

# THE HISTORICAL CONTINGENCY OF THE “CHRISTIAN HOUSEHOLD”

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## Household, History & Contingency

It is not, therefore, sufficient to study what ‘family’ is ‘in itself’: it is always part of a wider societal context and has a cultural meaning. In order to understand the function and the place of the family, we must have a grasp of the larger social pattern of which it is a part.<sup>1</sup>

## The “Christian Household” and the Contemporary Nuclear Family

In today’s world, the phrase *nuclear family* conjures up an image of a domestic unit comprising two parents and their children who live together in a single-family residence and who share a deep affective intimacy with one another... Under these conditions, the modern nuclear family is an institution that is characterized above all by privacy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Halvor Moxnes, "What Is Family? Problems in Constructing Early Christian Families," in *Constructing Early Christian Families*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Keith R. Bradley, *Discovering the Roman Family: Studies in Roman Social History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), 6.

## The Historically Contingent *Ancient Israelite* Household

[Though the boundaries around the family] became more defined as the nomadic period ended and settled agricultural and urban life began, they never reached anything approaching the central loyalty to the marriage found in much Western Society today. And in the contemporary Middle East they still don't.<sup>3</sup>

## The Historically Contingent *Earliest (& Early) Church* Household

It is not the family as an “emotional unit” that we encounter in the Gospels' descriptions of households in Galilee [or the Epistles' descriptions of Mediterranean households elsewhere] but rather as a group that lives and works together within the context of socio-economic inter-relations.<sup>4</sup>

[Understanding historical context] warns us against a reading of the texts which may project onto them images of the family and home in the society in which we live.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Brian W. Grant, *The Social Structure of Christian Families* (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Moxnes, "What Is Family? Problems in Constructing Early Christian Families," 23.

<sup>5</sup> Santiago Guizarro, "The Family in First-Century Galilee," in *Constructing Early Christian Families*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), 61-62.

## **The Historically Contingent *Medieval* Household (c. 500-1500 AD)**

The greater prominence of married couple households in north-western Europe should not be confused with nuclear family self-sufficiency. The poor lived in truncated families, with their teenagers and sometimes even their young children sent to work in others' homes. The rich, along with the lower-class youths who worked as their servants lived in large households that gave a married couple very little privacy. Even among the middle classes, households typically included servants or lodgers... day-to-day interactions were likely to be with neighbours, servants, or community institutions rather than with kin<sup>6</sup>.

## **The Historically Contingent *Early Modern* Household (c. 1500-1800 AD)**

Emerging was a family with stronger affective bonds and clearer external boundaries... the invention of corridors allowed privacy within rooms, and the dumbwaiter allowed a separation of families on one floor and servants on another... More affectionate child-raising became normative... marriage based on mutual affection was common, building on the established primacy of values of individualism and privacy.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), 128-29.

<sup>7</sup> Grant, *The Social Structure of Christian Families*, 72.

## The Historically Contingent *Modern* Household (c. 1800 – mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century)

What emerged was a Victorian ideal of the family—the “modern family”—that continues to function today in the nostalgic imagination as a normative model. In this middle-class vision of the family, home and work, female and male “spheres” were strictly separated. The ability of the male “breadwinner” to support a full-time house-wife was the mark of middle-class success, a standard that most working-class Americans could not emulate due to the low wages paid to their men. The woman who worked—that is, left the home for a paying job—was seen as nonnormative. Such work was allowable for young women or “spinsters” but it was regarded as selfish and destructive to family life for married women with children<sup>8</sup>.

As we will see, what evangelicals call the “traditional family” is in fact the bourgeois or middle-class family, which rose to dominance in the nineteenth century—not accidentally alongside capitalism and, a little later, America the ascendant world power<sup>9</sup>.

### The “Christian Household” // Christians in Households

... the current rearrangement of both married and single life is in fact without historical precedent. When it comes to any particular marital practice of behaviour, there may be nothing new under the sun. But when it comes to the overall place of marriage in society and the relationship between husbands and wives, nothing in the past is anything like what we have today, even if it may look similar at first glance.<sup>10</sup>

There is nothing about family, simply as a collection of spouses and offspring, that makes it members Christian. Instead, families and individuals gain a distinctive Christian identity through their participation in the church and its story.<sup>11</sup>

The God of the Bible is not a philosophical construct, not an impersonal force to be dissected and manipulated. The God of the Bible is the living, dynamic source and sustainer of all that is, who deigns to enter history and relationship with the people Israel and the man Jesus. So the Bible itself is not a list of abstract, timeless formulas... to create and live in a truly Christian family, the church in every generation and culture must read the biblical story anew... to see how the pioneers of the faith responded to the story in light of the particular challenges and privileges of their cultures.... The church must respond to the story of Israel and Jesus in the light of the particular challenges and privileges of its own culture.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 102.

<sup>9</sup> Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Tradition & Modern Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Clapp, *Crossroads*, 84.

<sup>12</sup> Clapp, *Crossroads*, 15.

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