

Is the 'Nuclear Family' Biblical?

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'Agrapha' is not a word in common use. But it usually refers to sayings attributed to Jesus in other parts of the New Testament, but that we don't find in the gospels. There are not many of them, but one of the best examples comes from *Acts 20:35*: "Remember the word of the Lord Jesus, how he said: *It is a more blessed thing to give, rather than to receive*". Jesus might have said this - but the gospels don't record that. But we know that Plato and Aristotle said similar things, centuries before. Then there is pseudepigrapha - things Jesus and the scriptures never said, but people think are in the bible anyway. Such as 'God helps those who help themselves'.

So what of 'nuclear family'? It sounds biblical, doesn't it? I mean, the way that so many in the church talk about it being sacred and fundamental to society, and the foundation of Christendom, you could be forgiven for thinking that Christianity was right behind the nuclear family. But I beg to differ. Jesus advocated leaving one's parents for the sake of the kingdom. The siblings too, got some short shrift from Jesus. He told his disciples to go do likewise, more or less. Moreover, don't even think about loitering at your parents' funerals; there is kingdom work to be done. The dead can bury the dead.

The bible contains many patterns of family life. Some include slaves, such as Hagar, with Abraham and Sarah. In *Genesis 16*, we read that Hagar becomes a surrogate mother to raise a child for the couple. Family dynamics are complicated at the best of times, but the Old Testament offers us dozens - literally - of 'family patterns', which should not necessarily be honoured today.

For example, few Christians would condone the family dynamics set out in *Genesis 29-30*, in which Rachel obligingly lends Bilhah (who is Rachel's slave or handmaid) to Jacob so that they can have a son. Rachel says this: "Here's my handmaid Bilhah. Go have sex with her. She can bear children on my knees so I can have children through her" (*International Standard Version*). So even the birth of their son (he is named Dan) is an intimate three-way affair.

Rachel's sister, Leah, who when she later realises she cannot have children either, follows suit and lends her woman servant Zilpah to Jacob too, such is their sibling rivalry. Under this biblical family pattern, Jacob is sleeping with at least four women at any one time, and all under the approving eye of Rachel and Leah's father, Laban, who offers both his daughters to Jacob (*Genesis 29*).

It should come as no surprise to most people that the word 'nuclear' is not in the bible. But it comes as a much greater surprise to the same number that 'family' is not really a term biblical either - if by that, we mean husband, wife and 2.4 children. The families that Jesus knew in his day were, on the whole, rather more extended affairs. They were 'households' (*oikos* is the Greek word that the New Testament uses), and they were extensive, not intensive; externalised rather than internalised.

More on this in a moment, but to set this in context, a question for starters. Was Jesus a good person because of his nature, or due to his nurture? A tutorial question I sometimes used to set for undergraduates was to spot the connection between Moses, the Buddha, Mohammed and Jesus. True, they are all great religious leaders. And yes, they all founded major world religions.

But there is also something stranger that connects them. They are all adopted. Moses was abandoned by his birth mother and left to float in a small coracle in the River Nile, and had the good fortune to be picked up by the daughter of one of the Pharaohs, and nurtured as one of her own. Mohammed was orphaned at the age of six, or perhaps earlier, and was brought up by his uncle in the ancient city of Makka. The Buddha's mother died when he was less than a week old, and he was raised by her sister. Jesus, of course, according to Christian orthodoxy is not exactly the child of Joseph, since Christian tradition claims no human intervention in his genesis. Although Mary is clearly his mother, Joseph is not his biological father.

As for the nature-nurture equation, one has to remember that the early church was not a new kind of eclectic synagogue; or for that matter, another recent addition to the long list of temple cults that were available. Rather, the early church chose to base itself on the model of another venerable institution: the *oikos*, or 'household'. This formed the nucleus of what we now call 'church'.

Now, an *oikos* was not the cosy insular home like today's ideal 'nuclear family'. An *oikos* was something else - an extended household incorporating kith and kin, servants, slaves, tutors, workers, dependents and contributors. It was an outward-facing and inclusive body that took to adoption quite naturally. It understood that just as God had adopted us, so we, in turn, were to adopt others. And as God had abided with us, so were we to abide with others. Jesus, as ever, modelled not just church, but society.

So in the early church, we find Jews Greeks and Romans; slave and free; male and female. All are one in Christ. In these new assemblies of believers, all were equal. Today, churches rarely think about their identity in self-conscious ways. They mostly go about their business assuming their values, and implicitly imbibing these from one generation to the next. But we might pause and reflect here, on the ways in which the church acts as a proto-typical adoptive agency within society. Thus, welcoming the strangers and aliens in their midst, and not only giving to them, but also receiving from them.

And one key to understanding this, in ecclesial terms, is to see that the dynamic of adoption is one of those implicit values that lie at the heart of the church and healthy society. That is to say, just as churches, congregations and individuals Christians understand or experience themselves as, in some sense, 'adopted' by God (as Paul suggests), so they in turn, find themselves adopting others. And the facets of adoption, though plentiful in ecclesial life, remain largely implicit in churches – embedded in everyday acts of charity and hospitality, yet rarely reflected upon.

When most people think about adoption, it is a habit of the heart to believe that it is the child who has somehow been rescued, and that the adopted parents are the redeemers. However, one of the extraordinary things about the of the world's great religions is that this equation is turned around - as most things are in religion - so that the adopted child becomes the redeemer, or the gift. This is particularly true in Christian thinking where orthodoxy teaches a kind of double adoption: in return for God's adoption of us by Jesus, we are ourselves adopted into the life of God. Moreover, the adoption is invariably what I would call a 'cross-border risk'; where one party takes on something alien, and both redeems it through hospitality and love, and in so doing is redeemed.

But to find this out, our churches and contemporary society have to be prepared to take profound risks in adoption. No matter what our social echelon or ecclesial tradition, there is something about the giving-receiving axis in major religious traditions, and their founders viewed (even just metaphorically) as adoptees – Moses, Buddha, Mohammed, and Jesus – that invites churches and societies to reflect on the nature of their composition and hospitality. Moreover, in transcending our normal boundaries and comfort zones, we can find love, and perhaps the trace of a more inclusive society. Somewhere, deep in this dynamic, the church and society discovers reciprocity through hospitality: it is in giving that we receive.

Churches, I think, know this – at least at an implicit level. Go to almost church or congregation on any Sunday, and you’ll find folk who bond together pretty well, often because of an explicit homogeneity – class, ethnicity or some other socio-cultural factor. Sometimes the explicitness is even a matter of doctrinal bonding. But take a closer look, and what do you find?

Invariably also sees strangers in the midst of such bodies. Those who know they belong, somehow, but simply don’t correspond to the homogeneity of the group; and there are those who simply don’t fit in - anywhere. Those same people are often cherished (and at the very least tolerated) by that same congregation and church, and also bring that body gifts; and also point to a strange diversity that is beyond ordinary comprehension. Here we find the implicit spirit of adoption at work.

So to some extent, it is a pity that the term ‘inclusive’ today has become so bound up with a slightly tribal and ‘liberal’ identity. But perhaps this should not surprise us. For the word ‘include’ began its life with a fairly insular definition. Drawing from the Latin word *includere*, it means to ‘to shut in, enclose or imprison’ – just as ‘exclude’ meant to ‘shut out’. But Jesus is not for either option. The defining character of the Kingdom of God Jesus inaugurated draws from a rather richer word: *incorporate*. That is to say, to put something into the body or substance of something else; from the Latin *incorporare*, it means to ‘unite into one body’.

The Kingdom of God, like the church, was to be one of hybridity. And this is a social vision, not just an ecclesial template. The lesson Jesus learnt in his childhood, and embodied in adulthood, is this. God brings us all together. He's all done with working through a single tribe or race. The church that begins at Pentecost has been dress-rehearsed in Jesus' ministry: it will be multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-racial. It will be multiple. We, though being many, are one body.

Christians, it is often said, believe in unity, but not uniformity. It is the spirit of adoption that underpins this dynamic. The eventual and explicit surfacing of diversity is caused by the implicit spirit of adoption. Christians can't help it. It is hard-wired into Christian nature, and mandated in Christian nurture. Welcomed by God as strangers, and adopted as children, churches and congregations have been communities for embodying this practice ever since. The adopted become adopters. Because in God's eyes, we are all adoptees - the people God chose to take to heart, and to make a home with, and to spend eternity in the many-roomed mansion of God.

This is one of those deep, inchoate value-laden dynamics that meant the church could never be a sect or a cult from the outset. It was always bound to be, deeply, a foundation for society: the open, adopting *oikos* is a vision of how to live together, not just how to be church.

That is why the churches, at their best, function like adoption and foster homes. They welcome the unwelcome; they love the unloved; they embrace the excluded. The church was not meant to be a cult or a club for members, any more than the Christian vision for 'family' was ever meant to be 'nuclear'. It wasn't.

The early church took in widows and orphans. The early church was extensive and open in character. It embraced slave and free, Jew and Gentile. It will have embraced married and unmarried, and young and old, citizen and alien. If the church wants to recover a vision for mission and evangelism, and plead for the restoration of moral foundations in contemporary society, then appealing to the sanctity of the 'nuclear family' is not the way forward.

Instead, the way forward is to recognise that by receiving, welcoming and incorporating the alien and the stranger into our households, it is as though we are receiving Christ. The act of reception and incorporation blesses the receiving-host as much as the recipient-guest. The lesson for the churches today could hardly be clearer: “it is in giving that we receive”.

Yes, this is pseudepigrapha, I know. For the phrase is not to be found in the scriptures at all, but was rather uttered by St. Francis of Assisi over a millennium later. This was Francis’ own interpretation of Jesus’ proclamation for the radically inclusive-incorporative Kingdom of God. It is by opening our hearts and doors to others, that we not only bless them, but are in turn, blessed *by* them. And then we are blessed again by God for acting in the way that Jesus both teaches and embodies: loving, welcoming and inclusive to all.