Jesus the Bachelor

The New Testament on Sex, Marriage, and the Family

Luke Timothy Johnson

Despite the popular acronym WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?), when searching for role models in family life it might be best to look elsewhere. Jesus was not much of an advocate for marriage, family, or sexuality.

When Christians turn to their Scripture for clear guidance or consistent teaching on these topics, they will discover instead that the writings of the New Testament present conflicting views. This deep diversity within the compositions should give one caution when making proclamations about "normal" or "ideal" families—the Christian legacy is, in fact, one of individual choice and alternative family forms.

In Judaism and Islam, both Moses and Muhammad marry, have children, live to an old age, and die naturally. Christianity’s founding figure died young and violently, without wife or child.

Even Jesus’ resurrection—the event that gave rise to the religion—did not occur in order for him to continue his mortal life. Rather, he entered into a share in God’s life and power, and through the Holy Spirit gave others a chance at an “eternal life.” This introduces a fundamental split between flesh and spirit, natural human capacity and divine gift.

WE ARE FAMILY

The New Testament does contain some appreciation of the family. Two of the Gospels pay positive attention to Jesus’ family of origins. In Matthew, Joseph is a heroic protector who preserves the life of the infant messiah. In Luke, Mary exemplifies those who belong to Jesus’ true family because they “hear the word of God and keep it.”

Unlike John the Baptist, Jesus does not appear as a man of the wilderness. He does not attack the comforts of the home. Jesus is noteworthy among ancient figures for the attention and welcome he gives to children, and households played an important role in the earliest days of the Christian movement. The Acts of the Apostles shows the gospel being spread through the conversion of entire households, and leaders of households are identified as leaders of congregations.

In the Gospels of Mark and John, however, Jesus is at odds with his natural family, which does not understand or accept him. Jesus also calls his followers to a radical renunciation of their natural family: they are to leave parents, spouses, and children in
order to follow him. They become, in effect, a kinship group, a new family gathered around the prophet. Those who listen to him are his mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers.

**MARRIAGE IS GOOD, BUT NOT BEST**

The New Testament contains the same sort of tensions with respect to marriage. Jesus appears to approve of marriage (or at least weddings) by his performance of a miracle while attending a wedding feast at Cana. At first, he forbids the practice of divorce absolutely, and then says divorce is allowed only on the grounds of the partner’s sexual immorality. If either husband or wife divorce and marry again, they commit adultery; and if anyone marries a divorced person, he or she commits adultery.

In one of the New Testament’s most unequivocal statements on the subject, Paul includes marriage with food as among “all the things that God has created as good,” and designates those who forbid marriage as “liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron.”

After the resurrection, however, Paul comes down in favor of celibacy as the preferred way of life because it allows a devotion to the Lord without distraction, whereas the married are conflicted by anxiety.

The Gospels portray Jesus as unfettered by any human spouse; he is, rather, the “bridegroom” of his followers. Nor does Jesus support the institution of marriage when he says, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

**SEX AS SERIOUS BUSINESS**

The New Testament is remarkable among religious writings for the almost complete lack of attention to aesthetics, pleasure, or the erotic. There is no Song of Solomon among its writings. Desire and lust are regarded as equivalent to actual fornication and adultery. The sexual drive appears as dangerous and destructive.

Sex is not playful or trivial, and is not to be engaged in for health or recreational purposes. Rather, it is a serious business, meant to take place only in monogamous marriages. Within this context, sex can sanctify both the partners and their children. There is importance placed on mutual consent.

Sexuality stands within God’s creative activity, and sexual intercourse and childbearing are blessings because they participate in God’s creation of life. But God’s ability to give life is not restricted to sexual means. Jesus is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit gives life to the dead. In the New Testament, human sexuality is a good but it is not an ultimate good. Like marriage and the family, it can, and sometimes must be transcended for the sake of God’s rule.

**Sexuality within Christian writings is a mystery to be celebrated and suffered—in that, like life itself.** Indeed, when Jesus’ disciples complain about the difficulty of his teaching concerning the indissolubility of marriage, Jesus holds out the ideal of being a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven: “Let anyone accept this,” he says, “who can.”

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