

# THE CHURCH AND THE FAMILY: AN ETHICAL TASK

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There has been a kind of "turn to the family" on the part of the Christian churches in the past decade, manifesting a concern for what is judged to be the western family in "crisis." Unfortunately, the voices of religion have had little more effect than the voices of psychology or sociology in either healing or empowering the family, and they have had perhaps less success in interpreting the difficulties which beset the contemporary family as an institution. This failure may represent simply the intractability of the problems which individuals and families face. It may also, however, represent an almost tragic perception on the part of many persons that the Christian tradition regarding family life is today too oppressive to yield a prophetic, a healing or a freeing word.

It will not do, of course, to think of the voices of the churches as all speaking the same word. The Roman Catholic and many of the Protestant traditions have differed greatly in regard to their understandings of the form and function of the family in the life of the Christian community. Still, today all of the Christian churches face similar challenges to the theological and ethical adequacy of their teachings regarding the family. If the Roman Catholic tradition must, for example, for the first time take seriously marriage and family as a way of Christian living on a par with celibacy and community of unmarried persons, the Protestant traditions must think again about the roles of men as well as women in the family and about the possibility of life-styles which do not fit the pattern of the traditional family. Questions of the meaning of family life, the justice of its structures, and its relation to the rest of human and Christian life challenge in some way the heart of each tradition. The insights of one become the issues of another, and contemporary experience yields a clearer common need to discern the ways of faithfulness possible for persons in this time and conducive to the well-being of future generations.

An important part of the church's institutional response to difficulties in families has been its efforts to articulate specific ethical norms, or action-guides, for persons in their family lives. There is considerable

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evidence (statistical as well as impressionistic) that many of these norms or action-guides have not met the present needs of families. They have not changed significantly the behavior patterns of persons, but perhaps more importantly, they have not always seemed relevant to the questions and struggles which characterize the lives of individuals and families. I am less interested here in examining these specific ethical norms than in considering the broad framework, or perspective, in which such norms are developed and their application discerned. Such a perspective includes the experience of persons in families—or the concrete reality of family life. A prophetic word addresses the experience of its hearers; and ethical norms must take account of the reality of moral agents and objects of their actions.

It belabors the obvious to note that if the Christian community's theological and ethical reflection is to address effectively the problems and needs of the family, much depends on the accuracy of the analysis of these problems and needs. Ethical imperatives will be quite different if one thinks that the fundamental problem of the Christian family is, for example, a "contraceptive" selfish mentality, or a real powerlessness before vast economic and social forces outside the family, or inaccessibility on the part of families to the experience of the sacred because of inadequate faith development and inadequate forms of Christian worship.

Moreover, much depends on the adequacy of one's understanding of the variations and complexities of contemporary family life. Without this, the wrong words may be spoken to the wrong persons. What might it mean, for example, for the church to speak a word of moral judgment against "unbridled disordered passion" to husbands and wives whose struggle for survival is so great that even the memories of past passion have faded? Or what might it mean for the church to call for self-sacrificial love from women whose whole lives have been based on that ideal, but without mutuality of response and without the respect of those who call them to such love? Or what can condemnations of "materialism" mean when they are the only words heard by single parents stretched to their limit by financial pressures, loneliness, and even fear? What will result from children's hearing the word of commands to obey parents whom they cannot for good reasons respect?

What, then, are some of the needs and problems in the experience of the contemporary family which call out for the church's concern? There is something to be said for focusing on the most acute problems—not because all families suffer them so, nor because they alone call for theological and pastoral response, but because they are sometimes life and death problems and hence have a kind of moral priority. Moreover, if the extremes are not recognized and responded to, often the ordinary human needs and problems of which they are the extreme form are not recognized and receive no response.

In any case, and however briefly, four major problem areas may be identified (among the many that vie for central concern). (1) There is, first, the life and death problem of family violence—between husbands and wives, parents and children, adult children and elderly parents, siblings and relatives of all kinds. (2) Second, but as we shall see, closely related to the first, there are what may be called ongoing “structural” problems in the family. The most visible of these is perhaps the struggle with old and new gender roles in the family, but there are also problems with the role of children in the family and the place of aged persons. Moreover, the variety of family structures for the contemporary North American family may not be a problem in itself; yet often enough the absence of a parent or the isolation of the nuclear family or the stresses of multi-generational homes yield experiences of “partiality of home.” There tends, too, to be difficulty in the assessment and acceptance of variously structured families by the Christian community as a whole. (3) Then there is the problem of the seeming inability (often so painful and so terrible) of persons to blend their lives together—the problem of the breakdown of marriages, the escalating rate of divorce. (4) And finally, there is the overall problem of the interconnectedness of the family with other institutions and systems in the world around it—with the economic, social, and political systems on which the family depends and by which it is importantly shaped.

If these, then, are key problem areas in the experience of contemporary families, what can be said about the theological and ethical task of the church in their regard? On the supposition that it is problems like these which challenge traditional understandings, I want to argue that there is a two-fold task for the reflection of the church regarding the Christian family. There is, first, a task which does not immediately address specific problems but which is essential if they are eventually to be addressed. This is the task of reassessing the place of the family within the whole of Christian life. The second task is to begin to address specific problems by examining the family itself as a place of justice. Both of these tasks are preliminary in the sense that they are necessary though not sufficient for an adequate Christian theological ethics of the family—necessary for a theoretical basis of such an ethics and for its pastoral efficacy, insufficient for meeting ultimately the depth and complexity of problems and opportunities which characterize the experience of family life today.

### I. *The Place of the Family*

It may appear odd to insist that we have theological work to do regarding the “place” of the family in the Christian community. Such a question seems to have been laid to rest long ago by the various Christian traditions. Yet in this question lies a fundamental struggle for Christian

self-understanding and for clarity regarding the ways in which Christian faith ought to be lived. The critical nature of the question is evidenced less by its resolution in varying traditions than by the intensity of the historical conflicts among these resolutions. The unsettled status of the question can be seen in the growing dissatisfaction of both Roman Catholics and Protestants with the past resolutions within their own traditions.

### *Historical Placement*

Today's general "turn to the family" by all of the Christian churches is not completely consistent with the history of Christian attitudes in relation to the family. A large part of that history is one of deep ambivalence, sometimes open hostility, toward marriage and family life. No wonder, then, that when persons in the name of the church struggle to speak prophetic words of support and guidance to today's family, the words sometimes appear to ring hollow, empty of the life they intend to give. But from the beginning, the Christian message was understood to be a sword dividing families, a call to loyalties beyond the family.<sup>1</sup> While the New Testament affirms marriage and childbearing as a part of divine creation, honorable in themselves and potentially open to the holiness of God, it nonetheless portrays a faith which asked persons to "hate" father, mother, spouse, children, to "forget" wives or husbands they had married, to leave all things in pursuit of something greater than ordinary family life. Moreover, the early church believed it was close to, and hence living in anticipation of, a new age which would exclude marrying and giving in marriage. Family ties and responsibilities were relativized in favor of an imminent Kingdom of God in which unity with God and God's people would transcend special relationships begun before its dawning.

Enemies of the early church accused its members of being domestic troublemakers. The truth in such a claim was that Christians did not give primary loyalty to the Roman Empire's concern to build a society on the foundation of the family. Christians appear as a "new family," based not on blood ties but on common loyalty to Jesus Christ. As a movement, Christianity attracted women and slaves, as well as men and slaveowners, with a magnetism that created social tension. The earliest persecutions of the church were in part initiated by husbands jealous of the commitments of their wives to the companionships and works of the Christian community. The pagan philosopher, Celsus, accused Christians (with some basis in fact) of disrupting the bonds of society by making children rebel against their fathers and schoolteachers.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>I am indebted for much of the historical material here to the work of Rowan A. Greer, "The Family and the Early Church," Unpublished manuscript, 1979.

<sup>2</sup>See Robert A. Nisbet, *The Social Philosophers: Community and Conflict in Western Thought* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1973), p. 178.

Christian attitudes toward martyrdom sometimes manifested extreme forms of rejection of family responsibilities. Women left husbands and children to “run to martyrdom,” and men were sometimes encouraged to forsake wealth, wife, and children, brothers and sisters, with the assurances that the renunciation of human ties (whether for martyrdom or for a life of ministry and prayer) would bring the achievement of spiritual ties.

From the fourth century on the negative attitude of Christianity toward the family was expressed most clearly in the monastic movement. Monasticism took the place of martyrdom in offering the ultimate form of Christian renunciation of attachment to the things of the world. It flourished as a protest against the domestication of Christianity, the loss of radical forms of life and witness, and the relaxation of tension toward a future beyond an illusory identification with the world.

Through all of this, of course, there were repeated efforts to strike a balance in Christian evaluations of marriage and family. Very early in the life of the church household codes were delineated to mitigate the socially disruptive effects of anti-family trends in the Christian community.<sup>3</sup> Later, Gregory Nazianzen and others urged solicitude for family responsibilities when persons were considering risking martyrdom. Basil and Benedict required a spouse’s consent and provision for family financial responsibilities before married persons could be received into a monastery. Periodically church councils recalled Christians to the respect due to marriage and to familial bonds and duties. John Chrysostom taught that, while the spiritual life of married persons was in principle inferior to that of monks, it could nevertheless become superior because it was achieved in a context marked by greater obstacles, greater difficulties.

All of this notwithstanding, the themes of asceticism, of union with God through contemplation, and of the church itself as a “substitute” family, converged to sustain through centuries a view of marriage and family as subordinate to other forms of Christian living and other spheres of Christian works. When the church affirmed the family’s importance, it almost always did so only in terms of its functional role in socializing children, in keeping order in society. The family was to prepare persons for more important things in life; it produced persons for lives of prayer and solitude, or for ministry in the church, or for political leadership in the world. The church issued a call to greatness which was almost always understood as a call to go beyond the family. As long as the family prepared persons for this call, and released them to it, the church bothered little about the family.

<sup>3</sup>See Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Discipleship and Patriarchy: Early Christian Ethos and Christian Ethics in a Feminist Theological Perspective,” *1982 Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, p. 143.

Only in the fourteenth century did there come a significant enough shift in Christian self-understanding to allow a new evaluation of marriage and family life.<sup>4</sup> Renaissance humanists began a massive change in focus from otherworldliness to social responsibility, from renunciation and withdrawal to self-discipline and achievement in a world where family and productive labor were combined. It was the Protestant Reformation, of course, which completed this movement and dramatically articulated a new understanding of the place of the family in Christian life. Now the theater of God's activity is the common life of everyday affairs. Not only in the cloister, nor even the sanctuary, but "in the market place, behind the plow, and in front of the stove" is God's work.<sup>5</sup> What had been previously relegated to a subordinate and wholly instrumental position now takes center stage. There is, according to Martin Luther, no higher social calling than marriage. And raising children is the "noblest and most precious work of them all."<sup>6</sup>

In the Reformation traditions, then, we may expect to find today credible words of healing and empowerment for the family. Here the family has been taken seriously for centuries, without ambivalence or hostility. Here there is experience built upon experience, and understanding should abound. Even here, however, twentieth century Christians find themselves troubled by the words of the church. First of all, the theology of the Reformers was not powerful enough to withstand the cultural shift of the nineteenth century which brought the separation between the private world of the family and the public world of productive work. With that separation came the relegation of the family to a realm for women and children. Once more, then, the important things in life seemed to take place beyond the family, in the world of the church or society—in the world of men. Nominally the father belonged in the family as its ruler and its pastor. In reality, the worlds of men and women drifted farther and farther apart.

Second, Reformation theology of the family removed Christian ambivalence toward the family to such an extent that women were left with no alternatives at all to the life-style of wife and mother. Christian interpretations of "female nature" were locked together with the central importance of the family to Christian life.<sup>7</sup> So unbreakable was this connection that when a rising secular consciousness allowed the separ-

<sup>4</sup>See John K. Yost, "The Traditional Western Concept of Marriage and the Family: Rediscovering Its Renaissance-Reformation Roots," *Andover Newton Quarterly* 20 (March, 1980), 169-80.

<sup>5</sup>William H. Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), p. 133.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>7</sup>See Beverly Harrison, "L'Effet des industrialisation sur le role des femmes dans la societe," *Concilium* 111 (1976), 91-103. See also Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

ture of men from the center of family life, women's worlds were more and more isolated but more and more religiously established. No earlier church ambivalence toward family ties provided other options for Protestant women or offered critical distance from an essentially patriarchal structure for the Christian family. In the late twentieth century a theological task remains regarding the place of the family in Protestant understandings of the whole of the Christian life.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, on the other hand, the pattern established in the early church and reinforced in the centuries that followed remains almost wholly intact today. Though marriage was elevated to the dignity of a sacrament in the twelfth century, it remained a lesser calling in the Christian community, subordinate to virginity as a way of living one's sexual life, and purely instrumental in relation to the church and society. Major developments in the Roman Catholic theology of marriage and family have tended not to change the basic evaluation of their place in Christian life, but to reconsider the nature of the marriage bond, the purposes of sexual activity, etc.<sup>8</sup> Even Vatican II, which made significant efforts to foster "the nobility of marriage and family," nonetheless sounded notes of moralistic suspicion as often as it lauded the family "as a kind of school of deeper humanity."<sup>9</sup> The 1980 international Synod of Bishops struggled to clarify the meaning and mission of the Christian family in the twentieth century. Its insights were articulated by John Paul II within a framework which compared marriage to virginity and celibacy and reaffirmed the church's defense "throughout her history" of the "superiority of this charism [virginity] to that of marriage, by reason of the wholly singular link which it has with the kingdom of God."<sup>10</sup> Twentieth century efforts in the Roman Catholic tradition to move beyond a ranking of higher and lower ways of Christian living are countered still by largely unanalyzed beliefs which hold the family to an inferior place. But in this tradition, too, many are troubled by the words of the church, and a task emerges for the reassessment of the meaning and function of the Christian family.

### *Contemporary Re-placement*

My rendering of the history of Christian understandings of the place of the family may seem to argue for a reassessment which will once and for all give it priority over other ways and spheres of Christian life. This, however, is not my aim. On the contrary, a reevaluation of the meaning of marriage and family may finally offer the possibility of valuing a

<sup>8</sup>See Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), pp. 397-452.

<sup>9</sup>*Gaudium et Spes* I, 47 and 52.

<sup>10</sup>Pope John Paul II, "The Apostolic Exhortation on the Family," II, 16, in *Origins* 11 (Dec. 24, 1981), 443.

variety of ways of living a life of faith without the need to subordinate one in order to enhance another. It is not sufficient, however, to extol the needed functions of the family or even to declare that it is no longer to be considered inferior to, for example, a celibate life-style dedicated to the church. It is, rather, necessary to take explicitly the very concerns which led Christians of the past to relegate the family to secondary importance, and to address these concerns in the light of both contemporary understandings of the family and modern theological developments in Christian self-understanding. This is to say that efforts at reassessment of the place of the family must take seriously the underlying reasons for past subordination of marriage and family to a celibate life-style and to activity beyond the home. These reasons have been dealt with only in very small part by the Protestant challenge to the Roman Catholic tradition; they have not been met head on by contemporary Roman Catholics who want to equalize marriage and virginity; and they remain either as hidden stumbling blocks or obscure guides for the whole of the Christian tradition.

But what are the underlying reasons on the basis of which Christian teaching has relativized the family? We have already seen that early emphases on such things as asceticism, contemplation, eschatology, and the church as substitute family, served to weight the scales against the family. Undergirding one or more of these emphases are three beliefs which, from the beginning, limited and sometimes repudiated the importance of marriage and the family in the general Christian life. (1) Marriage and family were believed to belong to the "things of this world" which must be transcended for the sake of the kingdom of God. (2) Marriage is inextricably bound up with human sexuality, and sexuality itself is always in some way suspect. (3) The sphere of the family is primarily women's sphere, which makes it historically and in principle subordinate to men's sphere, to the public worlds of church and society. Let me try very briefly to explicate these beliefs and to indicate ways in which they may be directly challenged as continuing bases for the secondary status of marriage and family life.

### *The Things of This World*

First, then, the concern to transcend family ties for the sake of the kingdom of God is not just an "otherworldly" concern. It represents not just a movement of withdrawal from the world nor only a high valuation of renunciation and asceticism. Rather, it is itself based in the further belief that marriage and involvement in a family are less conducive than a celibate life-style to (a) a *whole and absolute love for God* in Jesus Christ, (b) a *universal love of all humankind*, and (c) an *eschatological witness*, an affirmation of a hope which transcends what is possible in the present. This latter three-fold belief lies, I am convinced, deep in a



traditional Roman Catholic understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

In this tradition, the reason why marriage and family are less conducive than a celibate life-style to a *whole and absolute love of God* is that they have been thought to entail a “divided heart” and preoccupation with the things of this world as over against the things of God. If marriage does not “divide” the heart, it is thought at best to offer a way to union with God which is indirect, mediated through love of and commitment to another human person. Celibate love, on the other hand, is committed whole and directly, immediately, to God. In this regard then, it is argued that this latter is a superior way of loving, more radically and intimately open to union with God. Moreover, as a life-style, celibacy provides freedom for contemplation of God and for total dedication to the works of the kingdom of God.

Though this traditional distinction between marriage and family on the one hand and virginity or celibacy on the other continues to inform church judgments regarding the relative importance of each, it is a distinction which can no longer, in my view, be sustained. Development of the doctrine of the Mystical Body within the Roman Catholic tradition has, when taken seriously, dispossessed it of this distinction as a basis for the inferiority of marriage and family. According to the doctrine of the Mystical Body, to love another human person with Christian love is to love that other in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ in that other. “Whoever sees you sees Me.” Human love and divine love need not divide the heart. Somewhat ironically, contemporary critiques of past prohibitions of friendships among celibates signify the relevance of this insight for all persons, whether married or not married, celibate or not celibate.

This does not, of course, totally equate all love of God with love of neighbor. The heart is not divided by love of another human person, but it is also not wholly expressed in this love. The self-transcendence of anyone’s power of loving—whether married or celibate—is not limited or exhausted by even the greatest of human loves. All Christians, then, are called to a total love of God—with their whole heart and mind and strength—a love which is neither made indirect, nor is it constrained, by love of human persons.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>This way of understanding the relation between the love of God and the love of a human person is especially important for women’s perception of the possibility of direct love of God which is not mediated through love of a husband. Its special importance for women comes not from the fact that women love differently from men, but from the historical situation in which women in particular were taught that marriage precluded for them a direct relationship with God comparable to that of the virgin. It is also interesting to note that this problem was not addressed by the Protestant reformers when they rejected celibacy in favor of marriage for the majority of Christians. The reason it was not addressed was that the Reformers generally did not talk about a direct love of God in the sense used here. Reformation spirituality tended to speak of faith in God and love for neighbor, implying on the one hand a reverential awe and even distance in relation to God, and on the other hand, a critique of the incorporation of *eros* into *agape* if the latter was directed toward God.

Finally, as the Roman Catholic tradition has taken more seriously the sacramental view of creation which is in many ways so characteristic of its view of reality, the “things of this world” have come more and more to be understood as the things of God. To be called to share in the mission of Jesus Christ, the building of the kingdom of God, is to be called to relate to one’s neighbor and to struggle to make the world a place where justice and neighbor-love can flourish. Sustaining such a vision, whether in contemplation or in action, is required of all Christians whether or not they live out their lives in the context of a Christian family.

If married life (and family) is not in principle less conducive than a celibate life-style to a whole and absolute love for God in Jesus Christ, the argument may remain that it does not conduce as well to a *universal love of humankind*. After all, both Catholic and Protestant traditions have often charged that marriage and family life are based on self-referential rather than self-sacrificial love, on motives of self interest rather than universal regard for others. Preferential love for one’s family, in this view, conflicts with loyalty and service to a larger community. As Reinhold Niebuhr observed, “The truth is that every immediate loyalty is a potential danger to higher and more inclusive loyalties, and an opportunity for the expression of sublimated egoism.”<sup>12</sup>

In this argument we encounter a tension in the Christian life which may be described in terms of *eros* versus *agape*, and preferential love versus social responsibility, but also in terms of individuality versus community, and obligations to the near neighbor versus the far. Christians believed from the beginning that the ideal for Christian love was somehow a universal love for all persons. Yet their experience of the limitations of the human heart was realistic enough to make them aware that Christian faith did not automatically enlarge the heart to embrace one’s enemies as well as one’s friends, the larger society as well as the close community. In response to this awareness two movements emerged in the church through time. The first strained against the family in favor of the church as “new family” and the whole of humankind as potential hearers of the gospel and recipients of Christian service. The second, however, saw the family itself as “domestic church,” and as such, the place where human love could be transformed and *agape* could be nurtured, where the Christian community could be modelled and opened to a more and more inclusive love. This latter way of thinking culminated in part in the Reformation when, for example, Luther concluded that the “station” of the family, like every other station in life, is itself an ethical agent compelling other-centered love.<sup>13</sup> In the

<sup>12</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Scribner’s, 1932), p. 47.

<sup>13</sup>See Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, tr. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p. 6.

twentieth century, the Roman Catholic tradition, too, has acknowledged the view that the family can both serve the church and embody it precisely by its mode of loving and its modes of sharing.<sup>14</sup>

Important elements in contemporary Christian self-understanding make it difficult to see how secondary status can be maintained for marriage and family on the basis of their limited conduciveness for universal love. A growing sense of the corporate nature of Christian life and destiny, along with the recognition that love and communion with others cannot be only in the abstract, challenge the family to its own self-transcendence. Any authentic Christian life-style must offer the possibility of moving beyond individualism to communality, beyond concern for self to unselfish and even universal love. The family need not today be only a self-centered "haven in a heartless world," but a place of struggle on the frontiers of Christian *agape* and a proving ground for ways of sharing in a world of scarcity and need.

But, finally, can it be argued that marriage and family are inferior to another way of Christian living because they bear a less clear *witness to Christian hope*? Every authentic Christian life-style, it is true, must hold within it the possibility of eschatological witness, witness of a transcendent hope (and even a hope in the ultimate transformation of this world). In the early years of the church, as we have seen, marriage and family could be relativized in importance because the new age, when there would be no marrying or giving in marriage, was believed to be imminent. Virginity then constituted a radical sign of hope in this new age. One needed above all to stand faithful and to wait, to care for the suffering of others and to share the gospel, but not to try to build a new world which would soon pass away. As centuries went by and expectation of the ending of this world waned, still there persisted the ideal of virginity, precisely as radical sign of hope in a now distant future.

Today our apocalyptic sense is reawakened. Now, however, we fear the apocalypse of terror and destruction. We vacillate between fear of a negative future and despair of any future at all. But today, then, one of the greatest acts of radical hope and signs of belief in a possible future (both a future that transcends this world and a future within this world) can be the choice to bear children. Just as remaining unmarried, or married and childless, can be signs of Christian hope, so at the heart of an ongoing family there is the potential for eschatological witness and a call to Christian hope.

### *Sexuality Reconsidered*

It was not only interpretations of the call to a total love of God and universal love of humankind, nor even an eschatological view of Chris-

<sup>14</sup>See *Gaudium et Spes* I, 48. Here for the first time an ecumenical council refers to the family as a "domestic church."

tian life, that made so strong an ideal of renouncing family ties throughout much of the history of Christianity. It was also, from the beginning, a pessimistic view of human sexuality. Indeed, part of what was thought to get in the way of full union with God and truly universal love of neighbor was ultimately the presence of sexuality in married life. Marriage and involvement in family will never reach their full affirmation in the Christian community unless sexuality can be interpreted as not a hindrance but a help to love of God and all human persons. For all of the churches' efforts in the twentieth century to move beyond a negative assessment of sexual activity, they remain to a great extent caught in past ideas and attitudes of suspicion in its regard.<sup>15</sup> If this is to change in any finally significant way, the historical connection between sexuality and evil must somehow be broken.

It is helpful to try to understand the historical reasons for Christianity's long-standing negative evaluation of sexuality. Without reiterating what is by now a familiar story, we can recall that Christianity emerged in the late hellenistic age when even Judaism (with its positive valuation of marriage and family) was influenced by dualistic anthropologies of Gnostic religions.<sup>16</sup> Against extreme forms of denial of the value of the body and sexuality, orthodox Christianity affirmed that marriage is good (as a part of creation), but sex (though also good, because a part of creation) is permeated with sin. Sexual desire is inherently selfish, it was thought, because it is a desire for pleasure for its own sake; and it is a cause of disorder in the emotional and spiritual life of persons, because it cannot be controlled by reason in the same way that other basic needs and drives can be controlled. What could alone justify sexual activity, then, was the rational good of procreation. With this kind of reluctant acceptance of something as central to marriage as is sexuality, it was easy to relegate marriage and the family to an inferior status.

The Protestant reformers affirmed, as we have seen, the importance of marriage; but they did not offer a significantly different evaluation of sexuality. For both Luther and Calvin, marriage existed, in part, as a remedy for unruly sexual desire and as a veil for the shame which remains in sexual intercourse.<sup>17</sup> Marriage was thus given a new priority

<sup>15</sup>This, of course, is not true of the work of many contemporary moral theologians, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. It does remain true in what is otherwise considered an advance in the thinking of the Roman Catholic hierarchy—that is, in the recent writing of Pope John Paul II, published in English in *L'Osservatore Romano* over several months in 1979-1980. Here sexuality is treated in dramatically positive terms as a part of creation, but it is ultimately marred in principle by sin.

<sup>16</sup>I have treated the relevant historical material more fully in my article, "Sources of Sexual Inequality in the History of Christian Thought," *Journal of Religion* 56 (April, 1976), 162-76.

<sup>17</sup>See Martin Luther, *The Estate of Marriage*; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* II, 8, 44. See also Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home*, pp. 208-217; Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), pp. 174-75.

in Christian life without addressing in a basic way one of the problems which had haunted it from the beginning.

Contemporary understandings of human sexuality, however, offer quite a different view of the meaning of sexuality and its potential for Christian affirmation. Classical libido theory considered sexual desire to be a search for pleasure found in the relief of libidinal tension. Fundamental sexual impulses, in this view, manifest themselves in ways that need human restraint but not human nurture. This kind of theory tended to corroborate traditional Christian views of sexuality, though they lodged the indomitability of sex in human nature rather than in original sin. Newer theories of sexuality, however, argue that the ultimate aim of sexual desire is not simply pleasure, but relationship, not simply gratification of an impulse, but union with another. No one denies that sexuality can, in fact, serve many functions. But central to its meaning, and normative for its fulfillment, is fundamental human relationship.<sup>18</sup>

No serious contemporary theory of human sexuality ignores its potential for evil. It can function for human conflict or union. It can destroy individuals and groups. Its potential for good, however, embraces more than human reproduction, more than human pleasure. Sexual desire had been suspect because of what was thought to be its power to cloud the mind and deflect the will from its ultimate goal. Now it is maintained (with serious theological as well as philosophical and psychological argument) that sex not only need not be distracting to the human spirit but may enable a harmonization and concentration of powers, so that the deepest and most creative springs of action are tapped close to the center of personal life. Sexual desire was suspect for what was thought to be its inevitable exploitative and selfish aims. Now it is contended that sex can be essentially bonding of one person to another, bonding in a way that turns not in upon itself but frees a human relationship to begin to be open to others. Insofar as such a reevaluation of sexuality is possible and more and more plausible, it contributes to a more equitable assessment of the place of marriage and family in the Christian life.

### *Women's Place, Men's Place*

Even when the place of the family in Christian life is strongly affirmed, it has remained of lesser significance than other spheres of human life and work. Undergirding this assessment lies more than the explicit concerns for transcending the "things of this world" and the reluctant toleration of sex. There is, also, the implicit belief that the

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, W. R. D. Fairbairn, *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), pp. 137-42. See also S. Ruddick, "Better Sex," in R. Baker and F. Elliston, eds., *Philosophy and Sex* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1975), pp. 83-104.

family is essentially women's place and a place for children; it is a place for minors. When one moves into adulthood, one moves beyond the family. In the case of men, this has come to mean moving not only beyond the family of one's childhood, but beyond the family as such as a major focus of time and energy. The family, it seems, is not the place where the important work of the world or of the kingdom of God is done. This belief, of course, is as much the product of secular forces (economic and cultural) in western history as it is of religious ones. The Protestant reformers, for example, did not want this kind of bifurcation of Christian life. Yet the Protestant traditions, as much as any others, live with the reality of the separation of private and public world and the ideological designation of the home as the proper place of women.

Women, unlike men, have received a double message about vocation to marriage and family life. On the one hand, the call to transcend it has been given to them in all the ways we have already seen. On the other hand, they have been taught that they have a special call to the family. The home and family is the central place for Christian labor when it is the labor of women. Women's task is to prepare children to move beyond the family, and to provide a system of support for men who do the important work of the world or the church. The family is a refuge for men, and hence the object of *eros*, a selfish love. But it is the responsibility of women, and hence the place of self-sacrificial love, of unlimited Christian *agape*.

Women have not always believed that their work in the family was inferior to that of men in the world, even though they have all too often experienced the judgment of the church in this regard. Nonetheless, if the relative importance of the place of the family is to be seen more clearly today, it must be seen as the place where both women and men are called to labor and to struggle with the fundamental challenges of human love and the making of human history. If this is to happen, the family can no longer be seen as the place of self-concern for men and other-concern for women. Nor can it be for women any more than for men the only place in which they experience a call to labor and to love. The true importance of the family will be seen when it has neither subordinate importance for men nor predominant importance for women, but when it takes its place along with other key human enterprises, the task of men and women, the concern of the whole church. This, however, belongs not only to our consideration of the place of the family, but to our consideration of justice within the family.

The aim of reassessing the place of the family, I have said, is not once and for all to give it priority over other ways and spheres of Christian life. It is, rather, to address explicitly the past reasons for relegating marriage and family to inferior status, and thus to offer the possibility of valuing ways of living a life of faith without the need to subordinate one for the

sake of protecting another. Having suggested avenues for this kind of reassessment, it should not seem jarring to end an analysis of the place of the family on a relativizing note. Idealization of the family, and especially of certain forms of family, can obscure our understanding of its reality as much as suspicion has obscured it in the past. Uncritical endorsement of the nuclear family as in some special way God's will for all humankind misses not only the variety of Christian callings and the variety of family forms, but it may miss (in the manner of the Moral Majority and other voices from both Protestant and Roman Catholic churches today) the full gracefulness of the family itself. Neither pessimistic subordination of the importance of the family nor romantic absolutizing of its value can help us now in our struggles within family life. Three relativizing (though not subordinating) comments, then, may help on the way to new valuation of the family.

First, the meaning of the family is relative not only to other Christian life-styles; it is relative to other social institutions. No one lives just in a family. Thus, for example, as Reinhold Niebuhr has noted, no individual parent fulfills the total meaning of his or her life in relation to his or her children. But on the other hand, it is not possible to divorce the meaning of life from an individual's vocation of parenthood.<sup>19</sup>

Second, the Christians of the early church were right in thinking that the family is not an end in itself. To treat it so would be, as they saw, idolatry. It is to be ordered to an absolute love of God and a universal love of all persons. To live in a family, then, whether by choice (through marriage or alignment) or by necessity (through birth or placement), is a task, a journey, which leads to ends beyond itself. And yet, as the early church saw only obliquely, the family is, after all, in a sense an end in itself. It is so in a way that differs from some other social institutions and life-styles. That is, it embodies a commitment to relations which are somehow eternal. It already realizes in part what it leads to as a whole. Its particularity needs ultimately to be transcended, but it need never be left behind.

Finally, the family as an institution—like every social institution and, indeed, every Christian way of living—is ambiguous in itself. It is able to be realized positively, as an institution marked by justice and as a way of life that leads to largeness of heart and greatness of love. It is also able to be realized negatively, placing unjust burdens on some, and narrowing human hearts to an incapacity for love. As feminist scholars in particular have documented, the family is an historical reality prone as often to disaster as to harmony and happiness. This leads me to the second task I have projected regarding the family—the task of under-

<sup>19</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribner's, 1943) II, 313. Another aspect of this relativity is contemporary longevity. No one now can spend their whole life in the care of their children (with the exception, perhaps, of parents with differently-abled children).

standing not only the “place” of the family, but the family as a “place of justice.”

## II. *A Place of Justice*

Earlier I indicated what seem to me to be four major problem areas in the experience of the contemporary family. These areas provide critical vantage points for addressing issues of justice in marriage and family. I shall attempt here not more than brief and programmatic suggestions regarding these issues and some of the ways in which the church may be a force for greater justice or injustice.

### *Family Violence*

It is, I suppose, easy to analyze situations of family violence in justice terms. It may be difficult to comprehend the vastness of the problem in which some form of violence is estimated to exist in from fifty to sixty percent of marriage relationships, and thousands of children are not only abused but die from family violence each year.<sup>20</sup> At first glance, however, it is a simple task to identify Christian ethical norms which should apply to such situations. The complexity of the analysis emerges only when we become aware of the way in which some interpretations of Christian beliefs have been used to reinforce, rather than to challenge, violent behavior in families. What are we to make, for example, of recent studies of battered persons which argue that most violence is likely to occur in families where one person is affirmed as absolute head of the household?<sup>21</sup> Or how are we to understand the violence which appears to rise from the sense of powerlessness effected by religiously inspired but unrealistic expectations placed on persons in family roles?<sup>22</sup> Or what evaluation are we to give of not just psychological theories of modes of disciplining children, but religiously based theories?<sup>23</sup>

The Christian community faces the task today of critically evaluating the import of its teachings regarding power in family relationships, tolerance of physical and psychological violence as long as it is contained within the family, manner of conflict resolution in intimate rela-

<sup>20</sup> See Richard J. Gelles, *Family Violence* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1979), pp. 74-76, 126-30; *Violence in the Family* (Washington, DC: U. S. Catholic Conference, 1979), p. 7; R. Gelles, “A Profile of Violence toward Children in the United States” in G. Gerbner, et al., eds., *Child Abuse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 85.

<sup>21</sup> See Gelles, “A Profile of Violence toward Children in the United States,” pp. 101-103; Murray Straus, “Sexuality, Inequality, Cultural Norms, and Wife Beating” in E. Viano, ed., *Victims and Society* (New York: Vintage, 1976), pp. 545-46; Catherine J. Ross, “The Lessons of the Past: Defining and Controlling Child Abuse in the United States” in Gerbner, et al., pp. 66-68.

<sup>22</sup> See *Violence in the Family*, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> See Seymour Feshbach, “Child Abuse and the Dynamics of Human Agression and Violence,” in Gerbner, et al., p. 58.



tions, rights of persons to reciprocity of care as dependency roles change through a lifetime, limits to burdens that can reasonably be borne by persons of varying ages and capacities. Minimally this means that never again can persons speaking for the church tell the battered wife that a woman should be subject to her husband, communicating to her in this that she will find no support from the church if she confronts the behavior of her husband. Maximally it means that the church will find more and more effective words of judgment and healing when it addresses the pain and destruction of violence wherever it occurs as the paradigm of injustice in marriage and family.

### Family Structure

Closely related to the issue of violence are issues of the structure of family relationships in general. On these issues many persons who seem otherwise to share a concern for the family find themselves in profound disagreement—disagreement regarding the “order” of the family, its inner structure, delineation of roles, distribution of power. Thus, there are those who fear the demise of the family because one form of it is disappearing; and there are those whose hope for the survival of the family depends on that one form’s passing away.

I began this essay by suggesting that for some persons the Christian tradition regarding family life is now experienced as too oppressive to yield a prophetic healing and freeing word. What is most oppressive to many is the reinforcement by Christianity of a culturally inherited patriarchal structure for the family. The patriarchal model of not only family but church and society is so deeply entrenched in the Christian tradition that it is difficult to discover and remember the earliest movement among Christians to a model of coequal discipleship. But the patriarchal model of the family emerged in the New Testament (with the adaptation of the household codes) over against another trajectory which emphasized not hierarchy in the family and the church, but equality and collaboration.<sup>24</sup> Then, indeed, it was the patriarchal model which triumphed in the Christian tradition—triumphed perhaps above all when it was etched deeply into the model of the family so enthusiastically affirmed by the Protestant reformers.<sup>25</sup> “The subjection of the inferior to the superior in the relationship of ruler to people, master to servant, husband to wife, . . . is part of an inviolable order established by God the Father.”<sup>26</sup> The subjection of woman to man exceeds in severity

<sup>24</sup> See Fiorenza, “Discipleship and Patriarchy,” pp. 142-48.

<sup>25</sup> See Lazareth, pp. 141-42, 224-25; Wingren, p. 50. See also Georgia Harkness, *John Calvin: The Man and his Ethics* (New York: Henry Holt, 1931), p. 135. Even the English Puritans, who emphasized the covenant character of marriage, built into that covenant a strong patriarchal model. See James T. Johnson, *A Society Ordained by God* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1970), esp. pp. 23-26. See also Pope Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* II, 74.

<sup>26</sup> Wallace, p. 158.

the original order of God's plan because it incorporates a punishment "for the woman's part in the Fall."<sup>27</sup> We are trained for this and every other form of subjection by the "yoke of obedience" which children bear in relation to their parents.<sup>28</sup>

Today, however, for many persons the designation of dominant and subordinate leadership roles on lines of gender no longer corresponds to notions of justice which (1) see equality as fundamental to the partnership of marriage, and (2) require mutuality in married love and in the full responsibility of shared parenting. New insights into the basic equality of persons (regardless of gender) and the possibility of collaboration in the sphere of reproduction as well as production render necessary a radical reformation of the hierarchical ordering of familial life and of the traditional gender differentiation of responsibilities in those spheres.

There are other structural issues which the contemporary family confronts, however. For example, it is a serious mistake to think that the family in the United States means today the nuclear family. Approximately twenty percent of families in this country are single-parent families. Over five million children are involved in families where parents have remarried—so that children have more than two parents. Longevity makes it possible for a full four generational spread in a home today. There is a growing number of childless marriages. In all of these configurations the questions of justice—of structures and behaviors which foster mutual trust and accountability, fairness, response to special needs, reciprocity in giving and receiving, respect for individual autonomy yet call for authentic relationality—must be taken seriously. Through all of these configurations it must be possible to meet justly the responsibility of transmitting to each new generation its history and so its rootedness, and of providing hope for old and for new generations of persons.

What role is there for the church in relation to questions such as these? At least two challenges may be clear. A first point regards the structural transformation of the patriarchal order of the family: It is not just a new teaching that is needed from the church regarding equality and mutuality in marriage and in the responsibilities of parenting. The needed prophetic power for the radical reformation of structures and attitudes may come only when the church can model in its own ecclesial structures the coequal discipleship which was part of the original vision of Christianity and which corresponds finally with a growing cultural awareness of the shared dignity and capability of women and men.

A second point regards the variety of structures for the contemporary family: In the beginning the church understood itself as the "new family," tied together in bonds stronger than ties of blood. Today, we can

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* See also Lazareth, p. 165.

remember such deep belief and use it not to undercut family ties but as the ground of our mutual claims in justice for the wholeness of family life which even nuclear families cannot find all by themselves. In this shared belief we can ask as a matter of justice that our needs for home and family be met by one another both within and beyond the family; that the partiality of our human situations be completed in the church; that our tendencies toward individualism and isolation be challenged to the communality of Christian life. We shall always only approximate such an ideal, but we are obligated to move toward it at the very least by accepting, supporting, and finding room within the Christian community not only for marginalized individuals but for presently marginalized forms of family.

### *Family Stability*

Everyone knows how fragile human relationships are—even those that begin in deep love; and everyone knows how almost impossible it is for persons to blend their lives together over a long period of time. It may seem too strong to say “almost impossible,” but one is pressed to it by the growing impression that those who manage a successful marriage are rare exceptions. In an age when the institution of marriage carried itself (if for no other reason than the economic dependence of wife and children, but for other reasons as well—including the strong support of family which cultural, religious, economic systems provided, and personal experience confirmed), we did not notice how hard it is for persons to share a life together. Their union did not depend upon the maintenance of romantic love (though it will not do to idealize the institutional settings and to ignore the pain which even then was a part of the relationship of marriage). Their shared life did not focus on the capability of each to fulfill the needs of the other.

Today, however, given the fragility of relationship yet the desire of individuals to form enduring unions (and the suffering involved if the union is ruptured or does not grow), how is the Christian community to relate to the issue of fidelity to a marriage bond? Justice considerations have, of course, been brought to bear on the experience of breakdown of a marriage. In the Roman Catholic tradition in particular, though in others as well, these considerations have taken the form of articulating the law of the permanence of Christian marriage. Yet who cannot see that the repetition, over and over again, of the law regarding divorce has become ineffective and perhaps counterproductive? Concern for justice, and a call to persons in troubled relations to be nonetheless faithful and so just, includes taking account of concrete limitations and capacities, of “thresholds of conjugal endurance.”<sup>29</sup> It includes, then, a careful un-

<sup>29</sup> See John L. Thomas, “Socio-cultural Profile of American Catholic Families,” manuscript presented at the University of Notre Dame, June, 1980, p. 17.

derstanding of the role of law in the Christian community and of the meaning of the law of Christian marriage.

Since the time of the Reformation, theologians have found it helpful to distinguish three “uses” of the law; a coercive use (which forces us by its sanctions to do what we would not otherwise do), a condemnatory use (which makes us aware that we are sinners when we violate the law), and a pedagogical use (whereby the law teaches us, and motivates us, “forms” us, into the fullness of life of which the law is an expression). Today there are serious problems with any continued efforts to make the coercive and condemnatory uses of the law the major functions of the law regarding divorce. Not only are such efforts ineffective (that is, they do not succeed in preventing divorce), but they may do violence to persons’ consciences and, above all, they may undercut the potential power of the “third use” of the law. A continuing focus on the limits of the law, and its judgment, prevents both the church and individuals from pondering the meaning of the law as a criterion for right love, at once binding and freeing, a call as well as a judgment, a source of light and a help to faithful love.

When persons marry, they yield a claim to one another and to the wider community—a claim on their love to become what it desires to be, to embrace a framework which will offer it a future. This new claim, new law, will function as a formative guide and call if it both acknowledges the limits of its obligation and yet experiences its binding at the heart of its history. Like any law for promise-keeping, it cannot bind beyond the limits of what is possible to fulfill; here, it cannot bind if the marriage becomes so alien to love that it is destructive of the love and of the graced life of the persons it is meant to aid. On the other hand, the law of marriage cannot form a marriage if it is perceived to relate only to a beginning (marriage vows) and an end (fulfillment unto death). For it to be formative of both freedom and bound love, it must somehow relate to the ongoing process of the marriage. The pondering of such a law in the hearts of those who choose it is not for the sake of bridging a lifetime of relational poverty. Its hope is to guide to mutuality, communication, accountability, to integrity and trust and justice. The church has a whole new task if it is to learn about such a law. Without such learning, however, it cannot help in discerning the claims of justice which are one with the claims of faithfulness in married love.

### *The Family in the World*

Justice in the family is inextricably connected with the justice and injustice of the world in which it is inserted. The relation of the family to other systems and institutions is a matter on which, once again, there is grave disagreement. Think of the cry of the Moral Majority that the problem with the family is the incursion into its domain by government

and other public agencies. Think of the argument of the Carnegie Council on Children for the public support of families and individuals in need.<sup>30</sup> Think of the analysis of Phillippe Aries which concludes that our real problem is not families but cities.<sup>31</sup> Think of the claim of Christopher Lasch that we need a new set of social arrangements if we are ever to solve the tensions in the family regarding the work world.<sup>32</sup> Think of the argument of feminists that the nuclear family is simply unable to cope with the way in which society orders its productive system. Surely it is the case that we cannot finally understand the lived experience of family violence, of tensions between partners, of alienation of children, etc., without taking seriously the economic, political, and social systems on which the family depends and by which it is importantly formed.<sup>33</sup>

Here I can do no more than point to examples of lines of analysis which must be considered by the church as it attends to the situation of the family. If a major motivation for sustaining a patriarchal family model is efficiency in supporting a certain kind of system of production; and if a patriarchal model is discovered to be unjust because it fails to take account of the human dignity of adult persons in the family, and hence unjustly burdens some at the expense of others; then the value and goal of efficiency in production must be called into question. If intractable poverty characterizes a high percentage of families with troubled relationships, then norms of just distribution of goods and services in society must be appealed to if families are to be supported and healed. These are only examples of the countless issues which must inevitably be raised when we address the question of the family as a place of justice.

I end, then, where I began—saying still that there is a two-fold task for the church's ethical reflection regarding the family: to understand the meaning of the family as a way and a realm alongside and in interaction with other ways and realms of human and Christian life; and to discern action-guides for ourselves in family life from the vantage point of our call to make the family, as every other institution, a place of justice. Today there are families with varying experiences and varying needs. There are fragmented families and troubled families, marginal families and persons without a family. There are strong and healthy families who need to be supported and to share their lives with persons beyond themselves. The family, like every place and way in life, holds a promise of life, though it cannot fulfill its promise all by itself. Those who struggle on the frontiers of human life within the family can offer

<sup>30</sup>See Kenneth Keniston, *All Our Children* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977).

<sup>31</sup>Phillippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood* (New York: Knopf, 1962).

<sup>32</sup>Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World* (New York: Basic, 1975).

<sup>33</sup>It cannot be irrelevant in this regard that, for example, fifteen percent of all American children under eighteen years of age live below the poverty level (or that forty-one percent of all black children live below the poverty level, and more than fifty percent of black and Spanish female-headed families live below the poverty level).

prophetic words to all the church, and they have a right to hear from all the church the word of healing and freedom which everyone needs. Part of that word is that the family is a place, and a way of life, in which we can share a hope for, but also the fruits of, justice.