
There have been numerous books on the Christian family. Why another one? The co-authors of this volume, a pastor-theologian and a family sociologist, both professors at the Fuller Theological Seminary and carrying with them an extensive experience in their respective fields, found much of the material in the past to be deficient on three counts: many materials were "culturally encapsulated," "naively influenced by psychology," and "biblically superficial and theologically shallow."

This book, then, is an effort toward an answer to these deficiencies. It presents a social theology of the family, using a methodology which is systematic and ecological, grounded within the framework of biblical theology. Although the quality of presentation is uneven and not what one might call exciting, it does succeed in accentuating and exploring in depth certain significant issues regarding Christian family life, both theologically and sociologically.

The systems approach is the current accent in understanding the family and its growth as a social and relational institution. Members of the family are seen as cause and effect simultaneously of their relationships with one another, whereas a previous approach tended to be more linear in its cause-and-effect explanation of relationships.

In their theological anthropology (leaning heavily on K. Barth), the authors explore the covenant love of God as the core, foundational paradigm of the family. The unilateral relation of God with humanity is the only ground on which the covenant-partnership of a Christian marriage can stand and be sustained. God’s parenting of humanity in covenant love is the context for the human family in its origin and development. "Before one can be effective husband or wife one must have developed competence in covenant partnership through the experience of being parented" (p. 32).

The theme of election is central to God’s covenant love for humanity in
general, and for each and every human person in particular. In this connection, the authors explain what they call a critical difference between the theological concept of election, of “being chosen,” and the ideological concept of equality, which is abstract and universal. “The covenant, on the other hand, begins with particularity and uniqueness as the source of personal value and practices indifference toward abstract and universal concepts of equality” (p. 38). This needs to be emphasized, particularly in our contemporary society.

Human love relationships that accept covenant and election as their foundational paradigm are thus intended to be monogamous, faithful, unconditional, and meant to be forever. This is explored by the authors in some depth, to the point of being cumbersome at times. The role of human sexuality is likewise described within this total context. Thus, marriage falls “within the absolute determination of a divine command,” the divine command of love. Those being prepared for marriage must view this realistically, warn the authors.

Marriage can never be the solution to problems of personal unhappiness or loneliness. It can never be the relational horizon within which one expects to meet all his or her personal needs. Marriage offers an expression of love and sexuality not realizable in any other human relationship, but it is no more human than any other human task or relationship (pp. 89-90).

To the contemporary, secular mind, the authors’ views on marriage and sexuality, including those on premarital sexuality and divorce, are unashamedly orthodox and traditional. Against an overwhelming scenario of “throw-away relationships,” “transience,” and “terrible impermanence,” the authors remain solidly anchored on the God-given design for the creative and redemptive experience of covenant love in marriage.

They are equally strong in reassuring those called to the married life to discover in it “a positive and rich resource of growth and renewal,” and the abiding support of God’s presence.

What God ‘joins together’ he attends with love and faithfulness. This is a promise and commitment of God himself to the marriage relation as a source of love, healing, and hope. The Christian community participates in this work of God by providing a context of support and enabling grace for each marriage that belongs to the community (p. 104).

The chapter on family roles is of particular significance. Against a conservative biblical interpretation of stereotypic male-female roles, which the authors describe as “morphostatic,” they opt for a biblical interpretation of
roles which is "morphogenic," that is, not culturally encapsulated. This would mean identifying the underlying principles in the text "that allow for the particulars within the family roles to change in light of the present demands of the environment while preserving the principles that are applicable both then and now" (p. 110).

This is an important point, particularly in the light of current tendencies, mostly among Pentecostal and Charismatic communities, in interpreting the "headship-submission" passage of Ephesians 5 in a unilateral, stereotypic, and culturally-encapsulated manner.

The sections on "Parenting and the Development of Persons" and "Family Life as a Means of Spiritual Formation" are likewise biblical, systemic, and morphogenic in approach. They contain some of the most engaging and challenging parts of the book.

The last two chapters are devoted to a socio-theological reflection on the kingdom of God, the Church of Christ, as family. Just as each individual family is called to be a "domestic church" (Vatican II), the total Church on the other hand is called to be family — the family of God, the new covenant community being formed in Christ.

This Church, as the family of God, sets forth three things: "a new criterion of worth, a new form of parity, and a new context of belonging."

Firstly, a new context of worth: Through a spiritual rebirth, we become brothers and sisters of Christ and of one another. In the context of the individual family: "Husbands and wives are first of all brother and sister in Jesus Christ before they are husband and wife. Sons and daughters are also brother or sister to their father and mother before they are sons and daughters" (p. 147).

Secondly, a new form of parity: Parity, to distinguish it here from equality, means "having full equivalence of partnership and value without having to have the same functional roles."

Thirdly, a new context of belonging: This means belonging to what the New Testament has called a "household of faith" (Gal 6:10). Household is a broader term we use which goes beyond the immediate members of a nuclear family. It includes all others who live together. And all human persons living under one sky and one God are called to live together, to be a household of faith.

All this has deep implications in the living out of a family spirituality. One cannot help but make a link between the authors' final chapters and the central message of Pope John Paul II in his latest encyclical on social concerns, "Sollicitudo Rei Socialis," where the key word and theme is the solidarity of all humanity. The only way to peace and justice is for all men to be in solidarity with one another, to regard one another as brothers and sisters, thus forming the family of God.

It may be well to end this review with a little story.
It was an ancient rabbi who asked his students how they could tell when night had ended and day was on its way back. "Could it be when you see an animal in the distance and can tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?" "No," answered the rabbi. "Could it be when you look at a tree in the distance and can tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?" "No." "Well, then," the students demanded, "when is it?" "It is when you look on the face of any man or woman and see that he or she is your brother or sister. Because if you cannot do that, then no matter what time it is, it is still night."

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A religious reading this book is reminded of Vatican II’s Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life. This appropriate renewal is understood to include two simultaneous processes: "a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community, and an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of the times." (no. 2).

Fr. Arbuckle’s three-part study may be regarded as a faithful and inspired spelling out of these processes, but in reverse order: (1) providing an insight into the stages through which religious have passed, or are still passing, in response to the apparent collapse of religious life after Vatican II, (2) identifying the thrust of an in-depth revitalization by means of generating the leadership for refounding religious congregations, and (3) detailing the strategies in planning the formation programs of religious life. In line with the spirit of the same Council, this study is also notable in its consistent deployment of the findings and tools of cultural or social anthropology in clarifying the whys and hows of religious life.

Part One presents a persuasive argument for some who are still wondering, after more than twenty years, about the apparent collapse of religious life (chap. 1). Briefly, the argument is centered on the impact of a rapidly changing world upon the Church, creating cultural disorientation and eventually leading to the break-up of the old-time Catholic ghetto. With the consequent loss of the symbols constituting that ghetto and the absence of viable substitutes, disorientation gives way to confusion, malaise, anger, and the like. But for others who are now ready to pick up the challenge (chap. 2), what is needed is to recover the sense of what it means to preach the Gospel (Evangelization). In religious life this is a move towards refounding religious congregations which can only be done effectively through the use of symbols.