

Introduction

Families We Make

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Recently we sent a greeting card to a family unrelated to us, but who are very special people in our lives. We often do things together, frequently talk on the phone or share e-mails and photos, visit in each other's homes, help each other with tasks, celebrate special occasions, and give each other gifts. Most especially, perhaps, for people in our stage of life, the children of this family call us "Grandma Karen" and "Grandpa Ron." While we have a family of our own that is most dear to us, we wanted to acknowledge the close ties we enjoy with this young family, and to thank them for including us in their lives and giving us opportunity to "be family" with them. The words on the card we chose seemed very appropriate: "Each of us has the family we were given and the family we make for ourselves." The card identified an important truth: family is as much a verb as it is a noun.

When we think of "family" as a noun, we tend to focus on the *structure*, that is, the configuration of the people that make it up. We differentiate between families with labels such as *nuclear*, *extended*, *step/blended*, or *single-parent*, etc. Even unrelated individuals who develop emotional attachments, help each other with tasks, and think of themselves as "family" are given structural definition. *Ecological* families, the theorists call them (Garland & Pancoast, 1990; Hartman & Laird, 1983). Defining family as a noun (albeit with adjectives) helps to designate groups of individuals with similar characteristics. Such definitions can facilitate ministry to families that is focused on the unique needs that their structure presents.

However, there is another way to define "family" that intrigues us. It focuses on the way persons behave toward one another. This *functional* definition of family looks beyond structure to what a group of people mean to each other, what they do for and with each other, and how their relationship endures across time (Garland, 1999). As Bryan Craig points out (see "Family is a Verb"), "family" by this understanding is a dynamic action word. It "is not so much a label to describe *who* we are as it is a way of describing *how* we care for one another" (Craig, 1994).

The roots of this concept of "family" go back beyond the creation of humankind to the close relationship within the Trinitarian Godhead. Scripture declares "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16) and a century ago theologian Augustus Strong reflected, "Scripture compels us . . . to maintain that there are personal relations between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, independently of creation and of time; in other words we maintain that Scripture reveals to us a social Trinity and an intercourse of love apart from and before the existence of the universe" (Strong, 1907, p. 326). The intimate relationship of love in the Godhead was surely in the divine mind when God said, "Let us create humankind in our image, after our likeness." Sang Lee draws the conclusion that marriage and family, as part of the created world, were meant to glorify God by being "the repetition in time and space of the supreme beauty of the self-giving love within God's inner-trinitarian life" (Lee, 1986, p. 119).

What meaning and purpose such an understanding of “family” can give to life in our individual households, whatever their structure may be! How important that we not think of family only in terms of our legal ties in marriage or adoption and our connection by blood and birth. We become family indeed by the attachment that develops through the sharing of self-giving love. In the absence of such love, the nomenclature and form of “family” may be there, but without the defining ingredient.

While on the one hand we uphold the divine blueprint for marriage and parenting and family living, wanting to do all we can to strengthen families in their pursuit of God’s ideals, we also realize that the divine plan is rarely even approached in a world distorted by sin. Scripture chronicles a great deal of diversity as well as distress in families of God’s people, yet portrays how God helps individuals to experience aspects of self-giving love and to become family through the workings of His grace in the midst of brokenness. Some of these situations are reflected in this resource. Jacob’s marriages to the sisters Leah and Rachel resulted in great pain in the household, yet God had surprising endings for Leah which she could not have guessed (see “Happy End for an Unloved Wife”). In the story of the healing of Naaman, we are reminded of how God uses the influence of a faithful young person to bring blessing even in the midst of her servitude to a foreign military general (see “God’s Way Versus My Way”). Single individuals often wonder where they fit in God’s scheme of family living. Roberto Badenas’ article “Jesus was Single Too” shows how Christ has opened the door of inclusiveness to all in His family. In fact, as Dr. Badenas reminds us in the sermon “Who are My Family?” whatever our life circumstances, “by the grace of our heavenly Father we become brothers and sisters of each other in the church.”

That God loves people and families in all their varied situations is a source of abundant encouragement to us today. His care for them and for us can lead us to a deeper appreciation of widely varied family structures among His people and to greater efforts in our ministry to our homes and to the church—the household of God—as we become family indeed.

References

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