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Paul's Family of God: What Familial Language in the Pastorals Can and Cannot Tell Us about the Church

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Some authors, especially among the Family-Integrated Church movement, have sought to draw practical implications for the administration of the church from Paul's family language. But does Paul use family metaphors to prescribe or even to suggest specific organizational structure within church body life? The purpose of this essay is to help establish to what extent Paul's use of the family metaphor is able to instruct us about how to organize and govern the church's worship and ministries. The essay traces the development of the concept of family from Genesis to the Pauline letters as a theological backdrop to Paul's family language. From the Old Testament to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, the Bible appears to present a single "family of God" comprised of believers who are devoted to him, in contrast to those who reject him. Reading Paul against this theology brings us to the conclusion that the church is not a "family of families," but that the church actually is God's "family," more significant than any human family. So while family language certainly has important implications for church body life, this essay concludes that Paul's use of family language is quite fluid, allowing for flexibility among churches in how they flesh out their identity as the "family of God."

The apostle Paul uses an abundance of familial terminology to speak of the relationship of believers to Christ and to the church. Beginning in his earliest letters, he assumes that the church is God's *family* by referring often to believers as "brothers" (19 times in 1 Thessalonians) and to God as "Father" (multiple times in Galatians and in the Thessalonian letters).¹ Paul is

¹ Abraham J. Malherbe, "God's New Family in Thessalonica," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 116–25. The fact that the family relationship occurs to Paul in his earlier letters indicates that the inferences from family to church were intuitive. The same family imagery continues to pervade Paul's writing. Joseph H. Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry: Power and Status in the Early Church and Why It Matters Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013), 190, identifies nine times in Philippians that Paul refers to the believers using the term ἀδελφός (brother), six of them in the vocative case, and that he also refers to God as Father and believers as God's children. In fact, Reidar Aasgaard, "Brotherhood in Plutarch and Paul: Its Role and Character," in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as*

also the only biblical author to develop the first-century concept of adoption as a metaphor for becoming a member of God's family.² Furthermore, although Paul apparently never had children of his own, his letters are full of references to the parent-child relationship, both literal and metaphorical.³

The most overt examples of Paul's employment of family language to speak of the church, however, are found in his Pastoral Letters, especially in 1 Timothy. Here Paul refers to the church explicitly as the *οἶκος θεοῦ* (1 Tim 3:15), most likely a reference to "God's household," since the phrase is immediately identified with the *ἐκκλησία θεοῦ ζῶντος*, the "assembly of the living God."⁴ In God's "household," the *ἐπίσκοπος* ("overseer") is to be evaluated in part by his competence as a good husband and father (3:2, 4–5). Mature men (or *ἀνὴρ*, husband) rather than women (or *γυνή*, wife) are to lead in matters of authority (2:8, 12–14). Paul also instructs Timothy to address older men as fathers, "younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, [and] younger women as sisters, in all purity" (5:1–2).⁵

Interpreters of the Pastorals have rightly concluded that Paul's family language ought to nuance our understanding of the nature of the church. However, some authors have pressed the application of Paul's family language further than others. A number of years ago, for example, Vern S. Poythress argued that Paul intends for readers to draw specific doctrinal inferences from the family to the church.⁶ When Paul says that the *ἐπίσκοπος* must be a good manager of his own household (1 Tim 3:4), Poythress observes, the apostle adds to this qualification a reasonable explanation, stating, "[F]or if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" (1 Tim 3:5). This explanation, says Poythress, allows the reader to understand the essence of Paul's logical use of the family metaphor.

Paul in effect presents an argument: good family leadership must be one of the criteria for appointment to a position of overseer because the same skills and competencies are required for overseeing "one's own house" and the Christian "house." Paul does not expect Timothy simply to take Paul's

Social Reality and Metaphor (ed. Halvor Moxnes; New York: Routledge, 1997), 174, states that over sixty times in his letters Paul refers to believers using brother/sister terminology.

² Trevor J. Burke, *Adopted into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor* (NSBT 22; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 194.

³ O. Larry Yarbrough, "Parents and Children in the Letters of Paul," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 126.

⁴ Jürgen Goetzmann, "House, Build, Manage, Steward," *NIDNTT* 2:249.

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV.

⁶ Vern Sheridan Poythress, "The Church as Family: Why Male Leadership in the Family Requires Male Leadership in the Church," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991; repr. 2006), 237–50.

word for the fact that such-and-such a criterion is suitable for elders. He expects Timothy to see the wisdom—yes, the inevitability—of this criterion on the basis of the validity of the analogy.⁷

By this same analogy, Poythress explains, Paul is asking the church to come to conclusions regarding the role of women in God's household. Because male headship is the God-ordained standard for the family, he argues, it must be the same for the church.⁸

Through this reading of Paul, Poythress suggests a hermeneutical principle for drawing doctrinal conclusions from the apostle's family language using a type of categorical syllogism. Simply stated, Poythress says that A (the church) and B (the biblical family) are both common to C (the divine order according to God's design).⁹ Put in these terms, Poythress's syllogism runs like this: All churches are (biblical) families; all (biblical) families have male headship; therefore, the church must also have male headship.

This same hermeneutical principle suggested by Poythress, however, has also impacted the life of the American church on the popular level, especially through churches participating in the so-called "family-integrated church" (FIC) movement. The FIC structures its practical ecclesiology on the premise that church life should model family life. Moreover, there has been a growing appeal of this particular church model, especially among home school families, because of its strong ethos of traditional family values.¹⁰ Therefore, the hermeneutical model upon which the FIC bases some of its decisions deserves scholarly attention. As a clear example of the hermeneutical process of the FIC movement, Voddie Baucham is one who argues for complete integration of all age groups within the local church. Baucham eagerly describes his own church in this manner:

Our church has no youth ministers, children's ministers, or nursery. We do not divide families into component parts. We do not separate the mature women from the young teenage girls who need their guidance. We do not separate the toddler from his parents during worship. In fact, we don't even do it in Bible study.¹¹

What leads Baucham and others in the family-integrated church to the

⁷ Ibid., 239.

⁸ Ibid., 241–42.

⁹ The terminology "biblical family" is used here simply to signify the family order normally depicted in the Bible and taught by the apostles (e.g., Eph 5:22–6:4; Col 3:18–21; 1 Pet 3:1–7) in which the husband is the loving authority in the marriage relationship, the wife is the submissive helper, and the children honor their parents.

¹⁰ The influence of the Family-Integrated Church movement is noted in Andreas J. Köstenberger and David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 249–68. In this edition the authors felt the need to add an evaluation of the FIC movement.

¹¹ Voddie Baucham, Jr., *Family Driven Faith: Doing What It Takes to Raise Sons and Daughters Who Walk with God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 191.

conclusion that the church must function this manner? “We see the church,” he explains, “as a family of families.”¹² Here is the same syllogism seen in Poythress. Only, in this application, Baucham deduces ecclesiological principles not only from the text of Scripture, but also from the model of the patriarchal family which was common in the culture from which the Scriptures were written. The syllogism in Baucham’s case may run like this: All churches in the Bible are (patriarchal) families; all (patriarchal) families reflect a collectivist society with a strong sense of corporate community; therefore, the church should reflect this same community (i.e., never segregate its members).¹³

These applications of Paul’s family language have serious implications, for they bring the authority of the Scripture to bear upon the conduct of the local church. As such, Poythress and Baucham raise an important hermeneutical question. *How far can we press Paul’s familial language into service for interpreting the nature and function of the church?* We could also state the question this way: *Can we draw from Paul’s familial language authoritative doctrinal and even practical implications for the administration of the church that go beyond what the apostle has already stated?* An essential step toward answering these and similar questions is to let the Scriptures themselves demonstrate how the concept of “family” is used to define the contours and practices of God’s people throughout redemption history. Toward that end, this essay will apply a biblical theology of God’s “family” to the hermeneutical syllogism suggested by Poythress and Baucham.¹⁴ The following major sections, therefore, will trace the development of God’s revelation concerning his “family” throughout the Old Testament, in the teachings of Jesus, and finally in the writings of Paul.

God’s “Family” in the Old Testament

From the beginning of human creation there has always been a divinely

¹² Ibid.

¹³ For other examples of this same hermeneutical process, see also Eric Wallace, *Uniting Church and Home: A Blueprint for Rebuilding Church and Community* (Round Hill, VA: Hazard Communications, 1999), 89, who explains, “God uses ‘household’ terminology to reveal how the church is to function”; and Dustin Guidry, *Turning the Ship: Exploring the Age-Integrated Church* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2006). See also Jason Webb, “The Family-Integrated Church Movement: An Exploration in Ecclesiology” (M.A. Thesis, Cedarville University, 2002), https://www.rts.edu/sharedresources/documents/global/Student_Theses/Webb-Family_Integrated_Church_Movement.pdf, who explores many aspects of the FIC online because the movement is largely unpublished.

¹⁴ The approach taken here is reminiscent of the one in Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 8. Scobie explains that biblical theology is a *bridge discipline*, for it stands “in an intermediate position between the historical study of the Bible and the use of the Bible as authoritative Scripture by the church.”

ordained, theologically definable “family,” upon whom alone God has poured out his divine grace, seen in both his blessing and chastening as a Father (cf. Ps 103:13; Prov 3:11–12; Jer 31:9). Indeed, the Old Testament record recounts the history of God’s creative and redemptive purposes regarding his family.

The Essence of “Family” in the Old Testament

In light of the ubiquitous and fluid use of familial terminology in the OT, it is important at the outset of this project to delimit the meaning of “family.” In this essay the term “family” will refer to a *kinship group, whether fictive or actual, to which members belong because they share a uniqueness that sets them apart from everyone else in the world.* While this definition may appear reductionist, it is intended to capture the essence and flexibility of familial terms as they are used in the biblical text.¹⁵ For example, the Hebrew word אָח, most commonly translated “brother,” designates several wider relationships within the solidarity of the kinship group.¹⁶ The word אָח is used to speak of a blood brother (e.g., Cain and Abel, Gen 4:2, 8), half-brother (e.g., Joseph and his brothers, Gen 37:2, 4), uncle and nephew (e.g., Abraham and Lot, Gen 14:12, 14), members of the same tribe (e.g., Levites, Num 16:10; Danites, Judg 14:3), and countrymen (e.g., a fellow-citizen of Israel, either male or female, Deut 15:12; one from among the men of Israel, 17:15).¹⁷ Yet, אָח can also refer to a unique relationship that is outside the tie of blood, most notably in the formation of ANE covenant treaties between nations (e.g., Moses’ entreaty to the king of Edom, Num 20:14; cf. Obad 10),¹⁸ but also in the relationship shared by Solomon and Hiram, king of Tyre (1 Kgs 9:13). Furthermore, the relationship defined with the nominative אָח can mark a relationship which takes precedent over immediate familial bonds, as seen for example in Jonathan’s friendship with David, which eclipsed his relationship with his father, Saul (2 Sam 1:26). In each of these examples, the term אָח is used to speak of the relationship between members of a unique social group, whether such uniqueness is due to near or distant kinship, or to exclusive political or philosophical ties. In short, the term is remarkably fluid, having currency in a multiplicity of close relational contexts.

We see the same fluidity in other common family terminology such as אָב, “father,” which can refer to an immediate or distant ancestor, and בֶּן, “son,”

¹⁵ Christopher J. H. Wright, “Family,” *ABD* 2:761 points to the “terminological fluidity” of family language, which is complicated by cultural changes over many centuries.

¹⁶ J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 167.

¹⁷ Victor P. Hamilton, “אָח,” *NIDOTTE* 1:345–46.

¹⁸ John Priest, “The Covenant of Brothers,” *JBL* 84 (1965): 400–2. Priest demonstrates with reference to Hittite and Achaean covenants the language of brotherhood which was used to define the covenant relationships between two parties.

which can refer to any immediate or distant descendant.¹⁹ Larger social units include the **בֵּית־אָב**, or “father’s house,” the foundational social unit which could range from a nuclear family to a large dwelling of fifty to one hundred people presided over by a single patriarch.²⁰ Beyond the **בֵּית־אָב**, the **מִשְׁפָּחָה** is often used to designate a “clan” comprised of several patriarchal units, which together make up the **בְּטֵלָה**, or “tribe.”²¹

Once again, although these social family units are comprised most obviously of blood relatives, membership is not based exclusively upon human descent. For instance, the law of Moses offered Gentile sojourners (**גֵּרִים**) the opportunity to become proselyte members of the religious community through their submission to the word and ordinances of Yahweh.²² Ruth, a Moabite woman, became a celebrated member of the tribe of Judah, not merely because she married into a Judahite family, but because she renounced her former way of life and pledged her fidelity to God and his people (Ruth 1:16–17; cf. Matt 1:5). Nevertheless, ANE people groups also considered themselves to be part of a collective whole, descended from a common ancestor. Israelites, for example, would have thought of their nation as “one large extended family.”²³ In summary, therefore, family language in the OT does not necessarily refer to a specific family dynamic, but to the loyal bond that members of a specific group share with one another, based upon a strong, common experience which unites them, most often related to ancestral ties.

The Creation of God’s Family Tree

The family, this loyal bond created through strong, common experience, is not an accident of the human race but is part of the very fabric of God’s created order. That God purposefully formed the “family” as defined above is reflected in a helpful overview by J. Gary Millar, in which he summarizes the consensus among those who reflect upon a whole-Bible biblical theology. Millar writes,

¹⁹ Wright, “Family,” 762.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Robert H. O’Connell, “**מִשְׁפָּחָה**,” *NIDOTTE* 2:1140. An example of the arrangement of these terms can be seen in the apprehension of Achan in Josh 7:14, 16–18, 24–26, first by his **סִבְתָּה**, then by his **מִשְׁפָּחָה**, and finally by his **בֵּית**. Again, however, this terminology is quite flexible. For example, there is no clear example of the use of **מִשְׁפָּחָה** to speak of a hierarchy within tribes until the organization of the nation of Israel after the exodus (p. 1141).

²² Paul F. Stuehnenberg, “Proselyte,” *ABD* 5:503. The Pentateuch details several ways in which the proselyte can participate in the covenant blessings, including circumcision and integration into community life (Exod 20:10; 22:21; 23:9, 12; Deut 5:14; 16:11, 14; 29:11; 31:12; Num 15:14–16).

²³ R. R. Wilson, “Israel’s Judicial System in the Preexilic Period,” *JQR* 74 (1983): 232.

The message of the Bible, in essence, is that God is at work to bring into being a people under his rule in his place. The idea of the people of God, therefore, stands at the heart of biblical theology. This is where the Bible starts and ends. In the Garden of Eden God creates the first couple, the protological people of God, and invites them to live under his rule. All too quickly they refuse to accept God's terms, and so are excluded from his presence. By the closing chapters of Revelation, however, the wheel has turned full circle. The story has returned to a "garden" (comprising a new heaven and a new earth), which bears a striking resemblance to Eden. The primary characteristic of this new place is that here God's servants live in intimacy with him forever, as his people, under his rule (Rev 22:3–4). This is the overall trajectory of biblical theology.²⁴

Where Millar uses the phrase "people of God," we may justifiably substitute the phrase "family of God" for at least three reasons. First, the "protological people of God" are not merely "the first couple" but the first *family* (Gen 2:24). Second, as the first family, Adam and Eve serve as a nascent example of our definition of the essence of family; that is, the fact that they are created by God in his image sets them apart from everything else in the created order and therefore binds them together uniquely in loyal fellowship (cf. Gen 2:18–25). Third, the Hebrew word אָמָּ ("people"), though it has a broad semantic range, often "implies a sense of ethnic community based on blood relationship."²⁵ In fact, God famously refers to his "people" using familial language. For example, God's repeated warning to Pharaoh is, "Let my people go that they may serve me" (Exod 5:1; 7:16; 8:1). God's ultimate warning, however, shows that he looks upon his "people" as a father to a son: "Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, 'Let my son go that he may serve me'" (Exod 4:22–23). Also, in the prophecy of Hosea, God plays the part of both father and husband to his "people," prophesying that "in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' it shall be said to them, 'Children of the living God'" (Hos 2:10).

Broadly speaking, it may be argued that the entire human race is a "family" (cf. Eph 3:15) in the sense that all people have descended from the same human parents. But this definition does not capture the close relational essence inherent in the concept of family. People form a family when, *among* the sheer number of descendants from the first human parents inhabiting the fallen, divided world, they find their place of community within *definable limits* of a population. That is to say, when they *identify with* a specific part of the whole. What the OT actually demonstrates is that, *since the fall of the original family, God has himself delimited from among all the inhabitants of the world a distinct*

²⁴ J. Gary Millar, "People of God," *NDBT*, 684.

²⁵ Daniel I. Block, "Nations/Nationality," *NIDOTTE* 3:966. Millar, "People of God," 684, would seem to concur, noting that Abraham's family is referred to with the word אָמָּ ("people"), which, in context, often emphasizes kinship.

family, one that shares the uniqueness of knowing him, one that identifies with him and with others who know him. Furthermore, God's loving purpose in electing a lineage of people is ultimately to redeem a *family* to inherit the new heaven and earth in the final state (Revelation 21–22), calling this *family* back into the fellowship that the entire creation was originally created to enjoy with God forever.

Millar continues to trace the people (family) of God, leaping ahead from the Garden of Eden to God's call to Abram, through whom he "begins to create a people for himself."²⁶ Remarkably, however, Millar's treatment ignores multiple generations of salvation history, namely Genesis 4–11, in which God demonstrates the redemptive process of choosing a unique family even in the second generation. Without probing the details and questions surrounding the offerings of Cain and Abel, the heart of the difference between the two men is seen in the implication of God's challenge to Cain in Gen 4:7. God essentially says to Cain, "If *you* do well (like your brother, Abel), will you not (also) be accepted (like he has been)?" Nevertheless, Cain does not "do well." He murders his brother and God drives Cain far away from the other members of his family (Gen 4:13–16).

This rift in the second generation of the human family provides the theological basis for the distinction of the family of God in the OT. As is commonly recognized, Genesis 4 immediately follows Cain's judgment with a stark contrast between his own ungodly lineage (Gen 4:17–24) and the godly lineage of Eve's third son, Seth (4:25–26).²⁷ The genealogy which begins with the murderous Cain climaxes with the taunt of the murderous Lamech (4:23–24), whom Gordon Wenham refers to as "the most vicious man in Genesis."²⁸ By contrast, the genealogy which begins with Seth is immediately marked by a distinct connection to Yahweh with the declaration, "At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD" (4:26).²⁹

It is the godly line of Seth upon which God explicitly sets his approval, singling out Seth and his descendants as a family distinct from the line of Cain. In the *Toledoth* formula which begins Genesis 5, the author recapitulates the creation of humankind (Gen 1:26–28) in order to mark Seth with the

²⁶ Millar, "People of God," 684.

²⁷ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26* (NAC 1A; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 279–94, has an excellent treatment of the significance of these two genealogies.

²⁸ Gordon Wenham, "Family in the Pentateuch," in *Family in the Bible: Exploring Customs, Culture, and Context* (ed. Richard S. Hess and M. Daniel Carroll R.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 26.

²⁹ Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 292–93, says that the phrase "unites the Lord of the patriarchs and of Moses with the Lord of the antediluvian line of promise through Seth and shows thereby that the spiritual ancestors of Abraham's family were those descended through Noah, the survivor of the flood's purge."

original creation blessing.³⁰ Genesis 5:1–2 reads, “When God created [*Adam*], he made him in the likeness (דְמוּת) of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named (קרא) them [*Adam*].” In Gen 5:3, God’s *creation* of Adam is mirrored in Adam’s *procreation* of Seth: “Adam . . . fathered a son in his *own* likeness (דְמוּת), after *his* image (צֶלֶם; cf. Gen 1:27), and named (קרא) him Seth” (emphasis added). The striking verbal parallels between these three creation/procreation accounts—Adam in Genesis 1 and 5/Seth in Genesis 5—provides a theological connection between God’s original creation of humanity and his continuation of blessing upon a specific family *within* humanity, to the exclusion of others.

The Creation of Adam (Gen 1:26–28)	The Creation of Adam (Gen 5:1–2)	The Procreation of Seth (Gen 5:3)
God created (ברא) Adam	God created (ברא) Adam	Adam fathered (ילד) a son
In his likeness (דְמוּת)	In his likeness (דְמוּת)	In his likeness (דְמוּת)
In his image (צֶלֶם)	-----	In his image (צֶלֶם)
-----	He named them (קרא)	He named him (קרא)

Claus Westermann is right to remark that the true significance of the creation of humankind in Gen 1:26–28 is unclear until “generation follows generation according to the rhythm of begetting and birth, life-span and death, as presented in Gen 5.”³¹ In other words, human creation is left unfulfilled until it continues in successive generations. As we follow the generations which flow from Adam through Seth, we observe that God continues his redemptive program through singling out a specific family line marked by those who continue to “call” upon him (Gen 4:26).

The line of Seth leads to Noah, who alone upon the earth, now filled with violence and wickedness (Gen 6:5–8), is described as “a righteous man, blameless in his generation” and one who “walked with God” (Gen 6:9). After God protects the lineage of Seth by saving Noah and his family from the judgment of the flood (Gen 6–8), he again places his divine approval on the lineage of a single son, Shem. The blessing upon the descendants of Shem is presented in bold relief against the judgment pronounced upon the line of Canaan, the son of Ham, because Ham dishonored his father, Noah (Gen 9:20–27). Once again, therefore, the distinct blessing of one genealogy is highlighted following a rift within a family. Furthermore, the contrast between Canaan and Shem anticipates the distinction which will later provide

³⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (The JPS Torah Commentary 1; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 40.

³¹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion, S.J.; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 348.

the backdrop for God's people dwelling as his "family" among the Canaanite nations.

From Adam to Noah, the genealogical record is presented as ten generations (Gen 5:1–32). Likewise, from Shem to Abram there are ten generations (Gen 11:10–26). This literary symmetry calls special attention to God's blessing on the family line which begins with Adam and climaxes with Abram.³² The Babel narrative (Gen 11:1–9) which precedes the genealogy of Shem again places the call of God upon a particular family, delimited among a world population living in rebellion against him. Abram receives the call of God while living among pagans in Ur. Significantly, the call to Abram begins with the words, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:1–3). Here, God asks Abram to break familial ties in order to journey by faith to a promised land, where he would create from Abram's lineage a nation/family who would provide blessing for all families of the earth.

The Theological "Family of God"

The rest of the OT may be briefly summarized as the witness to God's dealings with the specific family line from Abraham whom God chose to be his own people.³³ Within this line, God chooses Isaac rather than Ishmael (Gen 16–18, 21–22) and Jacob rather than Esau (Gen 27). Ultimately, God grows Jacob's (Israel's) family in Egypt into a mighty nation and brings this nation to Sinai where he formally constitutes them as his people by establishing a covenant with them (Exod 19–20).³⁴

It is the Sinai covenant which forms the basis for further development in the meaning of God's "family" theologically defined. For the covenant introduced the idea that those who were truly members of the covenant community—who were in the "family"—would obey the covenant commands. The inherent understanding of the Sinai covenant has been well-articulated by Scott W. Hahn. According to Hahn, the covenant formed between God and his people at Sinai was a "kinship covenant." Hahn explains,

In a kinship covenant, kinship bonds are extended to bind two parties in a *mutual* relationship based upon a *joint* commitment under divine sanctions. The purpose of this type of covenant is to draw others who are potentially at enmity into a family circle where amity might prevail. It may also serve to reinforce already existing familial relations.³⁵

³² Sarna, *Genesis*, 40.

³³ Scobie, *The Ways of Our God*, 470.

³⁴ Millar, "People of God," 684.

³⁵ Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (AYBRL; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 37 (emphasis original).

It is on the basis of this covenant that God refers to his people in familial terms, most notably using language of a father to a son.³⁶ God would later say through Hosea, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hos 11:1). In constituting the nation as his own “people” or “family,” God made them, in the words of Moses, “distinct . . . from every other people on the face of the earth” (Exod 33:16). By remaining in fellowship with their “Father,” Israel, his son, would enjoy the Father’s blessing in the land of promise.

Nevertheless, since obedience was a part of the covenant agreement within the family, the same covenant which served as a basis for Israel’s blessing was also the mechanism whereby the nation could be disinherited from the family of God. This notion is made plain in God’s response to the horrific idolatry of his newly-covenanted people in Exodus 32. On this occasion, God threatens to exterminate the entire nation and again place his blessing upon the lineage of a single individual, Moses, in order to reconstitute the family of Israel (Exod 32:9–10). In Deuteronomy 28, the blessings enumerated for those who faithfully obey Yahweh are paired with curses for disobedience. These curses climax with the judgment of exile back to Egypt, the reversal or undoing of the kinship covenant God had established with his people (Deut 28:68). Later in their history, as the nation’s unabated idolatry worsened and the time of God’s exilic judgment drew near, there was a ready distinction that the prophets were able to draw between *ethnic Israel* and *true Israel*, between those who were merely descendants of Abraham and those who were faithful to the covenant (cf. Rom 2:28; 9:6).³⁷ For example, God renounces his fatherhood of Israel with the words, “You are not my people, and I am not your God” (Hos 1:9). Obedience was required to truly belong to the family.

Alongside this devastating language from the heart of God, however, the idea of a restored kinship emerged, known as the “remnant,” or the core of those in the family who remained faithful, especially the small group who survived God’s catastrophic judgment on their idolatry.³⁸ At times, the “remnant” consisted of those few who remained faithful in the face of idolatry, such as Elijah (1 Kgs 19:9–18), Micaiah (1 Kgs 22:7–28), and Jeremiah (Jer 1:17–19; cf. 23:3; 33:1–22). Micah ends his prophecy with the promise of God’s “passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance” and renewing his compassion and faithful love to Abraham (Mic 7:18–20). When the last OT prophet, John the Baptist appears, calling for Israel’s repentance, he sternly warns those who would excuse themselves by saying, “We have Abraham as our father,” who would ignore the spiritual implications of what it means to truly belong to Abraham (Matt 3:9; Luke 3:8). However, the prophets leave God’s true family with great hope. Though God says to Israel,

³⁶ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing God the Father Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

³⁷ Millar, “People of God,” 685.

³⁸ Lester V. Meyer, “Remnant,” *ABD* 5:670.

“You are not my people,” he also promises that he will gather Israel together once more and call them, “Children of the living God” (Hos 1:10).

Summary

In this brief treatment of the concept of “family” in the OT, several factors may be observed. First, beginning with Adam and Eve, a tangible lineage of human descendants is marked out by God as *his* people. There is hardly a place in the OT where this lineage is not clearly identifiable. Second, these “people of God” constitute his “family” in that they share a unique bond of loyalty and obedience to God which brings them into fellowship with one another and sets them apart from everyone else in the world. Third, this exclusive relationship which God shares with his people is highlighted explicitly with familial language, such as the father/son language of the covenant. The language does not indicate a specific family dynamic but speaks to the *kind* of relationship that God and his people share with him and with one another. The bonds of kinship are also reflected in the familial language used throughout the OT. Fourth, after God chooses the line of Israel for his special family, he continues the process of delineating from among ethnic Israel both those who *are* and who *are not* part of *his* “family.” Those who are truly in the family are those who follow God. Finally, we should note that, by implication, being set apart as a member of *God’s* “family” necessarily means being disenfranchised from *other* “families” or people groups upon the earth, even sometimes being separated from other members of the same ethnic community who are in rebellion against God.

The Family of God in the Teaching of Jesus

The concept of God as Father of his children, which is explicit in only a handful of OT texts (e.g., Deut 1:30–31; Ps 103:14; Prov 3:11–12; Hos 1:10), comes alive in the Gospels through the teaching and prayers of Jesus, who continually refers to God as “Father.” In fact, there is a newness in Jesus’ teaching regarding God as Father due to the sheer emphasis he places upon this relationship for his followers. Beyond this general observation, however, one of the seminal passages in which Jesus speaks of the family appears in Mark 3:31–35 (par. Matt 12:46–59; Luke 8:19–21). The evangelist narrates,

And [Jesus’] mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers are outside seeking you.” And he answered them, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” and looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

In the context of first-century Jewish culture, the contrast in this passage between the crowd of Jesus’ followers and his mother and brothers could

hardly be more palpable.³⁹ Where it was expected that the members of Jesus' own family would surround him while others listen in, here we find just the opposite. The followers of Jesus are gathered around him while Mary and his brothers are alienated.⁴⁰ Jesus' family is left standing on the outside, while the followers of Jesus are seated on the inside.

What is the significance of Jesus' declaration that his *true* family consists not of those who are tied to him by blood, but of those who do the will of God? One common view of this pericope is that Jesus is pronouncing a radical "redefinition" of the very notion of "family." Namely, whereas the Jewish people are used to thinking of family in terms of blood ties to a common ancestor, Jesus profoundly rejects this notion in order to recast the family in terms of spiritual ties to him.⁴¹ This view, however, may be somewhat near-sighted. The idea that Jesus is newly introducing the concept of a spiritual family in contrast to a mere human family ignores the OT stream of God's revelation to his people about what being in his "family" means, a stream which, as we have seen, has its headwaters in the opening pages of Genesis and was articulated until the ministry of John the Baptist (Matt 3:9; Luke 3:8). Therefore, it is better to interpret Jesus' teaching about the "family" on this occasion in at least two ways. First, Jesus may not be introducing a new concept of spiritual family in this teaching, but he is certainly taking advantage of a teaching moment in order to remind his followers what it means to be in the true "family" of God. In fact, Jesus offers a similar reminder to the Pharisees who depended spiritually upon their human descent from Abraham (John 8:37–42). He cautions them, "If you were [truly] Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did" (John 8:39) and, "If God were [truly] your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here"

³⁹ William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 147, remarks, "Those who sat before [Jesus] felt compelled to call his attention to the persistent outcry, for in their thinking both the Law of God and common piety demanded that he respect the request of his mother."

⁴⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 179.

⁴¹ Those who interpret Jesus' words as a "redefinition" of the family include, for example, James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 125; Pheme Perkins, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIB; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 566; and Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26* (WBC 34A; Dallas: Word, 1989), 182. Additionally, Howard Clark Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 109, says that the "redefined family" is a "major image employed by Mark for the eschatological community" and that "this new definition of family [is] in terms of the Christian community." Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, "'Who Are My Mother and My Brothers?': Family Relations and Family Language in the Gospel of Mark," *JR* 81 (2001): 14, also explains, "Jesus *redefines* his family not just as those around him but as those who do the will of God" (emphasis added). Lane, *Mark*, 148, refers to Mark 3:34 as "the new family which Jesus calls into being."

(8:42). Moreover, Jesus continues to warn the Pharisees that their murderous disobedience proves they have no pedigree in God's family at all but are actually children of the devil (8:44–47). Yet as shocking as this verdict may have sounded to the ears of the self-righteous Pharisees, Jesus' teaching is entirely consistent with the theology of the family which God had already been revealed in the OT canon.

Secondly, we may interpret Jesus' words about family, if not as a *redefinition* of family in general, as a *reorientation* of the true family of God.⁴² In other words, Jesus may not be introducing the family of God as a new concept, but he is certainly reorienting the family around himself as the obedient Son of the Father. Whereas spiritual obedience would have previously placed one in God's family, Jesus may refine doing "the will of God" (Mark 3:35) more specifically as that which signifies a family relationship with Jesus himself. Thus, Jesus is not rejecting his mother and his brothers in this narrative but drawing a contrast which advances OT revelation. Though Jesus' own kinship group in Nazareth misunderstood him and even rejected him (cf. Mark 3:20–21; 6:1–6), his true "family" gave evidence of their spiritual kinship by sharing in the common family trait, illustrated by Jesus, of faithful obedience to the Father.

It is also important to mention that the implications of Jesus' teaching in Mark 3:31–35 extend to other events and sayings in the ministry of Jesus as he urges his followers that they must be willing to forsake all to follow him. While continuing to confine our observations to Mark's Gospel, we first notice that Peter and Andrew leave their livelihood in order to follow Jesus (Mark 1:16–18). Next, James and John, in order to answer Jesus' call, leave behind even their father, Zebedee, who remains sitting in the boat with his servants (1:19–20).

Later in Jesus' ministry, Peter compares himself with a rich young man whose grasp of possessions prevented him from following the Lord. Peter declares, "See, we have left everything and followed you" (Mark 10:28). Jesus replies, "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" (10:29–30). Two aspects of Jesus' teaching in this passage are especially significant. First, although Jesus is not teaching that one *must* forsake all family ties in order to follow him, Jesus recognizes that loyalty to the family of God—shown through obedience to the will of God—will sometimes mean a separation from blood kinship, and implies that persecution is a normal part of this separation.⁴³ Second, Jesus teaches that what may be

⁴² Mark L. Strauss, *Mark* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 174, uses this similar terminology when interpreting Mark 3:31–35. He says, ". . . the radical values of the kingdom of God demand new allegiances and a new orientation in human relationships." A *new* orientation is a *reorientation*.

⁴³ France, *Mark*, 408–9.

painfully lost in terms of human kinship will be gained in terms of multiple family members who are brothers and sisters with Christ and that this new family has an eternal quality.

In summary, the teaching of Jesus demonstrates a strong continuity between the family of God in the OT and the family of God reconstituted around himself as the Son of God. First, in both the OT and in the teaching of Jesus, the true members of the “family” are those who are obedient to God. Jesus’ ministry served to call attention to the distinction between those who were only Jews by race and those who were truly in God’s “family.” Second, just as God communicated to his people in the warm, familial language of a father to a son, so Jesus speaks ubiquitously of God as his Father and refers to his followers as brothers, sisters, and mothers. Third, just as faithful believers found themselves marginalized from society in the OT, Jesus teaches that this persecution is a normal expectation for those who choose to follow him.

The Family of God in Paul

We return at last to Paul’s use of family language in his letters. Before we note the continuity of familial terms among Paul, the OT and teaching of Jesus, however, we must explore a fundamental question. Poythress and Baucham have suggested syllogisms which conclude that the relationships within the family must inform the proper relationships within the church. Moreover, at least in Baucham’s view, family language in Paul must even inform the organization of the church. It is necessary, therefore, to identify what, if any, particular family structure Paul has in mind when he refers to the church as a family. To this question we will now turn before examining Paul’s family language itself.

Paul’s Perception of the Family Structure

To begin with, we must recognize that the ANE family model differs in substantial ways from the nuclear family in the modern West. Therefore, any attempt to understand Paul’s use of family terminology to describe the church must start with the recognition that the modern family structure which most people think of in the West when they think of a “family” was unknown to Paul.⁴⁴ Because the ANE family dynamics are quite complex, however, the following is a brief summary relying on the excellent work of Joseph H. Hellerman.

Hellerman explains the ancient family as a patrilineal kinship group in which the members view their participation “not primarily in terms of *relationship* but in terms of *consanguinity*, that is, in terms of a blood connection with a common ancestor.”⁴⁵ There are at least two aspects of the patrilineal

⁴⁴ John W. Drane, “Family,” *NDBT*, 494.

⁴⁵ Joseph H. Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis: Augsburg

family which are significant for an understanding of family in the NT. First, ancient families were highly corporate, valuing the group over the individual, willing without question to come to the aid of one another, and unbending in their loyalty.⁴⁶ This means that the needs and interests of the group always took priority over that of the individual.⁴⁷ Second, in ancient families, it was not marriage, but the priority of blood relation—especially between siblings—which formed the strongest bonds of loyalty.⁴⁸ In fact, among the members of the immediate family, the wife/mother was considered an “outsider” from the standpoint that she was the only person not connected by blood to the ancestor. Furthermore, the father and sons were the most important by virtue of the fact that they were the only members who could continue the bloodline. Consequently, father-son/daughter and brother/sister language represent the most loyal expressions of familial ties.⁴⁹ One example in which Paul appears to reflect an understanding of this faithful sibling loyalty is found in 1 Cor 6:1–8, where Paul is aghast with the knowledge that one of the believers was taking the other before the courts. “[Y]ou yourselves wrong and defraud,” he scolds them, “even your own brothers!” (1 Cor 6:8).

But does the patrilineal kinship model fully explain Paul’s perception of the family model, or are there other ways to approach this question? For example, Abraham J. Malherbe demonstrates how Paul refers to the Thessalonian believers as being in the “family” of God although the apostle never uses this term explicitly.⁵⁰ According to Malherbe, Paul builds upon the idea

Fortress, 2001), 29 (emphasis original). See also idem, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 36–38.

⁴⁶ Hellerman, *Ancient Church*, 214–15.

⁴⁷ Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 50.

⁴⁸ Hellerman, *Ancient Church as Family*, 35–51.

⁴⁹ Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 41–50, offers special insight into the aspect of sibling ties in particular. He gives several examples from Second Temple literature and from the Bible which demonstrate absolute sibling loyalty, which takes priority even over the marriage relationship. For example, Herod murders his beloved Mariamne in loyalty to his sister, Solome (Josephus, *Ant.* 15.185–240); Octavia leaves her husband Antony and returns to her brother, Octavian, when the two men clash in war (Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 35); Simeon and Levi slaughter the men of Shechem to defend their sister’s honor (Genesis 34), and Joseph forgave his brothers and took them back into fellowship (Genesis 37–50).

The emphasis on father-son/daughter and brother/sister language should not ignore, however, that the bond between husband and wife was also celebrated and used as a picture of the relationship between God and his people, speaking in terms of love and fidelity (e.g., Hos 2:14–23; Eph 5:25–32).

⁵⁰ Malherbe, “God’s New Family in Thessalonica,” 119–24. Among other evidences, Malherbe points to Paul’s addressing the Thessalonians as a people group,

that God is Creator, and therefore “Father,” and that this idea already existed in Platonic and Stoic philosophies present in the culture.⁵¹ “It is possible,” explains Malherbe, “that Paul derived this description of God as Father who creates and sustains the church from such traditions, which were indebted to Stocism.”⁵² Likewise, Reider Aasgaard attempts to explain Paul’s use of brother/sister language by way of philosophical ideas as seen specifically in a comparison of Paul with Plutarch’s *Philadelphias*.⁵³ At the least, these authors have recognized the wide range of familial terms and adjacent philosophical concepts that may have been in Paul’s vocabulary when interacting with Gentile believers.

Furthermore, it should occur to us that, as a Roman citizen, reared in Judaism but with knowledge of Roman family customs, Paul would have been fully aware of both Jewish and pagan traditions with respect to the household. Paul knew of the Jewish family, rich with ancient customs which flowed from honor to the Torah, and he also knew of the pagan family, where the hearth was the site of the shrine that brought the members of the household together for veneration of the family god.⁵⁴ When we read the letters of Paul, we note that he can organize his ideas around the Greco-Roman *Haus-tafel* when giving instructions concerning relationships within the family (Eph 5:22–6:9; Col 3:18–25), and he can also draw upon patriarchal kinship texts of the OT (Rom 9:6–13; 2 Cor 6:18).

To the various dynamics of family life which Paul could have drawn upon, Eva Marie Lassen adds the fact that family metaphors were ubiquitous in ancient Rome and that these metaphors were not always used the same way in pagan society as they were by the writers of the NT.⁵⁵ Her observation may suggest why family metaphors would have been attractive for Paul to use in describing the church to Gentile people, but it does not illumine what family system, if any in particular, Paul is using to describe the church, especially in the Pastorals. Furthermore, Karl Olav Sandnes touches on some of the intricacies of the patrilineal family detailed by Hellman when he warns that brotherhood and family terms are not necessarily to be used in the same category. Sandnes explains,

rather than using their place name, Thessalonica (1 Thess 1:1); addressing the believers several times as “brothers”; and referring to himself as a nursing mother and as a father in chapter 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 118–19.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 119–20.

⁵³ Aasgaard, “Brotherhood in Plutarch and Paul,” 166–82.

⁵⁴ John Barclay, “The Family as the Bearer of Religion in Judaism and Early Christianity,” in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (ed. Halvor Moxnes; New York: Routledge, 1997), 67, 73.

⁵⁵ Eva Marie Lassen, “The Roman Family: Ideal and Metaphor,” in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (ed. Halvor Moxnes; New York: Routledge, 1997), 114–15.

[H]ousehold terms cover relationships between superior and subordinate, between genders, and roles within the household, as well as the relationship between close and more distant relatives. Brotherhood terms, however, apply only to the relationship between siblings, who are usually considered to be equals, although there may be differences between younger and elder brothers.⁵⁶

The difficulty in approaching familial language used by Paul should by now be self-evident. Given that Paul was situated among a melting pot of various cultures and given the various familial terminology that would have been available to him, we are hard pressed to say for certain if there was a single family paradigm he would likely have drawn upon for all purposes in his letters. Therefore, it is probably best to view Paul's use of familial language in the following manner. First, we must observe that most of Paul's family metaphors use imagery that transcends many specific cultures. Who in Paul's culture could not relate, for instance, to the image of the tender, nursing mother caring for her children as an example of the apostle's affection for the members of a young church (1 Thess 2:7)? Or the image of the wise father patiently exhorting his children (2:11)? Or the honor that one should show to a mother or father as an example of deference to older believers in the church, or the familial bond between siblings (1 Tim 5:1–2)? Such imagery is still largely accessible even in the modern West. Second, when Paul desires to be specific in his application, he will couch his ideas in the teaching of the OT. For instance, when Paul addresses the subject of marriage in Eph 5:22–33 he defines marriage against the textual background of Gen 2:24. When he is explaining the roles of men and women in the church, he draws upon the created order from Genesis 1 and 2 (1 Tim 2:8–15). Third, the fluidity of much of Paul's language should not discourage the investigation of terminology that he may be using in a technical manner. For instance, the metaphor of adoption into God's family will be severely misunderstood by those outside of his culture unless one understands the process of adoption in the ANE. Finally, it is best to see Paul's use of family structure such as the Greco-Roman *Haustafel* as reflecting the common family structure of his readers. Therefore, we must be cautious about insisting that the apostle has one particular structure in mind when he speaks of the family. It may very well be that he uses the image of the household in the most fundamental sense of the concept only.

Examples of Familial Language in Paul

Despite the fact that Paul appears at times to draw upon Greco-Roman imagery which was unknown in the OT (e.g., the *Haustafeln* and his adoption

⁵⁶ Karl Olav Sandnes, "Equality within Patriarchal Structures: Some New Testament Perspectives on the Christian Fellowship as a Brother- or Sisterhood and a Family," in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (ed. Halvor Moxnes; New York: Routledge, 1997), 150.

language), his use of familial language shows a strong continuity with the general theological idea of God's "family" in the OT and in the teaching of Jesus. First, Paul agrees that those who are in the "family" are unique in that they obey the word and will of God. This teaching in Paul is seen in a striking passage in 2 Cor 6:14–18. Paul writes,

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty." Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

The overall message that Paul is urging upon the Corinthian church is to separate themselves as holy people unto God from their pagan culture.⁵⁷ But in making this appeal, Paul speaks in terms of partnership, fellowship, accord, portion, and agreement. The church is not to share these familial virtues of oneness with those who are unbelieving or in darkness, or who practice lawlessness and idolatry, but they are to find their closest fellowship with those who are living in obedience to God. Why is it important for the church to live holy lives, distinct from the culture around them? The answer is discovered in the tapestry of OT texts which Paul quotes freely in this passage (Lev 26:12; Isa 52:11; Ezek 20:34; and 2 Sam 7:14); in short, because believers in the church are "the people of God."⁵⁸ One of Paul's OT allusions in particular, however, is quite unique. In its original context, 2 Sam 7:14 was God's promise to David that his royal lineage would be preserved. Speaking of David's descendant (Solomon), God says, "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son." In order to make this OT text fit its present context, Paul must alter it in three significant ways. First, he must take a passage that originally applied to an individual and make it plural. Second, he must take a passage which applied to a single person or, arguably, a single lineage (David's heirs) *among* the people of God and apply it to *all* the people of God. Third, in order to encompass all of God's people, Paul must also include "daughters" with sons. That Paul recasts this important OT text highlights his theology of being in God's "family." At the fundamental level, being in the "family" of God means faithful obedience to God.

⁵⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (WBC 40; Waco, TX: Word, 1986).

⁵⁸ Peter Balla, "2 Corinthians," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 773.

A second significant passage illustrating a remarkable continuity between Paul and the OT is Romans 9, where he makes explicit the remnant theology of the OT. In answer to those who would accuse God of not fulfilling his promise to save Israel, Paul argues, “but it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named”” (Rom 9:6–7). With a keen eye toward the progression of God’s “family” in Genesis, in which Isaac was chosen instead of Ishmael (9:7–9), and Jacob was chosen instead of Esau (9:10–13), Paul sets forth the theological concept that membership in the “family” is not tied to blood, but to faith and obedience.

Third, the tender and strong images of family that Paul uses to speak of the church and their relationship with one another in Christ—as well as his own relationship with them—have already been cited above (e.g., 1 Thess 2:6–12). This is yet another way we observe demonstrable continuity between the OT, Jesus, and Paul. As mentioned before, brother/sister language is ubiquitous in Paul. To offer another example, Paul considered himself a “father” to the Corinthians. “I do not write these things to make you ashamed,” says Paul, “but to admonish you as my beloved children. . . . For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (1 Cor 4:14–15). Likewise, Paul continues to think of himself in this relationship to the Corinthians, even after much strife between them: “I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children” (2 Cor 12:14b).

Conclusion

How, then, does a biblical theology of the “family” in the Old and New Testaments inform our understanding of how far to press Paul’s family metaphor? At the most fundamental level, being a member of God’s “family” means that one is faithful and obedient to God and is therefore separated unto God in a visible community, whether it is the nation of Israel in the Old Testament or the church in the New Testament. On this basis, the idea of a family remnant was formed, comprised of those faithful in contrast to those who were unfaithful, even if the unfaithful had a claim to family ties at the biological level (e.g., Jewish descent). Furthermore, this “family” has always existed, protected by God’s grace, which means that we should expect to see it continue, even if in remnant form, until the end of the age. In the OT, the metaphor of being in the family, with God as Father, was often overshadowed by the more prevalent language of the “people of God.” But with the coming of Jesus, the language of God as Father came into prominence.

In his letters, however, Paul draws upon the full range of familial terms in order to communicate the idea of being in God’s household, or *οἶκος θεοῦ* (1 Tim 3:15), using family imagery in unprecedented ways. For instance, he equates *ἐπίσκοπος* with a father as a test of his qualification (1 Tim 3:5–6) and uses family relationships to explain to Timothy his behavior among his

brothers and sisters in Christ (5:1–2). But these examples are not radical departures from the trajectory of familial terms used by God to identify his community. Paul's use of οἶκος θεοῦ is a natural implication arising from reflection upon the church as the faithful members of God's "family" and the long-time use of strong family terms, such as "brother," to refer to the members of the family. It is also quite possible that, as Christians were pushed out of the temple court and the synagogues and began to gather more often in their own villas, the rise of the "house church" coupled with the familiar, OT family language made the term οἶκος θεοῦ practically intuitive.⁵⁹ As for Paul's equating the ἐπίσκοπος with a father, this application could also be seen as a natural extension from his own ministry, particularly the way he regarded the members of the Corinthian church as his "children" (cf. 1 Cor 4:14–15, 17; 2 Cor 6:13; 12:14). Given the organizational development in the church by the time 1 Timothy was written and the fact that Paul is writing specifically to instruct Timothy how to establish church leadership, Paul's means of describing the pastoral role should not be surprising. And, of course, his instruction to Timothy regarding the way he should treat other members of the "family" would also be a natural development of his references to church members using common, familial terms.

Moreover, it does not appear that the apostle Paul is drawing on a particular family model but is speaking of the family in universal terms. In fact, as we have seen, in both the Old and the New Testaments, the language the authors use to speak of the family is so fluid, and applied with such diversity, that it is impossible to insist upon one family model that Paul may or may not have had in mind when speaking of the church as a "household." This point must be made specifically with reference to Baucham's insistence that churches must never segregate age groups on the basis of the family model. How do we know which particular model of the family, if any, that Paul has in mind? Furthermore, if we begin to arbitrarily apply a family model to the church, where are the boundaries governing how far to take the application of ancient household paradigms? Are wives, for instance, to be marginalized as not being truly part of the "household" (church) based on the patrilineal model? Of course not. So as much as a biblical theology of the family *informs* our understanding of the *relationship* the members of Christ's church share with him and with one another, the same theology *limits* how far we can *apply* the dynamic of the family in practical terms.

But what about Poythress's belief that Paul is drawing upon implications of family for the church because believers are members of the same spiritual household? First, there is nothing that Poythress suggests Paul is saying in the Pastoral Epistles that the apostle has not already stated clearly on his own. In particular, Poythress's argument that male leadership in the home implies male leadership in the church simply offers another explanation for something Paul himself has already argued based on the created order in the first

⁵⁹ Goetzman, "House, Build, Manage, Steward," 249.

family (1 Cor 11:8–9; 1 Tim 2:13–14). Poythress’s essay is helpful in terms of suggesting further insight into the thinking of Paul on the matter of establishing relationships in the church. But his approach does not suggest *new* relationships or organizational structures within the church.

Baucham, however, insists that the family metaphor informs church polity and structure. Moreover, to Baucham’s credit, his application of the family metaphor has something to commend, for it augments the role of fatherhood and brings God’s people together for greater fellowship in the body of Christ. The question here, however, is not whether such church structures can be helpful. The question is whether Paul’s use of familial language is prescriptive, whether it is intended to instruct us how we *must* organize our churches, whether this prescription is binding upon God’s people. I conclude that the Scriptures do *not* bind the church to such structures. Family language in Paul tells us who is a member of God’s family by virtue of faith and obedience, and it suggests to us the unity and closeness of our fellowship with God and with one another. On that basis, one may certainly make a good argument for the organization of the church. For instance, if familial unity is a picture of the closeness of our fellowship, it is reasonable that we should organize our church life and worship in a way which reflects and encourages this quality of unity in the body. In some churches, therefore, God’s people may choose to accomplish this visible, family-like unity by having everyone, no matter how young or old, gather together for study and worship. In other churches, the congregation may find this kind of organization disruptive but seek for other ways to foster the visible oneness of the body. But there is no formal structure delineated in the Scriptures by virtue of family metaphor.

In short, Paul’s family language helps us to understand the *kind* of church Christ has in mind. But it stops short of prescribing for us the *organization* or *structure* of the church beyond what the New Testament has already clearly told us. Therefore, it is inaccurate to use the phrase “family of families” to describe the structure of the church.⁶⁰ This expression forces an emphasis that Paul does not make, an emphasis on the individual families whom God has brought together to build his church. Instead, the pervasiveness and flexibility of Paul’s familial language should lead the reader to a more significant conclusion about the relationship between church and family. The church is not a “family of families,” but the church is “a family.” A particular family model cannot drive the organization of the church with any authority for the very reason that the “family of God” in the Scriptures *transcends* all models. The “household of God” (1 Tim 3:15) is the New Testament expression of the one, true family that God, in his wisdom and sovereignty, continues to call out from among all nations for his own glory.

⁶⁰ Baucham, *Family Driven Faith*, 191. I have been careful to use the expression “family of families” in the way that Baucham uses the phrase, as relating to the *structure* of the church, not its ecclesiology. Cf. Scott T. Brown, “Is the Church a ‘Family of Families?’” *Scott Brown Online*. <http://scottbrownonline.com/is-the-church-a-family-of-families/>.