Exploding the Nuclear Family

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Exploding the Nuclear Family

When I brought up the term “nuclear family” in class the other day, very few students claimed to know what it meant. Sure, many more of them probably believe in the concept without knowing the term, but I took it as a sign nevertheless: that we are slowly shucking off the idea of the nuclear family.

Afterward, when I Googled “nuclear family,” I was comforted to find the term most likely predates the nuclear age. I had thought that the term arose with the bomb, and certainly this is how it comes to popularity: the single-family consumption unit of preplanned, prefabricated suburbs coincides almost exactly with the Manhattan Project.

But no, “nuclear family” actually anticipates the nuclear age; it originates simply with “nucleus.” It’s an old idea in Western culture, that nature mirrors culture, that the human body echoes the body politic, for example. The nuclear family is the modern scientific version of that old idea: the nucleus, building block of life, mirrors the family, building block of society.

Once, at a family reunion, I heard an aunt gloss all of Scripture as being about how God works through and for the family. I was a bit taken aback. Was she talking about Jacob, that model husband of warring wives and concubines? Or the fiasco David made of his family, particularly the incestuous rape that ignited Absalom’s rebellion? Or Ruth’s subtle play of Boaz? Heck, was she talking about Jesus’s family itself—Jesus, the son who wasn’t exactly Joseph’s progeny but who Joseph was charged to take care of on faith and a dream? Or the way Jesus disses his own family when they call him home, declaring about a random crowd of riffraff, “Here are my mother, my brothers”? Or Paul’s suggestion to use marriage for straight-up control of the flesh?

The idea of family may be pretty foundational to the plan as Adam and Eve set out, but right from those original dysfunctional sons, it seems more like God working in spite of the family—and certainly toward something more than it.

No, the nuclear family is more important to advertising than to Scripture. A study of ads from the late 1920s paints a familiar picture of American life:

Home is never an apartment but a house, usually owned . . . Homes usually have two cars and a dog. Mothers-in-law, uncles, and grandfathers live elsewhere. Single men and women do not exist. A successful man is a husband who is unfailingly cheerful, ‘sincere,’ and upwardly mobile . . . Harmony and happiness in fact depend upon the rate of consumption of gadgets. Friends are always dropping in to view the Frigidaire or dance to the Philco.

Before either the bomb or the modern suburb, it seems, advertising saw the chance to isolate the nuclear family as a place for consumption.

But I’m still stuck on the metaphor that “nuclear family” sticks us with. Perhaps the nuclear family is nuclear because of what happens when we introduce outside elements: the drunk
uncle who never kicks the habit or the live-in mother-in-law who drives a wedge between spouses. This disrupts the nucleus. Mom and Dad get divorced, and there go the kids, shooting off as radioactive ions into society. Johnny denigrates into the dangers of singleness, from porn addict to academic to—gulp—economically unproductive drudge. And Sally also flies off into uncontrollable sexuality, producing abortions and unwanted children bound to repeat the process and send society into—what?—the arms of deformity and cockroaches?

Seems alarmist, but just what is at the heart of a stable society is very much still a debate. Social conservatives, for example, feel very much threatened by the vision of family set forward by the Black Lives Matter movement. “We are committed to disrupting the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure requirement,” says the BLM website, “by supporting each other as extended families and ‘villages’ that collectively care for one another, and especially ‘our’ children to the degree that mothers, parents and children are comfortable.”

Economist Glenn Loury, on the other hand, argues at the end of this podcast for the basic strength of the family unit for economic and social stability.

However, perhaps our metaphor is just off. Perhaps the family has never been that nuclear in makeup or volatility. I know so many stories of actual families absorbing mothers-in-law or taking in children when disaster strikes, or madness or abandonment: another family opens its arms and the result is closer to fusion than fission—it’s a new creation. Family units have been more amorphous and transitive and fluid and far-flung than the law of advertising has ever allowed for. Adaptability rather than volatility seems to be the formula.

The attraction of the nuclear family—control, wealth-building, a personal oasis for your private space and hobbies—is a siren song I personally haven’t resisted. The entryway to our house is a shoe store. In the town of 1,100 where I live, I can read the families I’m most familiar with as primarily units of consumption. When I think about how important me-time/screen-time is in our house, how can that not simply be the incubation of entitlement, narcissism, and entrenchment of the status quo?

Nuclear family, meet the zombie.

Both of these metaphors (surely the zombie is the metaphor of our time) suggest that there’s every reason to recapture that other metaphor for the church: the church as a great amorphous body, where the unwritten end goal is not nuclear family units but integration and coordination among widely different types and social units: difficult drunk uncles, and single-parent families, and that most dangerous of all units, the single person, regardless of sexual orientation. It’s in this kind of family framework—one that explodes the nuclear family into something much wider if still deeply and intimately connected—that local churches (even a conservative one like the one I attend) can consider the place of gay marriage: when it’s in the family.

It’s time we got past the nuclear family, pretending it’s the point of Scripture. “Family” can work as a metaphor for the church only if we apply it in the wider, fluid, more far-flung sense—
a place for that imperfect jumble that can adapt together into something broken yet beautiful. It’s time we drop the nuclear from the family.