On issues of the family and scripture, Christians are in a bit of a pickle. It is not always clear how our convictions about “family values” mesh with what the Bible teaches, especially the Gospels.

Jesus, for example, did not assign the great spiritual and sentimental significance to family life that many Christians do today. How then do we reconcile the expectation that all good Christians should marry with his example of lifelong celibacy? Or our championship of family with Jesus’ warning that following him will set sibling against sibling and parent against child? Endorsing family values poses particularly interesting issues for biblical egalitarians, since many of our fellow Bible-believers hold that these values should include a hierarchical model of marriage.

In order to understand Jesus’ attitude toward the family, we must understand that family practices in the first century were not based on emotion as they are today, but rather on material, economic interests. In my book, *The Redemption of Love,* I show that the family values prevalent in Jesus’ day were the economic consequences of the Fall. These family practices, now known as patriarchy, were corrupted by the human decision to have our own way and live outside of God’s abundance.

I join New Testament historian S. Scott Barchy in arguing that rather than support patriarchy, Jesus and other New Testament writers (especially Paul) intended to overthrow it. Thus, Jesus’ teachings, which seem anti-family today, reflect his intent to dissolve the materialistic motives for family and replace them with relationships based on doing the will of God.

**Jesus’ Ideal for Marriage**

One of the most important examples of how Jesus reoriented family values is found in Matthew 19:11–12. In this passage, the Pharisees attempt to entangle Jesus in a dispute about grounds for divorce. He refused to be drawn in, however, and replied that they should be more concerned about the grounds for marriage instead of arguing about divorce.

Referring his questioners back to God’s intent in creation, Jesus quoted Genesis 2:24, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” To ensure they didn’t miss the point, he added, “So they are no longer two, but one” (vv. 5, 6a).

This ideal of husband and wife becoming “one,” however, surprised even Jesus’ own disciples, who responded, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better [more expedient or profitable] not to marry” (v. 10). In their context, men married in order to meet their own material needs for children, sex, and household management. They did not expect to make the personal sacrifices that becoming “one flesh” entailed in the creation model of marriage.

Jesus agreed that not everyone is capable of such a union, but since this was the point of God’s creation of humankind as sexual beings, “the one who is able to accept it should accept it” (vv. 11–12). In other words, people who decide to get married should base their union on God’s intentions, rather than materialistic needs.

**Singleness**

In this passage Jesus challenged another ancient family value—the expectation that every respectable person should marry. He noted several reasons why people might choose not to marry, including the decision to devote themselves entirely to the kingdom of heaven (v. 12). Between this teaching and his own example of celibacy, Jesus made it clear that it was acceptable for godly people to remain single.

This was a radical claim, since singleness had rarely been an option before. Historically, most marriages were arranged by families to further their own interests, often with little consideration for the preferences of the bride and groom. Given how far the relationship
between husband and wife had fallen from God's intent, allowing people to remain single was a great blessing. This was particularly true for women, who were valued mostly for their ability to contract a good marriage and bear children.

In allowing believers to remain single and challenging married people to renounce the self-centered way in which they lived together, Jesus reminded us that God created human sexuality as a blessing:

So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number..." (Gen. 1:27–28; my emphasis)

The imperative in verse 28 is not a command. Rather, marriage, children, and sexuality itself are blessings, gifts of God to human beings. As such, human beings may partake of them or not. While Jesus' teachings strongly affirm the right of marriage as a gift of God, at the same time there is no biblical support for the insistence that individuals marry or have children.

Viewing marriage and family as godly gifts helps us appreciate the extent of Jesus' own sacrifice for our sakes, forgoing the comforts of home and family in order to serve the kingdom of heaven. That Jesus was well aware of his sacrifice is apparent in his lament, "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20).

**Divorce**

Jesus' response to the Pharisees' question about divorce also significantly broadened his culture's assumptions about marriage. Jesus believed that marriage was the union of two into one, and that "what God had joined together," men were not to put apart (v. 6; Mark 10:9). He acknowledged that the only valid excuse for a man's rejection of his wife was infidelity on her part, but then he added a surprising twist.

Ancient societies considered adultery to be a crime against men. Unless the female partner was married, a man's relations outside of marriage were not considered adulterous. Although Jewish morality did not allow the sexual license granted men in the pagan world, they still considered adultery to be a sin committed against the adulteress' husband, but not the adulterer's wife.

Jesus' definition of marriage as a "one flesh" relationship implicitly recast adultery not as a property crime against men, but as a shattering of the essential union created by God. In his model, adultery is a concern not because it violates a man's right to his wife's sexuality, but rather because it introduces a third party into the "two become one" relationship.

This view of marriage made a husband's unfaithfulness a sin against his wife, and the fact that they had obtained a writ of divorce did not change things: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her..." (v. 9; Mark 10:11). This rejection of the "double standard" provided an important step in recognizing women as full partners in marriage and affirmed sexuality as central to the marital union rather than as simply a physical resource.

**The Importance of Spiritual over Physical Kinship**

Jesus' ministry consistently challenged limitations placed on women. His response to a woman who "raised her voice and said to [Jesus], 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!'" (Luke 11:27 NRSV) is a good example.

In a context where women were judged by their sons' accomplishments, this woman meant to pay Jesus a compliment: "Your mother was blessed to have a son like you!" But the woman framed her mother's blessedness in terms of her biology—she was not much more than a fortunate womb and breasts. Jesus, however, replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" (v. 28 NRSV).

Although the woman in the crowd could not have known it, Jesus' statement applied especially strongly in the case of his own mother, a young girl who was told by an angel that she would bear a child by the Holy Spirit. Mary knew that according to Old Testament law, she could be stoned to death if she were found to be pregnant by someone other than her fiancé, but she accepted the risk in faith. Jesus said that what was truly admirable about his mother, or anyone, was that obedience and faith.

What was important about individual women or men was not their ability to bear or father children, but rather that they heard the word of God, and obeyed it. This redefinition of blessedness opened the door to bonds that extend beyond physical kinship. Only one woman could be Jesus' mother in the flesh, but by obeying the word of God, an infinite number of people, male or female, could enter into a
familial relationship with him.4
Jesus even warned that doing God’s will would result in the rejection of believers by
their non-believing families:

Brother will betray brother to death, and
a father his child. Children will rebel
against their parents, and have them put
to death. Everyone will hate you because
of me, but those who stand firm to the
end will be saved. (Mark 13:12–13 TNIV)

This statement may sound extreme to us, but
it was even more shocking in Jesus’ context.
Ancient patriarchy placed great value on family
prestige, which could only be increased at
the expense of other families. Because of this
intense competition, only family members could be trusted.5 Elizabeth Johnson writes
that, “The notion that family members, in
particular siblings, should deal treacherously
with each other is a watchword in antiquity
for the very depths of domestic dishonor.”6

Jesus’ claim that “Anyone who loves their
father or mother more than me is not worthy
of me; anyone who loves a son or daughter
more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt.
10:37) was equally challenging. Following
Jesus required the renunciation of family ties
based on self-centered concerns about prestige, power, and material accomplishments in order to embrace a new spiritual kinship
group based on doing God’s will. By making
the kingdom of heaven the source of their
primary relationships, believers are redeemed
from the materialism of the Fall.

Family Responsibility
Jesus did not intend for his disciples to abandon
their biological families altogether, but rather he challenged them to abandon the self-serving family structures—especially when these old allegiances interfered with their higher duty to serve God.

The New Testament includes many examples of disciples who continued to honor and enjoy family ties: One of the first people Jesus healed was Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark
1:30), Paul taught that apostles were entitled to have their spouses travel with them (1 Cor. 9:5), Philip the evangelist ministered with his
prophetic daughters (Acts 21:9), and Aquila and Priscilla were a husband and wife ministry
team (Acts 18).

Once we renounce our desire to cling to
self-interest, reconciling duty to God with
love of family is not difficult. We do it by
making our family the first location for doing
God’s work. Indeed, when read in light of
Jesus’ teachings and first century family prac-
tices, Paul’s writings in Ephesians 5 and 6
emerge not as an endorsement of patriarchy,
but as guidelines for structuring Christian marriage and family without it.

For example, Paul writes that children should obey their parents, a notion consistent with patriarchy. Fathers, however, must
not use that obedience for their own pur-
poses, as they had in the past. Rather, they
now use it to serve their children, bringing
them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:1, 4).

Jesus said that he came to serve, not to be
served (Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28). So when
Paul describes the husband as “head” of his
wife as Christ is head of the church, he draws
not on a metaphor of authority but on the
metaphor of the head as the source of unity.
The husband does this not by leading his
wife, and certainly not by ruling over her, but
rather by nurturing and serving her in such a
way that they grow together, head and body,
into one flesh.

Jesus and Family Values Today
In Jesus’ context, people married in order to
have children to serve and care for them. In
our context, people marry and/or have chil-
dren in order to have someone to love and
to love us in return. This represents a major
and positive shift in motives; nonetheless, the
fallen impulse to use other people to fulfill
self-centered needs remains.

The imperative of Genesis 1:28 (“Be fruitful
and increase in number”) is a blessing,
not a commandment. I don’t believe that the
Bible teaches a Christian obligation to marry
or to have children. But if we do start our
own families, Jesus taught that we have deep
responsibilities to our spouse and children.
In marriage, we must strive for a life-long, one
flesh relationship. As parents, we have children
not to meet our own needs for love, but to
raise a godly generation who loves the Lord.

The family values that Jesus taught are
indeed not “expedient” or profitable by worldly standards. These are family values
of the kingdom of heaven, and truly the only
values worth living.

Notes
3. Throughout this passage, Jesus upholds the caveat that divorce is permissible for the innocent party. In Paul’s writings we see that although early Christians wrestled with remarriage, separation in the interest of “peace” was acceptable (1 Cor. 7). A writ of divorce refers not to marital separation itself but to a document renouncing a husband’s claim to his wife, freeing her to remarry.
4. Gilbert Bilezikian, Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says About a Woman’s Place in Church and Family (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1985), 94.
5. Bartchy, p.68.

Carrie A. Miles works as an organizational psychologist and consultant in Fairfax, Virginia. She is the executive officer for the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture and senior research fellow of the Consortium for the Economic Study of Religion.

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