



# **What would a household look like after four generations if it took the Bible for its guide, as interpreted by the life and teaching of Jesus, and was open to the leading of the Holy Spirit?**

Dr Keith J. White  
Mill Grove

## **Introduction**

It is appropriate that Christians in general consider such a question,<sup>1</sup> and more so a Christian Commission with a focus on households and families. But for the author of this paper, it was even more pertinent. The household into which he was born, had occupied the same house and neighbourhood, and through four generations and had been continuously seeking to live this way faithfully since 1899. What's more, because the family was given the property in which it lived, and cared for orphans and children in need, it is registered as a charity. And this means that there are plenty of records, and it has attracted attention from writers and organisations.<sup>2</sup> It is just possible that there are not many other examples are worldwide of a household or family like this.

The household has its roots in two sources: a family by the name of White; and the desire to offer care for orphans and motherless children, first as informal fostering, and then as a voluntary children's home. But in 1976 there was a decision to lay aside any, and all, labels. From that time until now (the best part of fifty years) the place has been called Mill Grove, a name designed to give no indication of what the community or household is; its vision or aims; the nature of the relationships of those who live within it; or its relationship with the wider world, including neighbourhood, local authority, and church. There has been no strategic plan aiming to become a particular type of household. It has developed in response to the needs of those coming for help. There has been an openness over the past two generations, influenced by understandings of the organic, counter-intuitive nature of the Kingdom of God, as lived and taught by Jesus.

It would be absurd to even hint that Mill Grove is in any way a model household that represents the Bible, the life of Jesus, and the influence of the Holy Spirit in any exceptional way. For the avoidance of doubt, it is vital to state clearly at this point that it is frail, imperfect, provisional and has often fallen short of its own intentions, let alone those of Jesus and its Heavenly Father. But it has sought its inspiration in these sources, and its lack of label or

definition makes it, at the very least, an interesting case: if only to be discarded as imperfect or so unusual as to be put aside in order to pursue more normal or practicable models.<sup>3</sup>

## Perspectives

In responding to the question, I draw together several strands or perspectives, and it is probably helpful to identify these at the start.

First, I am thinking of families and households worldwide: not just as historical or theoretical constructs, but from personal experience, having connected with them over all five continents through the Mill Grove family, from staying with them, and from facilitating many cross-cultural studies and courses.<sup>4</sup> Anything attempt to understand and support households in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain must incorporate such a cross-cultural dimension.

Second, I write as a sociologist who has been particularly interested in family and group dynamics, marriage, and inter-generational relationships and continuities.<sup>5</sup> Over time I have come to see the pivotal importance of some form of marriage covenant as a context and basis for long-term, intergenerational, life together.<sup>6</sup>

Third, I bring a Christian theological perspective, informed not least by working for a period of over 30 years to produce a Bible specifically for households of those around the world who belong to faiths other than Judaism or Christianity, or none.

Fourth, I have been studying the pioneering work of Bruce Reed, and am working on a follow-up to his book, *The Dynamics of Religion*, which explores the relationship between worship, family and work life, which sees them as inter-related rather than separate and given.<sup>7</sup> This means that I have a particular interest in the likes of John Chrysostom (c 347- 407) the early church father who described households as “little churches”, and Horace Bushnell (1802-1876) who saw families as the preferred or God-given locus for Christian education or nurture, rather than “churches”.

Fifth, I have been interested in and engaged with numerous intentional alternative residential communities worldwide, finding that they challenge any blanket ideology that sees a particular form of household or family as best, biblically typical, or appropriate for all people in every situation of peace and war.<sup>8</sup> I have spent the best part of 25 years studying the life and work of Pandita Ramabai with particular attention to the radical home-schools that she founded in India at the turn of the nineteenth century, and Mukti, the residential community that thrives to this day.<sup>9</sup>

Sixth, I suspect that there are hidden but potential links between households and nations both as symbols and as connected in the way that educationalists such as Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852) have believed, and as is hinted at in the preface to traditional marriage ceremonies.<sup>10</sup> When we speak of one, do we draw from or imply the other, I wonder?

And finally, I have explored what happens when the role of actual or physical “parents” is widened to embrace the functions associated with “parenting” in extended families and neighbourhood: in short, how far it is true that it takes a village to raise a child.<sup>11</sup>

## **Drawing from the Biblical Narratives**

Household is a biblical word: in the Jewish Scriptures it is applied to the dwelling and the occupants, both family and servants;<sup>12</sup> and in the NT it is used to describe the dwellings and families of Christians, as well as the community of faith.<sup>13</sup> Historical periods and situations change and can create different contexts and challenges for households and families of whatever type. The Hebrews lived in slave households in Egypt for up to 430 years<sup>14</sup>, before a 40-year period of nomadic wandering.<sup>15</sup> On the historic Passover Night in Egypt and in all Passovers since, the focus of action and faith was in the households, not in some wider gathered faith group.<sup>16</sup> In practice it was the households that often constituted the faith group. The life of the whole travelling community, its tribes, households, religious rituals, and worship were integrally related and inter-dependent. It is not possible or sensible to separate, say, religious life and worship, from everyday life in families. The daily arrival of manna (bread of heaven) on all, and the regular siting of tents around the central “tabernacle” indicate how interwoven they were.

Bruce Reed often reminded me in conversation that for whatever reason or combination of reasons, the Jewish community seemed to him manage the dynamics of religion as they affect all areas of life (including bereavement and death), much better than the Christian church and households. And as I work on a follow-up to his work, one of my current hypotheses is that it may be that the Jewish community has a better and more integrated understanding of household and synagogue, life, work, and faith, than its Christian sisters and brothers. For this reason, I encourage the commission to hold this space open.

When thinking of the earliest Christian households and churches as described or implied in the Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles in the New Testament, there is once again an integration of family life, household and gathered worship, life, and prayer. The contexts are challenging and varied, and this is far from irrelevant. Households live in the real world, and face specific constraints, challenges, and opportunities. The records refer to a time before there were any dedicated buildings for Christian worship, and when temple, synagogues, households, and riverbanks were where “Followers of the Way” gathered to worship and pray. There will be continued discussion about how far these ways of living are to be seen as normative for Christians today (as, for example, the question of signs and wonders), but there is no denying that they are part of our story. At the very least they are not to be forgotten, and probably not to be discarded. There was a time when they were fresh, alive, and a blessing to those who were part of them, and those whom they served.

This means that when responding to the question that concerns us at this moment, we need to avoid any tendency to see the 21<sup>st</sup> century context and the traditions that have accrued since then in church and household as in some way normative or immutable. Rather it may be that a combination of private property, nuclear families, individualism have combined with much else to shape (consciously or otherwise) the way we see and do family and church. Meanwhile around the world there are examples of every sort of type and combination, often necessary in response to pressing conditions, openings, and crises.

With this background in mind what can be said about the nature or type of households as described in the biblical record, with due acknowledgement of their varieties over time and place? There are three universal characteristics.

### **Inclusive**

The books of Moses and the message of the prophets, have a consistent theme running through them: widows, orphans and strangers are to have a special place in households/the community of Israel.<sup>17</sup> And a reason is given: the nation or people of Israel were once slaves and nobodies. It was God who redeemed them, accepted them as His own, and established their “household”. They are never to become exclusive of those in need or different to themselves. God is the Father of every household and the nation/family of Israel. It is He who created the household of Israel. Descriptions of this are graphic, and sometimes leave little to the imagination (e.g. Ezekiel 16). No individual or household can maintain the fiction that it is self-made and independent. When outsiders knock on the door, it will not do to imagine the household is to dispense charity to unfortunate others. For they are not “others”: they are one with those inside. Be they refugees, widows, or orphans, this is the very nature, the DNA of the household. With God as Father there is inclusivity common identity and roots.

In this the life, teaching and example of Jesus are of particularly relevant. The interaction between Jesus and his mother in Mark, Chapter 3, and his question, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” are vital to any exploration of a biblically informed understanding of the nature of households and “God’s way of doing things” (for many, a preferred way of describing the “Kingdom of God”).

Of course, how this works out in practice is something to be worked out in practice, but the principle is not in doubt. Every household is bound, and will want, to welcome and be open-hearted to those seeking help and hospitality.

This is where the example of Mill Grove may be helpful. It has sought to live in this way since 1899, and it does so joyfully because of the calling and example of Jesus. At the same time, living in the real world, the needs often threaten to overwhelm this little household. So how does it work in practice? This is not the place to begin an analysis or description, but it worth noting that this has been a household trying to be faithful to its calling, so the way it deals with challenges and how it functions are likely to be of practical use to any convinced that traditional models of exclusive nuclear and extended families seeking to keep their wealth within their families, and by implication to keep it away from others, will not pass muster.

It may be of more than passing significance that Mill Grove has “spawned” initiatives over the decades, or put another way, that there have been shoots. This is a reminder that the walls or boundaries of the household are not to be confused as the extent of its realm or influence. Among the fruits have been a Christian bookshop on the local high street; a Bible for households around the world; families that deliberately draw from practice and examples learned at Mill Grove; a Christian child care network; the Child Theology Movement; a village church six miles away now entering its 98<sup>th</sup> year; a mother and toddler group; a woodland

Pre-School; a school for children with cerebral palsy; a community association; a weekly lunch for neighbours; testimonies and autobiographies of those who lived at Mill Grove as children. Inclusivity should not be conceived as a one-way street or process: it is both centrifugal and centripetal.

## **Trusting**

As we have noted, the King of the nation of Israel, and the Father of the household is, ultimately, the Creator God, and one of His names is Jehovah-Jireh: God the Provider. There were times in the story of this people, and the households of which it comprised, when they could do nothing but trust Him: when facing the Red Sea with an Egyptian army behind them; and then for forty years in the wilderness relying on God to provide daily bread from heaven.

There were to be many more times when there was nothing responsible to do but trust in God. This was of course especially true during the period of exile. And significantly it was with the demise of formal temple, priestly worship, and ritual, that the community found new understandings of God and His ways (Kingdom). There seem to have been occasions beside the rivers of Babylon, perhaps together, but the real action most of the time was in households.

The period of re-formation as told in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah involved individuals, households and the community as a whole, all ages, seeking anew God's will for them, and trusting this. It was the opposite of an updated version of Babylon and its proverbial tower: "Let's make a name for ourselves."

And when Jesus came, He trusted His Father unreservedly following His will, and entrusting His life into His hands at the end. He also taught His followers to trust God. There is a famous passage in Matthew (6: 28-33, KJV). In its beauty it is unique, but it is in perfect harmony with the rest of the teaching and example of Jesus.

How Jesus as a single man should be taken as a model for households at any period of history is a very pertinent question, but any response will seek to embody the trust that he showed and extolled. The epistles, including the household codes, are an important resource when considering this, not least the parts addressed directly to children. God is speaking to them, and they are members both of specific families/households, and the household of faith which makes up the Church of Jesus Christ.

Above the front doors of Mill Grove are the words, Have Faith in God. This tends to label it in the minds of some Christians as a "faith work" in the mould of George Muller, CT Studd, Hudson Taylor and others.<sup>18</sup> It eschews any publicity, public profile or requests for help and support. It is a fact that it has sought to live in this way since 1899. But a life of faith that trusts God as Heavenly Father, is about far more than food, drink, and clothing. It is about seeking to let God lead the way things are done, rather than being squeezed into prevailing moulds. And it sees times of testing, such as the recent Covid epidemic, as opportunities to rethink priorities and patterns of life, to look for God-given opportunities, rather than to see them as a threat to our independence and the status quo.

If the trinitarian framework is to be applied specifically here, it would speak of Jesus as the author and pioneer of the faith of the household of faith.

### **A Place of Good News**

The third strand is that such a household is a place of Good News. People are drawn to it not because it preaches at them, but because there is love, joy and peace. There is a welcome for all without the need to plead or explain yourself.

Before the infamous Jonestown Massacre in 1978, there used to be a famous advertisement for Kool-Aid in the US: "Every community needs a Kool-Aid family". It showed neighbours being welcomed to a back yard where Kool-Aid was freely available, as part of a warm welcome and generous hospitality. Leaving aside this branded product, it is not difficult to see that neighbourhoods thrive because of households like that.

Because households drawing inspiration from the Scriptures know that they have received everything freely, and by grace, not merit, they share and give everything freely. They are not like places selling or dispensing bottled water, but communities with springs of living water flowing through them. All are invited to drink and bathe. Their residents know that they have been forgiven through the blood of Christ, and in Him it is their nature to forgive.

Jesus is revered, and His risen presence through His Spirit infuses daily life and relationships. There is something of a freshness, liveliness, spontaneity about the welcome and the way of life.

It means that flexibility, provisionality and spontaneity are built into the way buildings are designed, furniture, rooms and doors, as well and as part of their way of life. Just as a Jewish household keeps an extra cup at the Passover table in case Elijah turns up, so this household will always be ready for a knock at the door before, during and after meals, and there will always be room for the unexpected guest, by the very nature of things.

The parts of family life that are remembered through the generations are the times of celebration, play, shared holidays, and yearly festivals such as Easter and Christmas. The place exudes a sense of humour and relishes unexpected visitors. Such gatherings often lead to unexpected new dynamics and fun. And they tend to spread into and draw in and from the neighbourhood.

At Mill Grove for example there is a tradition of singing carols to the neighbours on Christmas Day. There is no collection, and we give Bethlehem carol sheets to those emerging from their front doors so that they have a record of the words sung. One household exemplifies Good News in action. The wife and mother is from East Germany, and every Christmas she comes out with her copy of *Silent Night* in German. We sing it together, and she shares sweets with our household and any others who gather. Memories of the famous truce on Christmas Day during World War I are not far away. This is good news spanning former enemies, and it has emerged naturally from an outgoing way of life.

Another example of the way good news is communicated unconsciously. We have had a holiday base in North Wales since 1976, and year by year we use the beach reached by a path from the back of our house. At the end of our stay in August 2021 an Indian family waited for us as we made our way back along this path. The mother spoke of how they had been coming to the same beach as us for many years, but that due to a family bereavement this might be their last time in the area. She wanted to speak to us to thank us for all that we had done to make their holidays and times on the beach so special. We were rather embarrassed: not being conscious of having invited them to join our games of cricket, our swimming, our trips on kayaks and dinghies, or our tide fights. She smiled. "It was simply a privilege", she said, "to see you enjoying yourselves year by year, people of all ages and backgrounds. And we agreed as a family that we must thank you before it was too late."

## **Conclusion**

So that's a brief and very sketchy response to the question informed by the experiences and perspectives I have mentioned. An insurmountable difficulty is that, by its nature, it can put Mill Grove in the foreground, when my intention is the very opposite. Rather, I see the very ordinary life of Mill Grove demonstrating how households and families that seek God-given patterns, rhythms and values, find that they are blessed and a blessing despite their limitations, frailties and faults. What's more, it has been my privilege to experience the three characteristics around the world in communities of different faiths and cultures, and in households and residential communities of very different sizes and natures. God's way, His Kingdom, is typified by diversity rather than uniformity.

The Commission is aware of the traditions and norms of those around us in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain and of the assumptions that control and guide the type and shape of household accommodation, and neighbourhood and urban plans. As a rough guide people expect or are expected to live in their own houses or flats either alone, with our blood relatives, or those we have married. To live in another type of accommodation such as a care home, children's home, refugee camp, and so on is seen as a last resort. A basic rule of thumb is that family is friendly and the norm; other types of living together are "institutional" and likely to be unsafe if not dangerous. The rule bears little resemblance to the facts of the matter around the world. Statistically most abuse, sadly, happens in domestic settings. But the planners and policy makers will continue to build what they optimistically call "homes" with a clear idea of the norm. And the myth is perpetuated. People will continue to express sympathy for all those who grew up in alternative settings, usually tone-deaf to any other narrative.

Meanwhile there is the question of how we conceive of the household of faith, often described as the Church of Jesus Christ. Some local expressions of church seem to seek to model themselves on families; others on temples (with altars and priests); some on historic parish models; some on ecclesial communities such as monasteries. The question that has become increasingly important to me in seeking to train prospective ministers and leaders,<sup>19</sup> is how such places or groups seek to relate to and support the households (from individuals living by themselves, to families and larger groups) that go to make the whole "gathered

community of faith". How much time and energy goes into equipping and inspiring households to be inclusive, trusting places alive with the Good News of Jesus Christ?

A response to the question along the lines outlined in this paper is a challenge both to each Christian household, and to the whole household of faith. For it does seem that the three characteristics of biblical households are what each is called to be. What's more, as households and the gathered community of faith, we are all called to pray the Lord's Prayer. As we address our Heavenly Father, how inclusive, or wide is the "We"? Whoever we are, will we, like Jesus, trust our Father for our daily bread? And will our households be infused and inspired by God's Spirit to become welcoming spaces and places of forgiveness which is at the heart of the good news of the Kingdom?

---

<sup>1</sup> As readers may guess, there is an implicit trinitarian underpinning to the question: God as Father (Mother); Jesus as the beloved Son in the household sharing the table with all and sundry; the Holy Spirit breathing life, relationships, insights, connections and creativity...

<sup>2</sup> Including for example, Bob Holman who wrote a book about Mill Grove, "*Not Like Any Other Home*" (Saltcoats: Campaign Literature, 1994); Rt Hon. Patrick Jenkin who wrote a foreword to *A Place for Us*; Sir Richard Bowlby, son of Dr John Bowlby, who wrote a foreword to *The Growth of Love; The Therapeutic Care Journal*. There have been several government departments charged with inspecting the place over large parts of its existence.

<sup>3</sup> Several factors combine to make Mill Grove unique: the large buildings; the extent and quality of the surrounding land that belongs to it; the long-term-commitment of those who have served as its leaders (just three couples since 1899); and the support of individuals and churches which means that everything has been accomplished without any publicity or fund-raising.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Keith J. White, *Childhoods in Cultural Contexts* (Penang: Compassion International, 2011)

<sup>5</sup> For example, Keith J. White "The Sociological Significance of Marriage", *Annual Review* (St George's House Windsor Castle, 1992) 50-67; "Life Together", *Crucible* (July-September 2005) 24-30

<sup>6</sup> It was only during 2021 that the penny dropped that Mill Grove has been blessed by three secure marriages at the heart of the extended family spanning the whole period from 1899 to the present day. To see this element as incidental to its functioning and well-being seems to overlook what the children and former children have said about it. Ruth, my wife and I, have been committed to the household of Mill Grove since we married in 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Reed, *The Dynamics of Religion* (London, DLT, 1978). See also Keith J. White *The Growth of love* (Abingdon: BRF, 2008)

<sup>8</sup> For example, Keith J. White, *Residential Community: Last Resort or Radical Alternative?* (London: Social Workers Christian Fellowship, 1988). All these dimensions find expression in the regular columns that I have written for *The Therapeutic Care Journal* since 2000, and available in *Reflections on Living with Children*, Vols I and II (London: WTL 2010; 2016)

<sup>9</sup> Keith J. White, *Let the Earth Hear Her Voice! The Life and Work of Pandita Ramabai* (Banglore: Primalogue, 2022; London: WTL 2022)

<sup>10</sup> For example, "...marriage enriches societies and strengthens communities".

<sup>11</sup> If it is true that it takes a village to raise a child, there are ideologies, structures, institutions, professions, and professionals, including planners, that tend to militate against it, singly and in various combinations.

<sup>12</sup> בַּיִת (bayith)

<sup>13</sup> οἶκος (oikos)

<sup>14</sup> Exodus 12: 40-41

<sup>15</sup> For example, Deuteronomy Chapters 1 and 2

<sup>16</sup> Exodus Chapters 11-12

---

<sup>17</sup> For example, Exodus 22; Deuteronomy 27; Isaiah 1; Jeremiah 49; Zechariah 7; Malachi 3.

<sup>18</sup> George Muller (1805-1898) cared for thousands of children near Bristol and prayed for money and resources to continue the work rather than appeal for funds; Charles Studd (1860-1931) and Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) were both missionaries who believed that God would provide for a Christian's needs without publicity, saving or borrowing.

<sup>19</sup> Since 1978 I have been an associate tutor at Spurgeon's College.