

6. Early Christianity

William Haines, August 7, 2026

For nearly two millennia Christianity has been the dominant thread in Western thought and culture.

Christianity is an offshoot of Judaism. One scholar writes of Judaism generally,

In Judaism, the family ... is that nucleus which constitutes and gives form to society, giving to the latter its components, its profound values. The rules belonging to society, the relationships which are set up and developed in it, should be the same as those of the family. ... Within the family, each has a specific role, and respect for individual responsibilities brings about the realisation of a common project. It is in the family that one learns the capacity of relationship, love, respect (respect for the rules, for every individual, for nature), the taking care of the other, mutual understanding, the capacity of listening and all those values and sentiments which enable human life to have meaning and to be lived to the full.¹

On the whole, Christianity has emphasized human family relations, and it has always used nuclear family relations as its main overt models for conceiving other relations.

After Jesus' death, the Christian tradition explained his importance partly on the basis of his family and kinship relations. The Gospels begin with begats, as Matthew 1 and Luke 3 are each at pains to trace the ancestry of Jesus through his stepfather Joseph back to King David (though the two

¹ Pepi 2014, p. 367.

accounts are spectacularly irreconcilable ²). More famously, Christianity eventually explained Jesus' divine status as his being God's literal son.

In the New Testament, God is envisioned mainly as a father. Jesus often speaks of "my father," occasionally puzzling interlocutors who do not realize he means God. But the real Jesus may not have been claiming a special status for himself. "Our Father who art in Heaven," says the prescribed prayer. And in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"³

"Call no one your father on earth," Jesus adjures his followers later in the Gospel of Matthew, "for you have one Father—the one in heaven."⁴ This and Jesus' other outbursts in the Synoptic Gospels against filial piety toward human parents⁵ bring out a potentially self-undermining feature of the project of familying the human experience—the project of taking as one's family what is not one's family. The more one conceives something other than one's family

² The irreconcilability is thoroughly explained by Thomas Paine in *The Age of Reason*, which he wrote while imprisoned in France during the French Revolution (Paine 1998, pp. 217-220). A common allegation in reply is that the account in Luke means to give the ancestry of Mary, rather than of Joseph as the text says. Indeed the fact that two gospels claim to trace Jesus' parentage back to David through Joseph would seem on its face to reflect a view that Joseph was Jesus' father.

³ Matthew 7:9-11. Translations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁴ Matthew 23:9.

⁵ Matthew 4:22, 8:21f., 10:37, 12:46-50, 19:29; Mark 1:20, 3:31-34, 10:29f.; Luke 2:49, 8:19-21, 9:50-62, 14:26. Van Norden 2007 touches on this matter at p. 250f. The Jesus of these gospels nevertheless acknowledges the family-related commandments (Matthew 5:27f., 15:4, 19:16-19, etc.) and opposes easy divorce (Matthew 5:31f.).

as one's family, the less one is regarding one's family as one's family.⁶ The root withers when the specialness of family is denied. Insofar as all bonds are family bonds, the family bond is *not* a special bond.

A different account has perhaps been suggested to explain Jesus' lack of focus on human family ethics. It has been said that "one of the main reasons why the role ethics of familial relations has attracted relatively little attention in the Western philosophical narrative from earliest times" is the abstract view that "the moral good is achieved by renouncing one's own interests."⁷ Though this abstract view was not held by Plato, Aristotle or the Stoics, who tended to identify a person's moral goodness with their happiness,⁸ we do find something analogous to it held by Jesus (as reported) and many other Christians. For while Jesus too recommended a way of life primarily on the grounds that it was in the interest of the agent, he departed from the main lines of ancient moral thought by often locating the main relevant interest elsewhere than in familiar social life: sometimes in world-overriding effects of faith such as miraculous food, wine, and physical wholeness and health (goods that the philosophers saw as more elementary than goods of social interaction), and sometimes in more distant goods seen either as an extension of the aforementioned miracles or as a consequence of sudden massive divine intervention bringing reward and punishment: "Blessed are the meek, for the meek shall inherit the earth." It may be interesting to speculate how far this view can be explained as an effort to place a deeply unsatisfactory world in the arms of a loving parent.

⁶ In Roger T. Ames' words, "Only I can be father to *my* sons; only I can be *this* son to *my* mother; only I can sacrifice to *my* ancestors" (Ames 1996, p. 17; Ames 2002, p. 62). But an ancestor can be special even if he or she has a *group* of descendants to symbolize. And while not every man can truly say, "Only I can be son to *my* mother," it is true that only I can be *this* son to my mother, or *this* member of any random crowd.

⁷ Rosemont & Ames 2009, p. 39.

⁸ Nor do we find such a view in Kant or Utilitarianism, for these have positive accounts of goodness.

The Pauline letters have been at least as important as Jesus and the Gospels in shaping Christian thought. Paul found the earliest Christians mindful of the transcendent and revolutionary character of their communities of love, as they expected the end times soon. He mentions reports of casual sex, even incest.⁹ When the Pauline letters give concrete regulations for conduct, these are usually rules about the conduct of nuclear family relational positions, literal or metaphorical. For example:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart. Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.¹⁰

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of

⁹ 1 Corinthians 5-6.

¹⁰ Colossians 3:18-22. (Scholars doubt that Colossians was written by Paul.)

you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.¹¹ ...

Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way— for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God’s church?¹²

Indeed, “whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”¹³

In the letters attributed to Paul, family serves as a main metaphor for religious relations. The writer addresses his audiences as “brothers and sisters.” Mere terms of address aside, he says that one should speak to older men not harshly but rather as to fathers, speak to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, and to younger women as sisters.¹⁴ Christians are “members of God’s family”;¹⁵ indeed God “gives his name to every family in heaven and earth.”¹⁶ “I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters,’ says the Lord Almighty.”¹⁷ Believers are the “family of faith,”¹⁸ and they should expand the church so that Christ can be “the firstborn within a large family.”¹⁹ Christ is “the firstborn of all creation” and “the firstborn from the dead.”²⁰ The Spirit of God is “a spirit of adoption,” making its followers

¹¹ Ephesians 5:28-33. (Scholars doubt that Ephesians was written by Paul.)

¹² 1 Timothy 3:2-5 (Scholars doubt that 1 Timothy was written by Paul.)

¹³ 1 Timothy 5:8.

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 5:1f.

¹⁵ Galatians 1:2

¹⁶ Ephesians 3:15.

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 6:18

¹⁸ Galatians 6:10.

¹⁹ Romans 8:29

²⁰ Colossians 2:15,18; Hebrews 1:6. (Scholars doubt that Hebrews was written by Paul.)

children of God, joint heirs with Christ.²¹ The law of Moses is like a slave-driver or a hired disciplinarian, but baptism and faith can make even Gentiles adoptive children of God, hence heirs of the promise.²² One letter admonishes the addressees:

Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness.²³

Sometimes Paul puts himself in the parental role. He says that his and his fellows' leadership is not that of a harsh disciplinarian, but rather that of a nursing mother or an encouraging, pleading father.²⁴ Paul gives relatively easy teachings to those who are "infants in Christ," as a mother gives milk before solid food.²⁵ Believers may have "ten thousand guardians in Christ," but not many fathers, such as Paul.²⁶

Reference to Paul as parent links him to another image. He is concerned about the Corinthians because he has promised them in marriage to Christ.²⁷ And just as a wife must be faithful to her husband until he dies but is free to

²¹ Romans 8:14-22

²² Galatians 3:25-4:7

²³ Hebrews 12:7-10.

²⁴ 1 Thessalonians 2:7, 11f.

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 3:1f.

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 4:14-17. Conversely, Paul expresses his love for the Thessalonians by saying that his time away from them made him an "orphan" (1 Thessalonians 2:17).

²⁷ 2 Corinthians 11:2

remarry thereafter, so the Mosaic law was binding until its abolition freed us to follow Christ.²⁸

Paul uses many kinds of metaphor (as does the Chinese political tradition), but family relations are a prominent recurring kind.

After Paul, in 325 the Council of Nicaea declared that God the Father and God the Son are the same in substance. Thenceforth Christianity officially saw the father-son relation as an internal feature of God.

At the Third Ecumenical Council (the First Council of Ephesus) in 431, the Virgin Mary was declared “Mother of God” (*theotokos*), on grounds of the divinity of Christ. This title for her was old but had been controversial. It tended to evoke the syncretic Great Mother tradition, which was popular around the Mediterranean for most of the millennium leading up to the Council. Controversy rages to this day on the extent to which Mary’s cult is an outgrowth of that tradition.

The Christian church has followed Jesus and Paul in invoking family relations as leading models or inspirations for cosmic, religious, and ecclesiastical order, even for celibate monastic life. Key Christian figures are labeled “Mother” (Mother Mary, Mother Superior, and the Mother Church) or “Father” (God, priest, abbot, bishop, pope (*papa*) or patriarch, and the founding theologians known as the Church Fathers or simply the Fathers); and there are “brothers” and “sisters” of holy orders, and more generally one’s “brothers and sisters in Christ”; as well as the “family of faith”—not to mention godfathers and godmothers. From the seminal *Rule of St. Benedict* of the early 500s:

An Abbot who is worthy to be over a monastery should always remember what he is called ... which is taken from the words of the Apostle: “You have received a Spirit of adoption as sons, by virtue of which we cry, ‘Abba—Father!’” ... Let no one call another by the mere name; but let the

²⁸ Romans 7:1-6

seniors call their juniors Brothers, and the juniors call their seniors Fathers, by which is conveyed the reverence due to a father.²⁹

Inspired by the various biblical references to God or Christ as a bridegroom of his people, Christians developed a variety of applications of this spousal image over the centuries. The historian Dyan Elliott explores these in her monograph *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500*. (My survey should give much more space to her material than it does.) Elliott writes of the image,

At its root was the mystical marriage between God and the human soul that, from the perspective of ancient and medieval commentators, found its most eloquent and provocative expression in the Song of Songs. Like the enterprising bride of the Canticles, all true believers should pursue the celestial bridegroom in anticipation of an ecstatic consummation in the afterlife. The mystical marriage was also possessed of an incorporated dimension as evident in Christ's marriage with the church of all believers. In addition, it had important institutional applications. By the eleventh century the bishop, standing *in loco Christi*, was customarily understood to be married to his see. During the papal schism, John Gerson (d. 1429) would raise the fraught question of what to do if the pope, the church's most immediate proxy for the celestial bridegroom, was bewitched and incapable of providing children for the virginal Ecclesia.

... While all Christian souls, women and men, were brides of Christ in a mystical sense, consecrated virgins were brides par excellence. And because the bride herself was ever-virgin, and virginity was a fragile asset, throughout the Middle Ages the consecrated virgin would most often pursue her vocation in a cloister.³⁰

²⁹ Benedict 1948, p. 8.

³⁰ Elliott 2011, pp. 1, 3. Rulers too might be seen as married to their domains, as we shall see in a later sketch.

To the present day, even as family metaphors have remained prominent in Christian theology and hortatory literature, the churches have tended also to emphasize literal family, at least among the projects and relationships available to those who have not chosen the path of wholesale withdrawal from the secular world or from sex. (See for example the 1964 play *Radiation of Fatherhood*, by Fr. Karol Wojtyla, later Pope John Paul II.) According to one scholar, while the classical world had exalted friendship—

With the coming of the Christian world, however, friendship fell into eclipse. ... The chief effect of Christianity upon personal relations was to elevate one particular human bond, that of family, which had received special sanction in the Scriptures.³¹

³¹ Pangle 2008, p. 2.

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