

The Church and the Natural Family

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 November 2018

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Welcome back. Today's question is, in the past two episodes of Mere Fidelity, there was an underlying issue which was touched upon, but not fully discussed. That is the relationship between the biological family and the new family of which Christ is the firstborn.

Examples I am thinking of. First, does the Great Commission now call us to emphasise being fruitful and multiplying for this new family through making disciples, over and against being fruitful and biological families?

Second, for those who cannot have biological families, how much should the church be relied upon to be family? And third, the New Testament certainly seems to de-emphasise biological family to some degree. What do we make of this?

When we talk about biological family, we need to recognise just how far removed our understanding of the family is from that which would have prevailed within the first century. A number of things need to be brought forward. For instance, when we think about the paradigmatic son, as an example, The paradigmatic son for us is maybe the ten-year-old on his father's knee and that relationship between the young child and the father, a more nurturing relationship.

Within the New Testament, the relationship between the son and the father is the adult son and the father. The son is the one who acts in the name of the father, who works for his father in the field.

[1 : 1 8] He's the one that the father brings a bride for. He's the one who represents the rule of the father. He's the one who enters into the inheritance of the father.

He's the one who works alongside and learns the trade of his father. He's the one that provides for his mother in old age. All these sorts of things, that's what it means to be a son within that context.

Also, it's a context where business and the life of production and the life of dominion in society is found in family. And so the son is very much at the heart of that.

The adult son is at the heart of the dominion of the family. He's the one who represents the power of the family in many respects. He's the one who takes over the business of the family and learns his trade from his father and really heads that up under his father's guidance.

And that context is one that raises different questions than the ones that we think of. Now, when we think about the family, we think very much about sentimental bonds. We think about the act of having children in a very restricted sense, bearing children, nurturing them through their young age and then sending them out into the world as individuals to seek their own fortune.

[2 : 3 9] That was not what the family was within the ancient world. The family was the place where you did your business. It was the site where you owned property.

It was your site of trade. It was your site of a wide range of connections, not just with the intimate connections of the immediate family, but broader connections.

It was one that was shaped by an extended family, by a close relationship between father and son in the passing on of forms of life and between mothers and daughters.

And it's also a context where we see relationships that are forged across the generations and between people of the same generations.

It's not the same sentimental bonds that we tend to privilege. Now, a lot of talk has happened lately about the relationships between men and women in the church, very much being according to the paradigm of the family.

[3 : 37] And what people have done often is import modern conceptions of the family and place those upon the ancient world. And the ancient world wasn't the site of the same sort of bonds that we think of.

So the bonds are brothers within the family were bonds of working together in a way that brothers would not work with sisters to the same extent. It would be a far more distinguished realms of life that they would distinguish from each other.

And people think that brotherhood and or siblinghood is exchangeable with the idea of friendship. It isn't. It's a bit more complex than that.

The other thing that people tend to do is they tend to, when they think in terms of family metaphors, they tend to infantilize people. And so you think of children, you think of young children prior to teenage years, for instance.

And that becomes a paradigm for thinking about our relationships with God, our relationships with each other. So, for instance, when we think about mothers in the church, we think about the relationship between the mother and the six-year-old son, for instance.

[4 : 47] And that that is the paradigm that should be followed. No, the relationship that we're thinking of is far more the relationship between the mother who's in her 60s, let's say, and the son who's in his 40s.

And this is a different sort of paradigm. And, for instance, when we see in the example of Christ, that relationship involved a bit of distance. Christ had to put a distance between himself and his mother.

So when his mother asked him to perform the miracle at Cana, he said, What have you to do with me, woman? There is a distance being created there that he is not just at her beck and call.

He's an independent person to a degree that he wouldn't have been in his young childhood. And so there are distinctions that happen with age that are not distinctions that we experience in the same way with young children.

And that failure to recognise the broader paradigm of family that exists within the ancient world makes it very difficult for us to understand how concepts of family are being applied to the church.

[5 : 53] And so we need to be careful, first of all, to get back to an understanding of family that is broad enough and capacious enough to hold the sort of metaphors that are being used.

Getting to the specific questions, does the Great Commission now call us to emphasise being fruitful and multiplying for this new family through making disciples over and against being fruitful and biological families?

No. No. It's presumed that we will be fruitful and multiplying in our biological families. And for instance, in 1 Timothy 2, verse 15, Paul talks about women.

Nevertheless, she, Eve, will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love and holiness with self-control. That's an interesting argument there because he starts off with she, Eve, and then talks about the daughters of Eve.

So the daughters of Eve, the women in the church, are participating in the calling of Eve, in the bringing in of life, in the bearing of seed. And the seed of the woman is that which overcomes the serpent.

[7 : 05] And women are participating in the calling of Eve. Now this is important to recognise that the calling of the family is seen as the normal calling of men and women is to bear children and to raise them as faithful children.

And as they do so faithfully, they will be blessed in that. They will be saved in that calling. And this is a particular calling that focuses upon that calling of childbearing.

It's one that particularly focuses upon women at that point. Now this does not mean that there's the same necessity to this as there would have been in the past. The necessity of being fruitful and multiplying, the emphasis upon bearing seed as the site of God's fulfilment of his promises, is no longer there to the same degree.

Now it's the normal way in which we'll live out our Christian vocation. And that doesn't mean there's not exceptions. But the exceptions are exceptions to a rule.

They're not the norm. And that does not mean that there's the same necessity. In the past we have the connection of the covenant very much with the bearing of seed.

[8 : 20] The sign of the covenant was performed upon the male genitalia. And it was connected with the bearing of seed, with the promise of seed. And that is not the same case anymore.

Rather, the sign of the covenant is associated with new birth. With birth into, birth by the spirit to a new form of generation. Now the principle of the old covenant, the principle of the original creation, and the creation that we're still existing in in many respects, is generation through procreative union between the sexes.

The principle of generation in the new creation is resurrection. And this is the argument that Christ has with the Sadducees. That the woman or the man who has had, or the woman who has had several husbands, that she will not.

The order of family in the old covenant, or in the old creation, is no longer the order of the family in the new creation. Because in the resurrection, we'll be sons of God, sons of the resurrection, and no longer be given in married and given in marriage.

The whole order has changed. And so the principle of generation changes, and that means that there's not the same necessity, covenant necessity, to the bearing of children.

[9 : 42] That does not mean that the calling to bear children, and the blessing of bearing children more properly, has ceased. Rather, this is still the conditions of the creation that we live within.

And we see within the New Testament, on a number of occasions, that this calling, the calling of marriage and the calling of bearing children, are seen as blessed vocations that have as their proper end the new creation.

And so they're opened up to that new realm. So we're heirs together of life. There is this promise of eternal life, and also the gift of life in the current creation.

And both of these things, whether that's bearing children, life in that sense, or the greater life that awaits us in the new creation, both of those things open up the relationship between a man and a woman, and give them a direction towards something greater.

Beyond this, it's important to recognise that throughout the New Testament, there are references to things like the bearing of children, things like marriage, things like parenthood, that present these things as the ordinary form of Christian discipleship.

[10 : 55] That this is what it will involve for most people. It will involve marrying, keeping homes, bearing children, raising children, training children in the way of the family, providing for families, etc.

And the assumption is not that that is done away with. There is a space made for exceptions that there was not, to a degree that there was not before. But we continue to presume the ordinary character of the biological family.

And that this biological family is not just a continuation of a creation order, but is a blessed order that is opened up to the new creation. It becomes a blessing, a vessel of promise.

And so as you bear children, you're bearing children in a way that is opened up to the promise that was given to Eve. Opened up to the promise of the salvation of Christ.

Likewise, when people get married, there is an entrance into something of the new creation order. As that marriage can serve as an icon of the union of Christ and his church.

[12 : 01] And so all of these relationships are seen as things that are not just condemned to the old order that is about to be done away with. Rather, they die and rise again and they become part of a new order that exceeds it.

For those who cannot have biological families, how much should the church be relied upon to be family? The church cannot really be family to the extent that many people idealise it as being.

The church is, has a family character to it. But there's a danger of overplaying that. And that can often take us in cult-like directions.

And I think it also, more importantly, it creates unrealistic expectations about what the church will actually do. For single people, the church actually can relieve some sense of loneliness.

But it won't replace the family. The other thing to recognise here is, getting back to the example of what family means in the ancient world. When we think about family, we think about family as the family that is the family of childhood.

[13 : 09] So you're in your family until maybe you're about 18 and then you go off to university and you start off on your life on your own. And at that point, you don't have a family in the same sense.

You're an independent individual. But within the ancient world, your family was your context of life more generally. It was something that you lived out for the entirety of your life.

It wasn't something that you left behind in that same way. And those identities that you had as a member of the family, as a brother or a sister, as a son and a daughter, these things were profound and powerful identities reaching into adulthood.

It involved working with, for instance, as a son, you'd be working with your father. You'd be providing for your mother. You'd be working alongside your brothers. You'd be engaged in a broader family network of the extended family.

And so all these things would be very significant for your day-to-day life. And we tend to restrict our notions of family to the childhood family or the young childhood family.

[14 : 14] And as a result, I think we struggle to understand just how expansive the realm of the family was. And so to say that the church should be family is, I mean, what sort of family is it to be?

We look to the church for sentimental bonds, the sentimental bonds that we look to the family for. Within the ancient world, within the world of Jesus' day, what was the family?

And how could the church take the place of the family? The family was a site of deep belonging. It was the site where you found business. It was the site where you had all your connections into adulthood and these deep responsibilities.

And so to say that the church replaces that and can be relied upon to be that, I think that's unrealistic. And I don't think this is what we see the New Testament put forward.

The New Testament puts forward a lot of familial language in association with the church. But I think that language very much depends upon the church being formed of natural families.

[15 : 20] And as the church is formed of natural families that are taken up into the logic of a greater family, that natural form of the family is opened up to something greater.

And so I don't think it's a leaving behind of the natural order of the family and replacing it with another family. Rather, it's an opening up of the natural order of the family into something greater. Now, this is something I think we see within the ministry of Christ and his disciples.

When we look at the list of Christ's disciples, I think what we'll recognize is that there were a number of relationships that were familial ones.

John the Baptist was probably Jesus' second cousin. When we look at the list of the women at the cross and compare them across the gospel accounts, it's almost certain that James and John were Jesus' cousins.

Peter and Andrew were brothers and they worked with James and John and they were probably related to Christ too in some distant way. James the Just and Jude were Jesus' brothers.

[16 : 24] James the Just and James the Just and James the Just was also probably one of Jesus' cousins.

That's suggested in antiquity. So there are these relationships that are very pronounced, familial ones, within Jesus' discipleship group. And the core disciples were family relations.

If we think that the beloved disciple is John, then we're talking about Jesus' cousin. We're not talking about an order that replaces or displaces the order of the family.

Rather, this is an order that exists within family networks and very much takes up family networks and opens them out into something greater. So when we look at the story of the early church, we see John and James as central disciples.

Peter and Andrew as other key disciples who are closely connected with James and John. These are networks that were existing, that were opened up to the gospel. In the same way, when Jesus talks about who are my mother's sister and brothers, and when his mother and sister and brothers are outside looking for him, we're talking about a situation where there's division within his own household.

[17 : 42] And the order of disciples that he's building around him is one where his aunt is involved, his mother is involved, a couple of his brothers come to be involved, at least a couple of his brothers.

And we see various of his cousins, second cousins. This is a family network. And there is a division. Christ has brought a sword into this family network, dividing different parties from each other.

As Christ talks about more generally, this division between parties is something that is seen within his own ministry, within his own family. And so as we look at this, I think we should be very wary of pitting the church as a sort of different sort of family that is opposed to the natural family, or a replacement, or something that displaces the natural family.

Rather, the natural family continues to be our primary context of life, our primary context of discipleship, but opened out to a broader extended family. And that extended family is significant.

And we need to recognise the order of the extended family to understand, for instance, some of the relationships that are taking place. So when we talk about brother-sister relationships within the church, we're talking about the sort of relationships that exist between groups of cousins.

[19 : 05] And so what we see within the world of Jesus' day, cousins would often, and people within the extended family, would be part of a broader family business. And the guys would be working alongside each other, and the women would be working alongside each other.

And there would be very much an order where they'd be closely related, working towards the same ends. But that order of the family would not be the sentimental order, where we're just spending quality time together, that we think of when we think about the modern nuclear family.

And so again, we need to be very careful about the way that we apply these concepts. And the way that we just recognise that within the ancient world, there was a family, or within the early church, there was a family order that grounded the life of the church more generally.

The church tended to meet in houses, in homes. And it was an order that was built around networks of family relationships, and built up out of those.

It wasn't just something to displace the family order. However, it did bring a sword into the family order. It called for the family order to die and rise again, to become something new, to be reordered towards a greater end.

[20 : 18] And there's a sort of unplugging and replugging into your taken out of it, and then related to it in a new way. So you no longer relate to it in the same sense that you once did.

Rather than being the primary context of identity and calling, the natural family is now opened up to something greater, towards something that is ordered towards the kingdom of heaven.

And so I think that is a key thing to recognise. The church cannot just replace the natural family. Rather, the church is an extended family, in large part formed by opening up the natural family, into a broader familial-like order.

And so we have an extended life, a sort of extended family within the life of the church, as various families are brought together in a common realm of life and communion. And as we work and labour together, and as we worship together, that that family order is expressed.

The New Testament certainly seems to de-emphasise biological family to some degree. What do we make of this? I think it de-emphasises it to some degree. It emphasises the order of resurrection.

[21 : 33] And so the order of natural childbearing is reordered relative to resurrection and the order of the age to come. And so the principle of generation that is now ordering the life of the church is the order of the age to come, which is resurrection.

And that changes the way that we think about bearing children, about getting married, about the necessity of those things. Now, it does not mean that those aren't the normal things that we do, but they don't have the same necessity that they once did.

Beyond this, I think that there is a challenge to the biological family, which is often a site of loyalties that eclipsed other things. Christ challenges those loyalties.

So he talks about the need to leave father and mother in some sense and follow him. And the danger of those loyalties holding us back.

And the fact that some people have given up family ties in order to follow, but they will get a new family. The church represents a new family order in that sense.

[22 : 42] But then Christ also speaks strongly against the Pharisees and the scribes who will abuse the tradition by saying that everything that was, all the loyalty that was supposed to be given to the parents, it now belongs to the temple, to the service of that order.

And that's a violation of the order of honouring father and mother, according to Christ. And Christ's teaching, therefore, is something that does not do away with the natural and biological family.

And of course, we need to think that the biological family is... Biological family focuses narrowly upon processes of procreation. The family of the world of Jesus' day was far, far, far more than just a biological thing.

It was the site of production. It was the site of social order in many respects. And so it challenges that in different sorts of ways.

And it de-emphasises certain bonds when those get in the way of the bonds of the kingdom. But what we do see is the natural biological family continues in a new form, one that has been unplugged from its primacy.

[24 : 05] And then it's placed within a greater order, order towards something beyond itself. And so I think we should beware about the way that some of this language of family is being used today.

The language of family as a sort of... There is this fictive kinship that exists within the church. And this fictive kinship exists independent of familial bonds.

It exists in opposition to the natural bonds of the family as an alternative to that. I don't think that's what we see in scripture. I think what we see in scripture is an order within the church that's very much naturally growing out of familial bonds.

And working with those, expanding those to a greater order. And when we think about the church in that way, and when we think about the church as a realm of family in the modern sense, I think we'll focus very much upon things that the church just won't provide.

The church has become something very different from the family. And that's not... It's become something detached from the world or life of deeply integrated familial society.

[25 : 18] And we've lost out in that respect. The household is no longer the site of production. It's no longer the site of significant dominion. It's no longer a site of great social order or anything like that.

And social transition to the extent that it was before. I've done a video on this in the past. I'll put the link to that below. But as a result of that, what we have is a very shallow family.

And the church is no less shallow. Because all of the things that used to exist within the more familial structure have been farmed out to businesses and other agencies within society that are detached largely from the family order.

And the church increasingly is shaped by individual choice, by a very privatised form of worship.

It's detached from deep community. It's detached from a deep rootedness in locality. And these sorts of things. And so people who are expecting that the church will be reliable as a sort of alternative to the family, I think will be sorely disappointed.

[26 : 25] That does not mean that we should not work towards an order that reintegrates society into a more familial order. One that's more centred upon the life of the household.

And then that opens up that household into this broader household of the kingdom of God. And gives everyone a place within that extended household.

I think that's something we should pursue. But we should be realistic. It's not going to happen to any extent that will provide an alternative to actual families.

Likewise, if we're thinking about family purely in terms of the bonds between parents and young children, and young children and parents, then that will automatically leave single and childless people in some sort of limbo.

Whereas within the ancient order, and within the order of Jesus' day, what we see is the family life is not just about the childhood family. And so until we recover those sorts of things, the church can't be relied upon for those ends.

[27 : 34] I think we need a society that's far more integrated into the life of the household for that to take place. The emphasis upon the biological family within our society can often be idolatrous, as I mentioned within the video, that the child becomes a symbol of the social order and its commands when God has been removed from the picture.

That our duty to our children takes the place of God. And that's a dangerous thing. But on the other hand, there is a tendency to read back into the New Testament a certain resistance to the biological family, a resistance to the natural family, to the extended family, and to read into the New Testament attitudes that are very much about modern notions of singleness.

And singleness, as we experience it, is in many ways a very modern phenomenon. This isolated person who's working outside of any household, working largely for their own profit, and that that whole order that's been, that person has been uprooted from their locality, is living somewhere far distanced from their parents, and their extended family in many cases, that's a very modern situation.

And it's quite dysfunctional. And we should be careful of reading, trying to read that back into the New Testament as some sort of, the church plays the role of the family for that sort of person. The church should be a place where the alien and the stranger are welcomed, and those who lack families.

But for it to operate as a site of welcome, it needs to be a place where there is a deep familial communal structure. And that requires natural families.

[29 : 28] That requires the sorts of bonds that are established in the original creation order. And when those are abandoned, the church is not going to pick up the slack. The church will be weakened in its capacity to function as a community.

What really gives the church the backbone of community is often the families that are opened up to the kingdom of God, to this wider household.

That's what really gives the church so much of its capacity to function as an extended family. The fact that it has actual natural families within it.

And so I'm wary of the way that people try and push the church into this role of this replacement family, which it can't perform realistically, and which also leads to a distortion of what the scripture actually teaches.

Much of what we think about in the New and Old Testament as examples of deep friendship connections, for instance, are friendships that are formed within the networks established by the natural family.

[30 : 34] The relationship between Naomi and Ruth is the relationship between a mother and daughter-in-law. The relationship between David and Jonathan is a relationship between a brother-in-law and someone and his brother-in-law, or a member of his father's household.

These are relationships that are knit in within a family order. And when we forget that, and we forget that these deep friendships find as they're rooting this familial structure, I think we'll try and produce things that just can't be produced within a society that has abandoned that sort of structure.

Likewise, Christ's relationship with the beloved disciple is the relationship with a close cousin. And in all of these cases, I think we need to recognise that we are dealing with a society that has largely abandoned a very intimate and developed social structure in pursuit of individual independence and autonomy.

And what we have lost will not be replaced by the church, which has succumbed to the same logic. The church is a place where we are primarily about serving our private preferences in worship and things like that.

That's what it's become. And if you're giving people the impression that the church is going to pick up the slack of the family, it's not. And we can work towards improving that order.

[32 : 06] But that, I think, will primarily occur as we root families within local areas and communities and then open those up to the broader family of the kingdom of God. There's a lot more that could be said about this.

But if you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you'd like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account. Thank you very much for listening and Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow.

God bless. God bless.