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Gordon H. Pols

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The Biblical View of the Family

Gordon H. Pols

Pastor

West End Christian Reformed Church
Edmonton, Alberta



Gordon Pols is a graduate of Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary. Since entering the ministry, he has served Canadian churches. He is presently pastor of the West End Christian Reformed Church of Edmonton, Alberta.

Is there a "biblical view of the family?" Of course numerous passages speak about the family. The first chapters of Genesis come to mind, as do Matthew 12:46-50; Luke 14:26; Ephesians 5:21-6:4 and others. Yet such passages hardly qualify as full-fledged discussions, dissertations on the family. None of them could appropriately be headed: "The Biblical View of the Family" or "The Christian View of the Family."

A second and related difficulty is this: what, exactly, does the Bible say constitutes a family? To the modern Western world, the family consists of one set of parents and their children, the so-called nuclear family. The nuclear family is not unknown to the Bible, but the extended family, the household, which could include menservants and maidservants as well, was perhaps more common.

A third difficulty is that the Bible quite consistently reflects a *patriarchal* society. Our own

society today is rapidly departing from this: we embrace a much more democratic and egalitarian principle in structuring social relations. This gives society and family structure a significantly different dynamic and orientation. This is true for Christian homes and families too. Is this development in principle out of line with a biblical view? I maintain that it is not.

My purpose in mentioning these three points is to caution against a too facile declaration as to what constitutes "The Biblical View of the Family." Hence, I propose to reflect more modestly on a view of the family that is biblical, that is in keeping with biblical revelation.

The Family in View: A View on the Family in the Bible

The family is never far from the center of the Bible's concern. Indeed, in a profound sense the

Bible's story is about family, not primarily the nuclear family, but the whole human family. The Bible's story is the story of the Father and his family. Adam and Eve were his first human children. With them the human genealogy begins; with them the human begetting begins. In the beginning what a wonderful rich and satisfying family relationship it was! The intimacy and daily communion between Father and his children was one of love and trust, of mutual loyalty and caring. It was paradise!

"Be fruitful and multiply," God said; clearly the Father intended his family to be an extended family encompassing all the offspring of the human race. Then came the Fall which destroyed it all. God's family was wrecked. The Fall and its consequences can of course be illumined in a variety of ways. But for our purposes we may characterize them as the dreadful events which fractured the relationship of humankind to its Father. In the Fall, humankind declared its independence from the Father; it became alienated from its Father. In the Fall humankind made itself an orphan!

The Bible's story after the fall is a story whose central purpose is to reveal how God the Father heals his broken family, recovering his lost children. But in responding to the restoring efforts of God, the human family experiences a further split and alienation. The rupture between children and Father is now compounded by a religious split among the children themselves. This break is revealed in all that follows in the history of the human race: Cain vs. Abel, Seth vs. Lamech, the sons of God vs. the daughters of men (Gen. 6), Abraham-Isaac-Jacob-Israel vs. all the other nations, Jesus Christ and Christians vs. "the world."

It is important to remember, however, that the Father's family-restoring aim never loses sight of the whole—the *whole* human family. In Genesis 12 the Father says to Abraham: "I will bless those who bless you...and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves (or, be blessed)." Of the nation Israel it is said in Isaiah 42:6-7: "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as covenant to the people, a light to the nations...." Jesus af-

firms of himself: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). To his followers Jesus said: "You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world.... Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:13,14,16; cf. also Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8 etc.).

These family-restoring aims may equally well be stated in the Bible's royal terms of the King and his kingdom. The Father is the King. And all those restored to fellowship with him by embracing the ministry of his royal Son become themselves royalty—sons and daughters of their Father, the King. And when members of every tribe, tongue, and nation shall be reunited into the Father's family, we shall celebrate the great family banquet in the fullness of the Father's kingdom.

The proper view of the nuclear (or extended) family—whether patriarchal, matriarchal, or egalitarian in structure—is that of the Father. From his perspective we see a family which embraces every tribe, tongue, and nation. The Father's family encompasses "all the families of the earth." Not to see our own family unit from this magnificent, humanity-embracing perspective of the Father is to short-circuit any possibility of a right view on the family. The gospel of the Kingdom expands our horizons in all directions. Anything short of a kingdom perspective on the family is going to misconstrue the proper place and calling of the family; it will misdirect the family. The family can take up its proper place and calling in the Father's scheme of things only if we see it as one of the rooms, one of the workshops of the kingdom instituted and blessed by God.

To see the family in the dynamic framework of the kingdom is stimulating, challenging, and liberating. We live in a rather different social, cultural and political situation than that reflected in the Bible. We in our families are confronted with issues and situations which raise questions which the Bible does not directly answer. Our families experience stresses and strains unknown in that precise form to Bible times. The phenomena of more and more singles, of "working" mothers, and of daycare

centers are only a few examples. But we have been given a basic kingdom-framework in the Bible in light of which we are to ask our questions. Under the active guidance of the Holy Spirit we may expect that God will lead us to answers—biblically sensitive answers, kingdom-building and kingdom enhancing answers.

Placing the family in the kingdom-context exposes a variety of modern dilemmas. Let me mention just a few. At one end of the spectrum of our age we encounter a strong individualism in the so-called democratic, capitalist West. Here we are forced to face such questions concerning priority. Which desires and “needs” are more important, those of the individual family

for each other’s sake, but *for God’s sake*. And for God’s sake each will strive to be a servant of all others. Each will help and encourage the other to seek God’s kingdom and his righteousness. Each has been given its own place and role to play to establish God’s kingly rule throughout the length and breadth of life.

The family will be a kingdom-servant in its own unique way. Contrary to some contemporary opinion, the family is not a human invention or convention. If that were so, we would be free in principle to abandon and abolish the family. But the Bible reveals that marriage—which is the basis of the family unit—is an invention of the Creator. Marriage and family are a Creator-given of human life.

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member or the family unit as a whole? Does the family exist for the individual or the individual for the family? Does the wife exist for the husband or the husband for the wife? Do the parents exist for the children or the children for the parents? At the other end of the spectrum of our age we encounter a strong collectivism in the so-called socialist, communist East. Here different questions surface as to which has priority: the welfare and the interest of society or the welfare and interest of the family? Does society (the various societal institutions, including government) exist for the family or does the family exist for society?

From the kingdom perspective the answer can only be that all of these are illegitimate questions. They are all false dilemmas. All of these questions and dilemmas presuppose that there is no God! Neither the individual, the family, nor society and the state have meaning or purpose *in themselves*. It is not even sufficient to say that each exists for the other. The deeper reality is that each exists for *God*! Each exists not for its own sake, not even primarily

Since the family is not *per se* a redemptive institution but a creational institution, some, like Abraham Kuyper, may prefer not to speak of the *Christian* family. Kuyper’s distinction may not be significant; after all, in a fallen world every institution and relationship needs Christ’s redemption.

The first chapters of Genesis reveal the basic task and purpose of the family. Adam was alone—lonely. “Not good,” said God. Therupon he created woman. Marriage and family, therefore, serve a primary human need: companionship, fellowship, intimacy, mutual assistance (Genesis 2). Surely we are not amiss, however, when we maintain that marriage and family fellowship, companionship, and mutual aid must be placed in the even larger context and purpose revealed in the King’s mandate and blessing to “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28). This mandate calls for human procreation—something which

Adam could not do *alone*, and for which the woman was given as a fitting, appropriate help. But the blessed mandate is more than procreation. It is to subdue the earth and have dominion. It is to till and to keep the garden (Genesis 2:15).

It was the Father's aim and intention that this human blessing and calling—in which the family has a primary place of service—be done in *obedience* to him. Obedience is precisely what was lost in the Fall. In the creation and human-life restoring aim of God it is crucial that the human task and calling be seen once again in the right perspective, an obedient-to-the-Father perspective. The Bible makes it clear that such directional education be considered a primary family function—especially a parental function. Abraham is told that God chose him so that he might “charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice” (Genesis 18:19). In Exodus 12:26-27 Israel is told: “And when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’ (i.e. Passover) you shall say, ‘It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover....’ ” In Deuteronomy 4:9 we read: “Only take heed, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children.”

Nevertheless it is important also to point out that according to the Bible the family is not an absolute. The gospel of the kingdom relativizes both the importance and the permanence of the family. The family is not the *summum bonum* of life; it is not the highest good in life. This may shock some Christian ears, but remember what Jesus and Paul said:

While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand toward 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).

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26 cf. Matthew 10:34-39).

Peter began to say to him, “Lo, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:28-30).

I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of the world is passing away (1 Corinthians 7:29-31).

In closing out this section I propose the following as a tentative working definition of the family: *The family is a unit of two or more people bound together by blood (or adoption), by love, and by a shared commitment of faithfulness to the Father, for the purpose of enabling its members to live to the glory of God and to advance the coming of his kingdom in the world.*

The Ten Commandments and Family Life

In the Ten Commandments the Father gives his children practical guidelines and direction for life. They embrace every area and facet of

life, not least of which is family life. The Ten Commandments give us broad hints as to what the kingdom-perspective could/should mean for family life. In what follows I draw out a few “applications” of each commandment which strike me as being particularly relevant for family life.

I. HAVE NO OTHER GODS.

A. The atmosphere, dynamics, and aims of family life must be saturated with a sense of the presence of God, living life *coram Deo*.

B. The family unit itself can easily become an idol, an object of “worship,” the supreme value in life; especially in reaction to corrosive secular attacks on the family. But family is not an end in itself.

C. Playing favorites in families can amount to idolizing. Not one’s father, or mother, or children, but the FATHER alone is to be worshipped and honored as God. “I adore my wife,” and “I live for my children,” can point to idolizing: the bottom falls out of life when such idols fail us, leave us, or die.

D. What the family as a unit lives for, idolizes (wealth, money, freedom, or power), are the idols of the family.

E. All family members must pull in the same direction, in the FATHER’S direction.

F. The family exists for the KING—for kingdom-service—and is a miniature kingdom community.

II. MAKE NO IMAGES.

A. This commandment is explicitly related to family life, given its mention of children and fathers (the inclusion of mothers is understood). Parents are models for their children. Children learn how to walk, talk, think, act, love, hate, etc. from their parents *first*. They are a (be it right or wrong) primary influence on their children’s attitudes and values. What they say, teach, and model carries on for *generations*!

B. “Like father, like son” is a proverb; yet it is not the task or calling of parents to get their children to image *them*. It is their task to teach, help and encourage their children to image GOD. In this sense parents are

“image-makers.” The big challenge for parents is this: shall I teach my children to look, think, act, and value like me or like God? I should want them to be like me insofar as I myself image God. Therefore, I ought to aim to image God. But only with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit can I image God and teach my children to image God.

III. DON’T USE GOD’S NAME IN VAIN.

A. God reveals himself, gives himself, and lives in his NAME—most supremely in the name of Jesus Christ his Son. The Son promotes the name of the Father. The Spirit promotes the Name of the Son; he takes what is mine, Jesus said.

B. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). The first ones to make into disciples are our own children, teach them the name! Teach them the presence and power given us in the name of God!

C. Don’t use God’s name in vain, i.e., God does not want himself connected with any words or deeds that misrepresent him, tell a lie about him, or give an untrue “picture” of him. Therefore, don’t use his name in connection with other gods. Don’t use his name if in fact you worship money, power, position, or prestige, because such behavior teaches children lies about God.

D. A parent who bullies and terrorizes children and yet prays and talks piously teaches children that God is a bully, a “holy” terror! Or a parent who is so kind and soft as to cater to every wish a child has and who lets everything pass, teaches children God is such a kindly old soul he wouldn’t harm a mosquito. Both of these extremes are *lies* about God and amount to taking his name in vain.

IV. REST ON THE SABBATH.

A. This commandment calls us to confess that we can’t live life on our own, that we need God to live. He delivers from Egypt (sin, Satan, slavery); he gives daily food (manna, Christ). We don’t really “make it” in life by our own

work and effort.

B. Life can't be all work. Work must be celebrated. *God's* work must be celebrated by us *with* Him. Remember our Deliverer! Break through our slavery to our work (workaholism), to our partner, and to our children.

C. Cultivate a strong sense of dependence on God. This calls for Sunday observance, "going to church," public worship, etc. But more than that, it calls for sensitive-to-God living seven days of the week. Therefore, we should have *daily* devotions and a *family* altar. Christian living and worship are *communal*.

D. Personal devotions bring one near to the heart of God. But we must also teach children in the setting of family devotions: family prayers, family Bible reading, and family proclamation (discussion and reflection) of God's Word.

V. HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.

A. This commandment in its wording is specifically oriented to the family. The commandment says *honor*, not *obey*. No doubt for young(er) children to give honor is to obey. But as the child reaches maturity and independence of judgment, the accent on obedience lessens while the call to honor always remains.

B. To honor is to give father and mother their due, to give them weight or substance in one's life. To dishonor one's parents is to take them (their person, their counsel-wisdom-insight) lightly, to give them the brush-off, to take them with a grain of salt, to walk around them, or to walk all over them. This commandment calls for an attitude of appreciation, respect, etc. for and care about your parents.

C. The family is the training school for learning the will of God. And the will of God is that we image him. It is to this end that parents have been given authority and children are commanded to honor them.

D. Hidden behind the veil of this commandment is that parents must honor their children! How else are children going to learn how to honor their parents?

E. "That your days may be long in the land" means that one's life in the land of the living is

not curtailed or eliminated because of running afoul of the land's laws and authorities. That land is not just the U.S. or Canada. "Long" is not 70-80 years. The Bible sees that the land is God's kingdom and that "long" is forever! The kingdom...[is] forever...for all who honor HIM and the authorities given by Him.

VI. YOU SHALL NOT KILL.

A. Israel was not vegetarian. This commandment does not prohibit the responsible and stewardly taking of animal life. Rather it protects *human* life. In the background of this commandment stands the biblical teaching that all life belongs to God. It is not ours to do with or dispense with as we please. Hence God prohibited eating (animal) blood, i.e., the carrier of life. Only God can give life and in principle only God has authority to take it. This is uniquely true for human life since human life uniquely belongs to God—it is *his image*.

B. Life and therefore death is more than having breath, more than merely physical, biological existence. Jesus explicitly showed us the depth and breath of this commandment (cf. Matthew 5:21-22). Life is to have the room and opportunity to deploy and develop Creator-given gifts, abilities, and human creatureliness, in many directions in obedience to the revealed will of the Creator. This includes the wide range of expressions of human fellowship.

C. The spirit of this commandment is broken when the expression of life is illegitimately or needlessly restricted, confined, inhibited, squelched, broken, or crushed, whether by others or by oneself. Outside of war this commandment is probably nowhere more frequently broken than in the setting of the family.

D. This commandment is broken with abortion, which nips life in the bud before it even gets fully started, before that life has been able to do good or bad to anyone! Abortion is misdirected hate (and hate is murder, Jesus said). The hate would be more appropriately directed against oneself—one's own carelessness, indifference, disobedience, sin, lust, or that of one's partner. At bottom it may be hate directed against God: "Why did you allow this to happen to me? I'm going to get rid

of it!"

E. This commandment is broken in child abuse—beatings, neglect, lovelessness. More than actions or deeds are at stake. Words, looks and gestures can kill too. They can cause life to shrink and shrivel up.

VII. DON'T COMMIT ADULTERY: THE PLACE OF SEX

A. This commandment, as the others, singles out one example in a whole field, a whole category. Not only adultery, but also incest, rape, fornication, pornography, etc., come into view.

B. Sex and conception are the means the Father uses to continue and expand his family through history—until the fullness of the kingdom comes.

C. One man and one woman bound together in troth for life is the norm. They are *one flesh*—that is a husband and wife, a father and a mother. Let nothing, not even one's children, break this asunder.

D. Paul makes two striking statements in I Corinthians 7: (1) In marriage neither partner rules over his/her body (1-5); and (2) "from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none....For the form of this world is passing away" (29,31). Sex and marriage are not an end in themselves. Their value is relative to that of the kingdom.

VIII. YOU SHALL NOT STEAL.

A. Positively, this commandment implies that God alone is the absolute owner and his children exercise *stewardship*, for which they will have to give account. "Private property" is therefore relative to the kingdom command to *live and serve* God and neighbor with all one has and is. Possessions must be used to serve the coming of the kingdom.

B. "You shall not steal" also implies that you shall not steal your children from God. Christian nurture and Christian education come into focus here. The identification of *work* with *money* (e.g., paying children for doing household chores) undercuts a sense of stewardship, service, duty, and obligation.

C. Stealing touches on more than material

possessions. It touches everything involved in being human, e.g., time, space (privacy), and affection.

D. This commandment gives a critique of the common saying: "It's all in the family."

IX. LOVE THE TRUTH.

A. The call here is to bear *faithful* witness, to be *faithful* to the TRUTH, to all God commands, demands, and promises.

B. The standard for truth is the Word of the King and his kingdom. The *word* of the King was made flesh in Jesus Christ ("I am the Way, the *Truth*, and the Life").

C. The truth shall set you free. Truth is alive, and personal. It is not a mere matter of static correspondence. One *stands* in the truth, *walks* in the truth, *does* the truth, and *speaks* the truth. Truth is that which sets free and builds up life in the kingdom. Children need to be taught the truth.

X. DON'T COVET: SUMMING IT UP.

A. This commandment goes for the *heart*. Here is the heart of the matter: you shall not desire to have, own, or do what God has not given or entrusted to you.

B. There is no room in the family for members to covet or begrudge one another their gifts, talents, possessions, or opportunities. Rather, we must encourage each other to use what one has to the praise of God and the service of each other.

In Conclusion

The family is an expression of the kingdom in microcosm. To view the family, the purpose of the family, the relationships in and of the family, and dynamics of the family from an exclusively horizontal perspective misses the whole biblical point, purpose, and perspective of the family. The Bible repeatedly places the whole family in the presence of the Father. This perspective of the Father, of the King and his kingdom, must control all we think and say in and about the family and all we do as a family. The FATHER and HIS family—it's as simple...and as profound as that!