

The Changing Shape of Family

BY BO PROSSER

Families are not always what they are cracked up to be. Sometimes they are hurtful, dysfunctional, unhealthy systems. But “family” does not have to be an outdated or negative word. While many of us struggle with our families of origin, inclusion into the family of God brings freedom, healing, and redemption.

The use of the word “family” has fallen out of fashion in some circles. Yet family is not a “dirty” word. The use of “family” is still valuable in our world. Like it or not, the meaning of family may have changed, but the importance of belonging to a family has not!

The nuclear family has certainly changed. For most of us, “Ozzie and Harriet” have been replaced with “Ozzy and Sharon Osbourne.” Father may know best but many families do not have a father in the house. An intern of mine has three sets of “parents” and four different sets of siblings. He has to reintroduce himself to some of them at holiday gatherings. In 2003, the number of filed divorces in the United States was half the number of marriage certificates granted that year! And many of us find ourselves surviving family life only through the help of a therapist and antidepressants. Family is not all it could be. Yet, we need community and the intimacy of knowing and being known. This intimacy is offered to those who would be a part of Jesus’ family.

The demands on family structures today are taking their toll. Parents, children, and extended family may be deficient in intimacy and sensitivity. Fantasy is replacing reality in what it means to love and be loved. In some cases fantasy has collided with dangerous opportunity, and the family unit

has exploded. Families come crying to our churches, "Can your Jesus help us cope?" And we must answer with a resounding "Yes!"

Jesus gives us the clues to what it means to be family. In his genealogy, we see Jesus being taken into family even in light of the inexplicable incarnation. At several points in Jesus' ministry, we see him being family to the apostles, the many disciples, and even to perfect strangers. Jesus modeled for us how to do the will of the Father. And in this passage, he gives us the deeper understanding, "Those who do the will of the Father are my family!"

While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Matthew 12:46-50

These are scary days. We spend more time at work or school than we do at home. Many of us spend more time in the car than we do at the family table. The average American today watches more than forty hours of television a week – much more than time spent at the family table. The average American lives more than two hundred miles away from significant extended family members. We end up sharing our hopes, dreams, and deepest secrets with those other than our spouses or significant others. We are all vulnerable. In our vulnerability we find ourselves desperate for intimacy, touch, and the affirmation that we matter. Acting out our fantasies is dangerous.

The family dynamic has changed. We tend to turn to complete strangers via the internet rather than turn to the one on the other side of the bed. One safe way to reclaim the intimacy we so desire is through God's family. We become part of the divine family as we respond to the will of the Father. Jesus adopts us into his family. We need the intimacy of God's family as we journey.

I have always felt like I had family. When my dad divorced my mother, I felt that he also divorced me. He wanted out of our family. When our broken family was trying to make sense of it all, several key families from my home church adopted me. They let me be a part of their families. They loved me unconditionally, fed me unselfishly, and tolerated me lovingly. How thankful I am for Bill and Ruby and Bundy and Anna, for Marion and Linda and their girls! These folks modeled family in the most healthy, intimate, and spiritual ways! They modeled what it meant to do the will of the Father, what it meant to be in the family of Jesus.

Churches I have served have also modeled family for me. Even when I did not always do my best, these congregations still loved me with affirmation and grace. These churches have been extended family for us when we were far from home; they have been the family Jesus represented. In days when some would define family too narrowly and others would abandon the term altogether, we need churches who will model living in the will of

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the Father. We need churches who will risk being family with one another and with their communities.

Jesus models for us what it means to “do the will of the Father.” There are certain things that are required of relationships. Toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells how to be family.

Smile at unfair demands. The idea of an “eye for an eye” was instituted in early Jewish life to keep persons in right relationship. The ancient Jewish mindset was one of fierce emotion. The Jewish male did not take insults calmly. “An eye for an eye” was meant to make those who would do harm think about the consequences beforehand.

But Jesus rejects this view entirely. He says that we are to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, forgive and forget! Very few of us today suffer physical blows from others, but we are hurt by unkind comments, insults, and emotional jabs. Jesus tells us that “doing the will of the Father” means to relate redemptively to persons who make unfair demands on us. Merit is not the issue; service in the Kingdom is! Understanding this concept gives us a freedom to move from oppression to action, from negative living to positive living. This kind of living allows us to be family with one another.

Spend time together. The family table, indeed the family altar, is quickly becoming replaced by the minivan! We spend lots of time traveling in the car. Last week I was riding in the car with my wife. We were holding hands: no radio, no conversation, just riding and touching. This was a holy moment, one to be cherished and shared. But this cannot be the only time we spend intimately.

Families need to set aside time for playing, praying, and sharing. They must find time to share ministry and to worship together. The intentionality that is required for spending time together is the same intentionality required for doing the will of the Father. Jesus calls us to be family with one another and the world. In previous days we were given the myth of “quality” time: just spend five minutes a day with each family member. This al-

lowed us to rationalize our time spent away from family. The call to be family is the call to be intentional about sharing the love of Jesus with one another and the world.

Serve one another in God's love. God's love does not discriminate; neither should our own! We are called to be gracious to those who are not in our group, to those whom we do not know very well and may not like very well. Jesus has always been in the business of tearing down walls not building them.

Again, Jesus gives us the model: serve those who hurt us. We continue working together and striving to reach out beyond ourselves. What a difference we could make in the world if we reached out in service and in love to those different from us. What a difference we could make in the world if we did the will of the Father, if we were family! As Christians we are in a unique situation to be peacemakers in our world, our churches, and our communities.

Seek perfection. Jesus says to each of us, "You must be perfect" (Matthew 5:48). God knows that we will never attain perfection but we are still to desire it. Too many of us are driven by wanting more stuff! Too many of us are driven by hoping that our next acquisition will be the one to fulfill us. Jesus calls us to be perfect, completed – to be completed in God's love, not our love of stuff.

Today's families need a release from the push for more. There is freedom in seeking completion in God's love. There is freedom in seeking fulfillment in doing the will of the Father. There is fulfillment in being within the family of God.

True, family is not always what it is cracked up to be. Families are sometimes hurtful, dysfunctional, unhealthy systems. But, "family" does not have to be an outdated or negative word. While many of us struggle with our families of origin, inclusion into the family of God brings freedom, healing, and redemption. Although there are many who struggle to escape from their immediate families, inclusion into the family of God is fulfilling, happy. Let us embrace our divine family. Let us encourage one another in the love of our Jesus. Let us be found faithful doing the will of the Father. Let us be family!



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