A Theology of the Generations:
Do People Today Still Risk Feudalism in the Family?

Beulah Wood

I am teaching an interactive class on family in a theological college in South Asia. Mothi Mary has organized her group to act as a mother, son, and daughter at the table. Daughter asks for a second helping. Mother says, “No. You do not need it.” Son asks for more. Mother gives him extra food. The children are leaving for school. Mother gives son a cup of milk. None for the daughter. Mother welcomes the son from school with tea with milk. Daughter complains, “Mother, you did not put milk in my tea.” “No, daughter. We must attend to your brother’s needs.”

I ask Mothi Mary, middle-class, educated, raised in an English-speaking Christian family, “Where does the story come from?” “I was the daughter,” she replies. I am incredulous. What is the name of this problem? It is not patriarchy, men ruling women. This is a woman disadvantaging her own daughter. How can we teach to counteract this injustice?

A traditional family

Sometimes, preachers say they will teach a biblical view of the family. There are problems with that. Most of the marriages that we know anything of in the Old Testament were polygamous. Are they our model? Does it matter? In fact, it does. Many were polygamous because of the deeply entrenched notion of the need for inheritance according to the law of primogeniture and patrilineal inheritance—the belief in higher status for sons that Mothi Mary’s mother shared and the view that property should pass intact to the oldest son, or at least to sons and not to daughters.

This belief still influences the thinking of many cultures in East Asia, South Asia, Africa, West Asia, and of immigrants from these places into the Western world. Indeed, the West is not so far from this thinking. Only two hundred years ago in England, in Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice, five daughters could not inherit their father’s property, which was “entailed” to a male cousin, and the mother and five girls all accepted this. Readers in North and South America may consider how recently and by which groups a focus on a male inheritance was (or is still?) practiced in their society.

While teaching in South Asia, I sometimes ask a class of Christians to help list on the whiteboard from their culture, “Wrong Reasons for Getting Married.” The answers usually include:
- To please parents, or to obey parents
- Because everyone must get married
- For sex
- To obtain dowry (money and goods) from the young woman’s family
- For a wife to serve her husband’s parents and/or bring another salary
- To provide a son to carry on the father’s line and receive the inheritance
- So the mother-in-law can sit back and control a daughter-in-law

The students understand that none of these alone is a good reason to marry, and some show manipulation of family members, especially of females. For many people, marriage is motivated by economic calculation, by control from one generation to the next, and by the view that the young woman has become a member of the young man’s family with no reciprocity toward hers. She must give birth to a son and work solely for the advantage of all males and the senior female of her new family. The controlling factor is patrilineal inheritance.

Women are brought in as wives to produce sons. If they have no children or only daughters, they are not appreciated. Girls born in the family are viewed as temporary members, granted little in resources for health and education, and even loved less. The Vedic writer said, “Let a girl be born, but let her be born in somebody else’s family.” And a proverb says, “Educating a girl is like watering your neighbor’s garden.” The patrilineal family values males. (See figure 1.)

Tragedies in homes

This total weight on the male line makes a stronger bond between parents and son than between son and wife, hardly the foundation for happy marriages with tender bonds of respect, mutual love, and mutual self-sacrifice between husband and wife. One hears of many marriages that run like parallel railway lines—the husband and wife each carry out a prescribed “role” with very little communication.

Figure 1: The Patrilineal Family

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<tr>
<th>Other Families</th>
<th>The “Real” Family Line</th>
<th>Other Families</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wives obtained—conditional members</td>
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<td>Grandfather</td>
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Home should be the place above all for love and protection. Yet, in South Asia, we know too well the abuse of girls and young wives. Indeed, the worst atrocities against females happen in their own homes. What sadness! The home is where the decision is made for a female fetus to be aborted, or where mothers and grandmothers give less care, less food, and less medical attention to little girls than little boys. The home is where the family decides that boys attend school and girls do not, or that girls must discontinue their education before they are even literate. In homes, girls grow up believing their role in life is to “adjust” to their husband (read “serve his needs”), and boys grow up believing that males have privileges, the right to make decisions to suit themselves, and even the “right” (!) to have extramarital affairs and to visit prostitutes.

In homes occur dowry demands—the harassment of young wives to bring more dowry, even harassment until she becomes one of the many young women who commit suicide in the first six months of marriage. In homes, mothers-in-law and husbands demand a double burden of outside work (with salary handed over) and inside work until late in the night. In homes occur the physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual abuses that harm the lives, emotions, and self-esteem of women and girls. In homes, men who have contracted HIV/AIDS pass on the dreaded virus to thousands of loyal, faithful wives.¹

Many pastors are afraid to approach these issues, saying, “We must not interfere with the home. These relationships are sacred.” “Sacred” means “set apart.” Praise God, some homes are set apart to thousands of loyal, faithful wives.¹

Many women are so brainwashed by the views of society and church that they are too frightened to think differently. As Christians, we must look harder, theologically and practically, at marriage and the nature of the passing generations.

**Practical critique of traditional views on marriage and inheritance**

To those who keep to traditional views, the system looks logical and serves those whose opinions have weight. But the views are flawed. They lack justice.

**Providing male heirs**

To obtain a male heir to carry on the family name and receive house, land, money, or material goods, traditional views say a son is essential and a daughter is less valuable. Traditional families ask, “Why should we raise daughters to benefit other families?” “Food, clothes, education, and medical bills for her are money down the drain.” “How soon can we get this girl married?”

**Excluding women from inheritance**

The traditional view declines to leave property to wives or daughters, believing them incompetent and inappropriate for decision making. Even where law now decrees that siblings inherit equally, to do so is uncommon. While dowry was originally the young woman’s inheritance, parents now routinely, and without justice to their daughter, give the money, goods, gold, cars, and even apartments to her new husband’s parents. This harms both married and single daughters.

Padmini’s parents had three daughters and then a son. Single, Padmini has given years to dedicated social work and is now training as a theological teacher. “We are a very close family,” says Padmini. “I get on wonderfully with my parents and my brother and his wife. But something is wrong with the system. Before my brother was one year old, my parents signed over the whole family property to him. This is normal. My married sisters are cared for in their new families, but I will get nothing from my parents, since the house and assets all belong to my brother.”

**Providing for old age**

Traditional thinking says sons, not daughters, must take care of their parents. Is it impossible to change that? Daughters are sometimes better at caring, but people think the daughter belongs to her husband’s family, not theirs. Some parents resent being cared for by a daughter’s family. There is something wrong here.

Many families view sons as an insurance policy for parents. They invest in a son for their own future, so he must obey them. It is mercenary, love with strings attached. Parents may choose his college course and vocation for a high-paying job to suit their needs.

Simon’s pentecostal father left to work in the Persian Gulf and send money home when his older son Simon was nine years old. “By the time I was twenty,” he reported, “I had nothing to say to my father. I wanted to train in Bible teaching, but my father required me to take undergraduate and then postgraduate study in science for a high-paying job.” Finally, when Simon was about thirty, married, and with two children, he went against his father and started theological training.

**Providing “proper order” in the family**

Parents may want their married son to prove that he has not put his wife ahead of them by obeying them. A woman married ten years may still find that, if she walks into the room when her husband is discussing family finances with his parents, the conversation ceases until she leaves.

**What is God’s view of family and inheritance?**

A Christian theology of marriage begs to differ with the patrilin-eal view. For God, the primary bond should be between husband and wife.

God opposes the human “law” of primogeniture and patrilin-eal inheritance. At the beginning of all instructions for humans, God put in place the directive that a marriage starts a new family, ensuring separation from parents and placing the husband/wife partnership and decision making ahead of the parent/child bond: “For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24).²
The new husband and wife leave each other’s families, and they start a new family—so there are now three families. (See figure 2.) Inside the circle of extended family are the wife’s birth family, the husband’s birth family, and their new family.

God’s intention contrasts markedly with the patrilineal view that the young woman leaves her birth family and enters her husband’s family. (See figure 3). But, the patrilineal view still shows in many marriage ceremonies worldwide. “Who gives this woman to this man?” the marriage celebrant asks. “I do,” says the father, as if the two men make a deal and pass the woman over like a parcel. Such wording perpetuates human laws of primogeniture and patrilineage—property for the male line. Should not a husband and wife give themselves before God to each other?

So what can we know of God’s view of status, genealogy, and inheritance all passing along the male line? God disdains the whole thing. For God, family lines and selection for honored work have nothing to do with birth order, nor even with bearing sons. Whom did God choose out of Cain and Abel? Ishmael and Isaac? Esau and Jacob? Judah and Reuben? David and the older sons of Jesse? To lead his people out of slavery, God chose all three siblings, male and female: Aaron, Miriam, and Moses. No primogeniture there. Did God choose Deborah ahead of brothers? We do not know. But God chose her ahead of her husband Lappidoth, and similarly Huldah ahead of Shallum. No law of primogeniture assigned leadership tasks to an orphan girl, Esther, nor determined heredity for the Davidic kings and the Messiahs through a non-Israelite widow, Ruth, and non-Israelite prostitute Rahab.

Eli’s sons perished, unworthy of inheriting his ministry (1 Sam. 3:11–14). Saul was from the tiny tribe of Benjamin (1 Sam. 9:21). Gideon objected to God, “My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family” (Judg. 6:15). Samson was from the Danite clan. God spoke to his mother before his father (Judg. 13:2–3).

Similar patterns appear in the New Testament. Jesus was a first son, necessary for the virgin birth, but described as a member of the tribe of Judah, Israel’s fourth son. Jesus appears to take James and John away from inheriting Zebedee’s fishing business (Matt. 4:20–22) and then gives a long and great task to the younger, John, asking him to care for Mary (John 19:26–27). Why not her own sons?

Christ’s new church, too, ignored male primogeniture and patrilineage. Paul delighted in telling of how little value his human inheritance was in God’s sight (Phil. 3:4–7). A woman, Mary the mother of John Mark, was the householder who welcomed one of the earliest regular Christian gatherings (Acts 12:12). Missionaries included a Samaritan woman (John 4:28–30) and an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40). God’s called-out church leaders included women like Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), Lydia (Acts 16:14), and Damaris (Acts 17:34). All four of Philip’s daughters received the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:9).

God reveals why he spurned this human doctrine of male family lines when he chose David: “The Lord does not look at things human beings look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7 TNIV). Addressing men and women, God offers grace and influence, not bound by human traditions: “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6 TNIV).

The failure of Israel to observe God’s plan

When, in Genesis 2, God gave humans the principle that each marriage starts a new family, this truth rapidly disappeared from human thinking. By the time of Genesis 5, people were counting the male line as more important and not seeing marriage as starting a new family, but as adding to the father’s line. The writer recorded male family lines and the names of Noah and his sons without their wives’ names. As predicted by God in Genesis 3:16b, families emphasized a male lineage, being controlled for the advantage of the males and even identifying as the “father’s house.”

Abraham and Sarah started out differently. They left his father Terah in Ur of the Chaldees, marking themselves as a couple for each other and obeying God, rather than for Abraham’s father and obeying him. However, they quickly returned to the pattern. God was using Abraham and Sarah to start a nation, but the couple’s concern about having a son for their patrilineal line mushroomed out of all proportion until they sinned to achieve it by orchestrating the conception of Ishmael through Hagar (Gen. 16). Their excessive anxiety for a son damaged their own relationship, their relationship with God, and the future of the nation they were to found, not to mention the anguish their actions caused to Hagar.

Figure 2: God’s View of Marriage and Family

Figure 3: Patrilineal View of Marriage and Family

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Their thinking was common for their day. Patrimony, or inheritance of name, honor, family line, and family property, was at the top of their priorities as a patrilineal family—higher even than the intimate loyalty between husband and wife that God had commanded. In the next generation, Isaac’s wife left her family, but he did not leave his, and the pattern continued through the Old Testament and into the culture of Israel. It was not what God intended.

**Patrilineal inheritance overemphasized the birth of sons**

If a couple had no children, people saw them as woeful beyond understanding. They still do in patrilineal societies. Their life together has no meaning. The barren woman is thought to be cursed, since she has no reason to be alive. Everybody “knows” that society’s biggest requirement on a man and woman is to maintain and improve the wealth and number of his “father’s house.”

Writer William Courtryman notes that the family structure of ancient Israel did not, in fact, acknowledge either an equality between male and female or a complete unity of flesh between married persons. The wife, though an important part of this household, did not become truly and fully a member of his family and was certainly not his equal. A man’s right to divorce his wife demonstrated these. . . . A woman became her husband’s property at betrothal. Deuteronomy routinely equates the acquisition of house, vineyard and wife (Deut. 20:5–7, 28:30).

A man was always a member of the “father’s house” in which he was born. A married woman remained, in some sense, a part of her birth family too, but there was no sense of men leaving father and mother to form the very close bond that God told of in Genesis 2. Men were kin to their mothers and to the men and women of their “father’s house,” while women were kin only to their sons and immediate female relatives. A wife was not recognized as next of kin.

**Polygamy supported patrilineage**

God had given his plan of monogamy, the only kind of marriage possible if a man would leave father and mother and cling to his wife until they became one flesh. Adding polygamy added problems.

Human urgency for sons and selfish desire for power through more children destroyed the beauty of monogamous marriages, which is immediately obvious in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph with their deception, rivalry, and deceit. “The failure to see sons and daughters as starting new families and leaving, cleaving, and becoming one flesh became entrenched in the theme of one’s “father’s house” and the essence of what it meant to be Hebrew.

Building their “house” is revealed as a central motivator of actions by David and Solomon. When David collected wives and concubines, he was building his power base and numerical strength, not family cohesion. It severely damaged his family relationships to have so many wives, for he could not give adequate attention to them, nor to the raising of the many children. He treated Michal inhumanely, insisting on having her return to his control, when, if he truly loved her, he would have wished for her happiness rather than taking her away from her weeping second husband (2 Sam. 3:13–16). He sinned in committing adultery with Bathsheba and marrying her, by implication ignoring the value of his other wives (2 Sam. 11:27). His failure as a father showed when one son raped his own sister (2 Sam. 13:11–15). He was so out of touch with Absalom that this son murdered his half brother and led a rebellion against his own father (2 Sam. 13:29, 2 Sam. 15).

Later, the pharaoh of Egypt and King Solomon consecrated their treaty with one man giving his daughter to the other as yet another wife (1 Kgs. 3:1). Solomon certainly did not need another wife!

Each “father’s house” was made up of a landowning father or grandfather who led the next two or three generations, along with wives and servants. Gideon is an example in Judges 6:11, 15. He was married and had children, and the land he worked and lived on belonged to his father, Joash, the head of his “father’s house.” The Old Testament often refers to this patrilineal “father’s house.”

The New Testament has significantly fewer references to this patrilineal view. Acts uses the term historically, referring to Moses (Acts 7:20). Jesus employs it in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:27) and twice in reference to heaven rather than with human families (John 2:16, 14:42). This all shows how strongly the patriarchal view in which fathers made the decisions, and the patrilineal view in which the land and property belonged to the male line, had permeated and conditioned the thinking of the people of Israel. The gospel, as we shall see, had something different to emphasize.

**Levirate marriage supported patrilineage**

Levirate marriage—the requirement that, if a man died with no children, then his brother should marry the widow (apparently even if he already had a wife)—is another example of the fierce desire for offspring—perhaps a temporary accommodation on God’s part (as was the Mosaic instruction regarding divorce) to make the best of a situation that was less than the Genesis 2 ideal. For a brother to fail to do this was seen as a disgrace, and the woman had no option. The goal of such a marriage was not her physical and financial support, nor to prevent her marrying someone else and taking family property. A wife did not receive property anyway. It was for name and family line. The liaison still served the deceased husband by giving continued meaning to his life.

The enormous weight given to family line is in evidence in further verses. A visible shape to punishment would be that one’s name and survivors would be wiped out (Isa. 14:22). Punishment for a wicked man would come as loss of survivors (Job 18:19–20). The only promise Saul asked of David was that he “not kill off my descendants or wipe out my name from my father’s family” (1 Sam. 24:21).
Traditional marriage called for wifely obedience

Since a young woman was brought up to believe she must serve her husband's family, her husband and his family expected her to do what she was told to serve him. Early in their marriages, both Sarah and Rebekah obeyed their husbands, Abraham and Isaac, in concealing their married status among strangers (Gen. 20:2, 26:7). Both turned against the method when it failed them, Sarah to giving orders to Abraham and Rebekah to deception. Patrilineal thinking had prevented the close bonding of husband and wife.

A saying of modern counseling goes, “You cannot love what you control, and you cannot control what you love.” Control within the family seriously damages love in marriage relationships, even forcing devout women to go against their husbands publicly, as Abigail did (1 Sam. 25:4–34), and Hannah, too, with her personal prayer for a son (1 Sam. 1:10–11).

Dina sat moist-eyed as her ten-year-old daughter, Jyothi, gave her first piano recital. “Thank God I disobeyed my husband and his mother,” she said to herself. “I thought as a good Christian I should obey them when they told me to have an abortion when we knew I was expecting a daughter. Jyothi would have been a heap of ashes.

But here is my beautiful little girl playing the piano. I’m so glad I disobeyed.”

Control within the family

Do we have a name for this intra-family control? The word “patriarchy” fits the control of women by men, but it does not describe the full story. Traditional family control is perpetrated by women as well as men against younger members of the family. Is it oligarchy, control by the few? Not really. Is there a word for control by older people? Perhaps “family feudalism” fits. Feudalism prevailed in many countries of Europe one thousand years ago and more recently in nations as diverse as Japan, Russia, Ethiopia, India, and the antebellum American South. It thrived on fixed rights and obligations for all with the “law” of primogeniture at its core.

Barons or lords who received land on sworn loyalty to the king or emperor granted land as manors to knights if they swore to give military service. This lord’s power was both possessive and protective. Knights granted land to serfs (landless workers) in return for sworn agreement to give free labor, while receiving no assets, no rights, and no permission to leave the service of that manor. Obedience was central to all behavior of those not at the top of the pyramid, and those with power passed on that power to their sons.

Is traditional marriage like sworn loyalty and service in the feudal system? Men own the land, women promise to love, honor, and “obey,” giving work (service) in return for protection, along with somewhere to live, but obtain no assets and no permission to leave. Is that still the case for women who promise in a marriage service to “obey”?

And the children born—do the privileges still in many families around the world belong, as in feudal systems, to sons more than daughters? And, if children exist for the sake of their parents and parents demand excessive obedience into adulthood, is this not also a feudal arrangement?

Old Testament legal response to patriarchy and patrilineage

Because practices that treat women and daughters as property had invaded the thinking of the Israelites, initial laws were made to protect them. One such law regulated divorce so that men could not put women out of the home on a whim (Deut. 22:13–19). Another regulated the treatment of an unmarried woman who became pregnant, so that the man, required to marry her, could never divorce her (Deut. 22:29).

In the new land of Canaan, where property apportioned after the death of parents normally went to sons alone, five young women who had no brother argued to receive their parents’ land (the daughters of Zelophehad, Num. 27:1–7). Moses asked God, who said he must certainly give them property. The scene in early eighteenth-century England for Jane Austen’s heroines was less friendly!

In another example, where men could divorce their wives but women could not initiate divorce, the Holy Spirit inspired Malachi to write that God hated divorce, and that God hated violence just as strongly (Mal. 2:16). From this, we recognize that there is indeed a strong ground for divorce if a man does not cease his violence against his wife.

The position of a wife, however, had signs of both subjection and equality. Fathers and mothers were equally to receive respect according to the Ten Commandments: “Honor your father and mother so that you may live long in the land…” (Exod. 20:12). The angel came to Samson’s mother twice before talking to his father in Judges 13. And, in Proverbs, mothers and fathers are often mentioned with equal weight, as in, “Wise children bring joy to their father, but foolish children bring grief to their mother” (Prov. 10:1 TNIV) and “Listen to your father, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old” (Prov. 23:22).

An important factor out of which spring many of our contemporary problems in relation to gender justice is our failure to start from the right point, i.e., the glory shared equally by boys and girls and men and women of being created in the image of God, of being redeemed in Christ, and of being empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Family with married love within the Old Testament

Israel also had positive examples of marriage and deeply committed loving couples. Isaac initially loved Rebekah greatly, and she comforted him in sorrow (Gen. 24:66). Jacob was fond indeed of Rachel (Gen. 29:30). Elkanah loved Hannah, though he did not truly hear her sadness (1 Sam. 1:8). Uriah must have been greatly attached to Bathsheba, for Nathan uses the metaphor of a much-loved ewe lamb of their relationship (2 Sam. 12:1–10). Paltiel wept insensibly all along the road when his wife Michal was taken from him (1 Sam. 3:15).
Proverbs praises faithfulness and love that lasts longer than death, and celebrates faithfulness to the “wife of one’s youth” (Prov. 5:18). Solomon’s Song depicts in drama the excitement of uninhibited love with words like, “Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me. . . . Show me your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely. . . . My beloved is mine and I am his. . . .” (Song 2:13–16). “Love is strong as death. . . . Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away” (Song 8:6–7).

Jesus wanted couples to be bonded, united, at one in every possible area, placing loyalty to each other ahead of loyalty to the family line.

The gospel critique of the patrilineal and patriarchal system

We have shown that, for most of the Old Testament period, much of family life in the nation of Israel was contrary to God’s desire. In the New Testament, we note that Jesus quoted and underscored the Genesis 2:24 primary code for marriage—leave parents and cling to spouse. It appears in both Matthew 9:35 and Mark 10:8, and Paul quotes it again in Ephesians 5:31.

Indeed, Jesus’ teaching takes a very different direction from that of the culture in which he lived. The culture taught that it was one’s duty to marry and have children. Christ ignored that culture himself and respected those who chose to be childless. The paramount leader of the new churches, Paul, wished all others would remain single like himself (1 Cor. 7:8). God’s plan was shifting. Up until then, the vehicle for God’s covenant had been the family-based nation of Israel. However, Jesus’ goal, even though he was a member of that nation, was not nationalism that extended the family of Jews. His goal was all the earth entering God’s family and forming a new heaven and a new earth.

Jesus gave a ruling so that women could not be divorced for frivolous reasons (Mark 10:2–9). Jesus then made a surprising statement: “and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mark 10:12). That was new—a wife divorcing a husband. Jesus saw it as a possibility when there was a hardness of heart that indicated a sinner would not change.

Jesus’ disciples honored father and mother, yet he called them to leave them. James and John left Zebedee and the fishing business (Matt. 4:21–22). Peter and Andrew did similarly (Matt. 4:17–19). People saw Jesus as a carpenter in Nazareth with sisters and four brothers (James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon) in a hometown (Matt. 13:55). But, for Jesus, family identity was superseded: “Anyone who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:37). The basis for this family is not biology, but behavior. People would become his brothers and sisters by doing the will of God.

But let us stop and think. The Hebrew family was entirely shaped by considerations of property and inheritance. Membership in a family was defined by inheritance. Those who were true members would inherit, and children of concubines, or children who were merely given care but not legally adopted, could not inherit. Neither could wives (brought in from other families) nor daughters (going to other families), although there were rare exceptions to this, as with the daughters of Job and of Zelophehad.

Jesus cut across all that cultural understanding with his view of family and inheritance. The kingdom and the blessings would be awarded, not by male preference nor by biological membership, but to those who chose to do the will of the Father by, whether they knew it or not, ministering to their new brothers and sisters. This he taught in the parable of the sheep and the goats: “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat . . . .’” (Matt. 25:34–35). The people who inherit in Christ’s family come from every family, tribe, and nation. That is extraordinary in view of his culture’s extremely high value on family inheritance.

Bystanders must have felt shocked when Jesus said, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” He then pointed to his disciples and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:48–50, Mark 3:33). One supposes this may be an hyperbole, an exaggeration to give effect, but, still, he was placing extremely high value on the relationships of the kingdom as compared with family ties.

There is another surprise in John 19. Jesus apparently redeems a family. Among his four brothers, one would suppose at least one was still alive to look after Mary when Jesus, the oldest son, died. John perhaps still had his father Zebedee to look after. Further, James would live a few more years until he died in persecution (Acts 12:2). Why did Jesus ask John and Mary to treat each other as mother and son? Did the new family mean more? That is astounding.

The gospels significantly place human family in a lesser position of importance to Christ’s family. In fact, commentators have not known how to interpret some of Jesus’ seemingly anti-family statements: “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life” (Matt. 19:29). It is possible that Christ’s main point is his explanation of how to inherit eternal life. Perhaps Jesus was trying to get people away from their fixations on the family’s earthly inheritance. This interpretation would fit, too, with “if you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me” (Matt. 19:21) and “I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law” (Matt. 10:35). Perhaps it is noteworthy that these verses occur in Matthew’s gospel, the one above all the others written for the Jews. Perhaps Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries would have disliked the message, but may have needed it the most.

John, too, writes in his epistles as if the church has become the family of the believers. He writes of his beloved children and of
fathers, brothers, and sisters (1 John 2:1, 12–14, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4, 21; 2 John 1, 4, 13; 3 John 3, 5).

**Marriage from Paul’s perspective**

Although Paul wished for others the celibacy he enjoyed, he recognized just as clearly the joys of marriage and defended married life. Throughout 1 Corinthians 7, he advocates and demonstrates the breadth of the principle of totally reciprocal relations between husband and wife. He recognizes for each the right to sexual satisfaction, a level of authority over the other’s body, and the right to choose temporary celibacy in order to pray and still be respected. The mutuality of marriage becomes considerate and cheerful living for the other—“how he can please his wife . . . how she can please her husband” (1 Cor. 7:3).

**Inheritance in the gospel view**

In the New Testament, women are heirs of God just as much as men are. Jesus’ parable of the sheep and goats shows all people are welcome to inherit from God: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (Matt. 25:34). Paul expected his whole congregation, not just the men, to inherit from God “his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32). He also wrote of “the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his people in the kingdom of light” (Col. 1:12).

Peter, too, sees all members of the Christian family as heirs: “He has given us new birth into a living hope and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade” (1 Pet. 1:3–4). He even reminds husbands that their wives are also heirs: “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life” (1 Pet. 3:7).

This gives a vital point. If women are competent to inherit from God, surely they are competent to inherit from their own fathers and mothers. We can rest assured that it is biblical for both sons and daughters to inherit family property, for wives to inherit upon their husbands’ deaths (which does not happen under patrilineage), and, consequently, for a wife to have an equal say with her husband over their joint property before a death.

**Assessment**

Some of the statements of Jesus about family seem hard to understand. What we can learn, however, is that he wanted the new family of believers to be a high priority in the lives of his people. He also wanted them in their human families to leave behind their fixations with property, money, and who would receive the inheritance, thus enabling couples to place top priority on their marriages ahead of all other family commitments. Jesus wanted couples to be bonded, united, at one in every possible area, placing loyalty to each other ahead of loyalty to the family line. This is not so difficult to understand, and Jesus taught it clearly, reiterating the words given at the beginning of Genesis: “For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be united with his wife and they will become one flesh.” These directions apply to us in our families and ministries as well. The gospel goal is to transform unjust structures. How should we respond to injustice within families? The “new commandment” of the New Testament is to become a community of equals, not by descent or marriage, but by adoption into God’s family. How does this influence our thinking?

For example, in the New Testament, Mary made a decision to become the mother of the Christ child without being controlled by her father, or husband-to-be, or his father. In regard to care for the elderly, we notice it was his wife’s mother who lived in Peter’s house (Mark 1:30–31). For an example in our time, in many marriage services, the bride and groom each say, “With all my worldly goods I thee endow [My money will be yours].” This gives finances to each other. Modern legal systems often include a matrimonial property act so that wives may own property, and many allow for an equal division of property at the time of divorce. A country such as India, where patrilineal thinking remains strong, has legislated that siblings should inherit equally, though this is not yet enforced. As believers, we know that every one of us receives from God and is a responsible decision-making entity, not controlled by parents or husband to the advantage of an earthly family, but responsible to God: “You then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat your brother or sister with contempt? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat” (Rom. 14:10).

**Potential results of this theology of the generations**

In many homes and societies around the world, this “theology of the new family” could curtail the control and posturing by older generations as well as that by men. We do not want to continue to live out unjust treatment of younger family members or women and girls, simulating the feudalism of the Middle Ages or the era of slavery. In societies where this tendency is particularly strong, it is high time for Christians to see the injustice of patriarchy and patrilineal inheritance and to work for change.

The agents of change are people. If Christians teach and practice that each couple starts a new family, committed first to each other, while still maintaining cordial relations with both birth families, we could banish many sins that have invaded our thinking. Then we could model a family life of greater justice for all, men and women, boys and girls.

Husbands and wives would talk together as equals. They would together plan for themselves, their children, money, jobs, and responsibilities in their extended families. Pastors and all Christians would teach the equality of husbands and wives and the need for their primary relationship to be to each other, even while they retained commitments as members of families.

Counselors and all Christians would teach that a couple is a new family that all should encourage in its relationship together. This message would be emphasized in premarital and marital counseling. Marriage services would reflect the starting of a new family with primary and mutual commitment to each other.
In South Asia, where I work, one could write an astounding list of changes that could follow from taking seriously this biblical theology of the generations. There would be no violence against women and girls in homes, since “God hates violence” (Mal. 2:16). Women would be respected in their own right as equally made in the image of God, equally valued by God, and equally valued in marriage. Parents would not sinfully prefer sons, nor abort unborn baby daughters. If a wife is beaten, she would go to the pastor, and he would retrain the husband, or discipline him.

Nobody would ask or give dowry. If they wished to do so, parents of both bride and groom would give gifts to the new family (not to the young man’s parents). Young men would refuse dowry. Pastors would refuse to perform the marriage if any dowry changed hands. (They would make the effort to ask, since these things are kept quiet.) Preachers would praise as honorable young men and their parents who refuse to take dowry.

No mother would discriminate against her daughters in assessing their value to the family or in distributing food or ensuring education or health, and none would marry their daughters off under eighteen years of age. Sons would not be spoiled or allowed to grow up believing that men have privileges that women do not have. Widows would not be deprived of their marital family property, and brothers and sisters would inherit equally from their parents. Elderly parents would be cared for by daughters, sons, or both.

Let us work for families with the beauty of leaving, cleaving, and oneness, with no internal domination or control, the kind that God intended at the beginning.

Notes

1. Forty percent of people with HIV and AIDS are innocent wives and children.
2. Scripture citations are from the New International Version (UK) unless otherwise noted.

3. I am indebted for these thoughts on primogeniture to my brother David Baldwin.
4. God predicted rather than prescribed (ordered) at this point.
6. A priest was allowed to mourn the death of parents, siblings, or children. He could not mourn his wife or his married sister (Lev. 21:1–4).
7. This failure was apparent in continued control by members of the older generation: Isaac trying to give special privileges to his older son, Esau; Jacob continuing to make the decisions for his adult sons when famine struck, etc.
8. Some examples of “father’s house”: “The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you’” (Gen. 12:1). Abraham told his servant to “go to my father’s family and to my own clan, and get a wife for my son” (Gen. 24:38). Saul requested of David, “Now swear to me by the Lord that you will not kill off my descendants or wipe out my name from my father’s family” (1 Sam. 24:21). “I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my ancestral family (literally “father’s house”), have committed against you” (Neh. 1:6). “If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish” (Esth. 4:14).
9. “Then the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, ‘I do not want to marry her,’ his brother’s widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, ‘This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother’s family line.’ That man’s line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsanded” (Deut. 25:8–10).
10. “If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall take her and marry her and fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel” (Deut. 25:5–6).
11. In recent academic discussion of the meaning of feudalism, it is still apparent that most aspects of life were managed by sworn “lordship” and control. Today, it is more often a perjorative term describing something outdated or unfair.
12. See also Eph. 1:14, 18; Col. 3:24.
13. Still today in India, more than one-third of young women aged seventeen or less are already married.