandparents need honouring. Strangers require hospitality. NT churches were mindful of the plight of widows. Every Christian household can be expected to contribute to the ‘common good’.²⁴ What matters most is that all household members are treated in accordance with the values that good marriages embody.
8. The church laments the arrival of unwanted pregnancies, particularly to unpartnered mothers, and as a result of heterosexual promiscuity. Thomas Aquinas condemned ‘simple fornication’ as ‘contrary to the love we should bear our neighbour, for...it is an act of generation performed in a setting *disadvantageous to the good of the child to be born*’.²⁵ Aquinas’ view of sexuality remains medieval, but his joining of sexual ethics to the general consideration of neighbour love, together with his child-centred disapproval of ‘simple fornication’ remain very apt.
9. The church must support appropriate age-related Relationships and Sex Education [RSE]²⁶ in all schools, especially in church schools.
10. The church must speak of sex in a way that connects with the life world of adolescents. At present it remains embarrassed when talking about it. It has nothing to say about the positive value of intimacy on the long road from puberty to marriage (and perhaps beyond). To many its stance on homosexuality is itself immoral. A bold church would develop a RSE programme *based on its own teachings*. It might include:
 - The goodness of human bodies and the desirability and respect due to them as bearers of God’s image;

²² Russian Orthodox Church Department for External Church Relations, *The Basis of the Social Concept*, X.2. <https://mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/>.

²³ See the various publications of The Shiloh Project. <https://www.shilohproject.blog/>

²⁴ For a detailed theological description of ‘the common good’ and what it entails, see David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

²⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae.154.2 (emphasis added).

²⁶ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education/relationships-and-sex-education-rse-secondary>



- The goodness of desire as the embodiment of God's desire for us;²⁷
- What the Great Commandment of 'neighbour-love' requires when the neighbour is a romantic partner, spouse, lover;
- What the Great Commandment of 'neighbour-love' requires for *the loving of oneself*, including one's sexuality, orientation, and self-delight;
- How 'the fruits of the spirit' can frame the meaning of sexual intimacy;
- How equality and reciprocity are found between the Persons of the triune God, and present in just relationships;
- How celibacy and chastity can (and must) be remodelled with regard to duration, and for all people 'suited to their state of life';²⁸
- That pastoral guidance to heterosexual, fertile couples is: don't have full sex unless you are *both* prepared to accept, love and commit to any child you bring into the world (contraceptives can fail);
- How in a fallen world desire can become distorted and result in violence; how the grace of God operates in sacramental relationships, etc., etc.

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²⁷ See Rowan Williams, 'The Body's Grace', at e.g. <https://www.onebodyonefaith.org.uk/shop/the-bodys-grace-pdf-download/>

²⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 2349. <https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/INDEX.HTM>