In the past two episodes of “Mere Fidelity” there was an underlying issue which was touched on, but not fully discussed. That is the relationship between the biological family and the New Family of which Christ is the firstborn. Examples I am thinking of: 1.) Does the Great Commission now call us to emphasize “being fruitful and multiplying” for this New Family through making disciples, over and against being fruitful in biological families? 2.) For those who cannot have biological families, how much should the church be relied upon to be family? 3.) The New Testament certainly seems to de-emphasize biological family to some degree, what do we make of this?

When we talk about biological family, we need to recognise just how far removed our understanding of the family is from that which would have prevailed within the first century. A number of things need to be brought forward.

For instance, when we think about the paradigmatic son, as an example: the paradigmatic son for us is maybe the ten-year-old on his father’s knee and that relationship between the young child and the father, in a more nurturing relationship. Within the New Testament, the paradigmatic relationship between the son and the father is between the *adult* son and the father. The son is the one who acts in the name of the father; who works for the father in the field; he is the one that the father brings a bride for; he is the one who represents the rule of the father; he is the one who enters into the inheritance of the father; he is the one who works alongside, and learns the trade of his father; he is the one that provides for his mother in her old age. All these sorts of things—that is what it means to be a son within that context.

Also, it is a context where business, production, and dominion in society is found in the family. And so the son is very much at the heart of that; the adult son is at the heart of the dominion of the family. He is the one who represents the power of the family in many respects. He is the one who takes over the business of the family and learns his trade from his father and really heads that up, under his father’s guidance.

That context is one that raises different questions than the ones that we think of. Now when we think about the family we think very much about sentimental bonds. We think about the act of having children in a very restricted sense: bearing children, nurturing them through their young age and then sending them out into the world as individuals to seek their own fortune. That was not what the family was within the ancient world. The family was the place where you did your business; it was the site where you owned property; it was your site of trade. It was your site of a wide range of connections, not just with the intimate connections of the immediate family, but broader connections. It was one that was shaped by an extended family, by a close relationship between father and son in the passing on of forms of life, and between mothers and daughters. It is also a context where we see relationships that are forged across the generations, and between people of the same generation. It is not the same sentimental bonds that we tend to privilege.

Now a lot of talk has happened lately about the relationships between men and women in the church very much being according to the paradigm of the family. And what people have often done is import modern conceptions of the family and place those upon the ancient world; and the ancient world was not the site of the same sort of bonds that we think of. So the bonds of brothers within the family were bonds of working together in a way that brothers would not work with sisters to the same extent. It would involve far more distinguished realms of life—realms of life that clearly distinguished brothers from sisters. And people think that brotherhood or ‘siblinghood’ is exchangeable with the idea of friendship—it isn’t. It is a bit more complex than that.

The other thing that people tend to do is that when they think of family metaphors, they tend to infantilize people. And so we think of children prior to teenage years, for instance. And that becomes a paradigm for thinking about our relationships with God and our relationships with each other. So for instance, when we think about ‘mothers’ in the church, we think about the relationship between the mother and the six-year-old son, for instance, and that that is the paradigm that should be followed. No—the relationship that we are thinking of is far more the relationship between the mother who is in her sixties, let’s say, and the son who is in his forties. And this is a different sort of paradigm.

For instance, when we see the example of Christ, that relationship involved a bit of distance: Christ had to put a distance between himself and his mother. So when his mother asked him to perform the miracle at Cana, he said, “What have you to do with me, woman?” There is a distance being created there—he is not just at her beck and call. He is an independent person to a degree that he would not have been in his young childhood. And so there are distinctions that happen with age that are not distinctions that we experience in the same way with young children. And that failure to recognise the broader paradigm of family that exists within the ancient world makes it very difficult for us to understand how concepts of family are being applied to the church. So we need to be careful, first of all, to get back to an understanding of family that is broad enough and capacious enough to hold the sort of metaphors that are being used.

Getting to the specific questions:

1.) Does the Great Commission now call us to emphasize “being fruitful and multiplying” for this New Family through making disciples, over and against being fruitful in biological families?

No, it is presumed that we will be fruitful and multiplying in our biological families. And, for instance, in 1 Timothy 2:15, Paul talks about women: “Nevertheless she [Eve] will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control.” It is an interesting argument there, because he starts off with ‘she’—Eve—and then talks about the daughters of Eve. So the daughters of Eve, the women in the church, are participating in the calling of Eve in the bringing in of life, in the bearing of seed; and the seed of the woman is that which overcomes the serpent. And women are participating in the calling of Eve.

Now this is important to recognise: that the calling of the family is seen as the normal calling of men and women, which is to bear children and to raise them as faithful children. As they do so faithfully, they will be blessed in that, they will be ‘saved’ in that calling. That calling of childbearing is one that particularly focuses upon women at that point.

Now, this does not mean that there is the same necessity to this as there would have been in the past. The necessity of being fruitful and multiplying—the emphasis upon bearing seed as the site of God’s fulfilment of his promises—is no longer there to the same degree. Now it is the normal way in which we will live out our Christian vocation, and that does not mean there are not exceptions, but the exceptions are exceptions to a rule—they are not the norm.

And that does not mean that there is the same necessity. In the past we have the connection of the covenant very much with the bearing of seed. The sign of the covenant was performed upon male genitalia and it was connected with the bearing of seed, with the promise of seed. That is not the same case anymore. Rather, the sign of the covenant is associated with new birth, with birth by the Spirit to a new form of generation.

The principle of the old covenant, the principle of the original creation—and the creation that we are still existing in in many respects—is generation through procreative union between the sexes. The principle of generation in the new creation is resurrection. And this is the argument that Christ has with the Sadducees: the order of family in the old covenant or in the old creation is no longer the order of the family in the new creation, because in the resurrection we will be sons of God, ‘sons of the resurrection’ and no longer be married and given in marriage. The whole order has changed and so the principle of generation changes. And that means that there is not the same covenant necessity to the bearing of children.

That does not mean that the calling to bear children and the blessing of bearing children more properly has ceased. Rather, this is still the conditions of the creation that we live within. And we see within the New Testament on a number of occasions that this calling—the calling of marriage and bearing children—are seen as blessed vocations that have as their proper end the new creation. And so they are opened up to that new realm. So we are heirs together of life: there is this promise of eternal life and also the gift of life in the current creation. And both of these things, whether that is bearing children—life in that sense—or the greater life that awaits us in the new creation, both of those things open up the relationship between a man and a woman and give them a direction towards something greater.

Beyond this it is important to recognise that throughout the New Testament there are references to things like the bearing of children, things like marriage, things like parenthood, that present these things as the ordinary form of Christian discipleship. That this is what it will involve for most people: it will involve marrying, keeping homes, bearing children, raising children, training children in the way of the family, providing for families, etc. And the assumption is not that that is done away with. There is a space made for exceptions to a degree that there was not before, but we continue to presume the ordinary character of the biological family.

And that this biological family is not just a continuation of the creation order, but is a blessed order that is opened up to the new creation, it becomes a vessel of promise. As you bear children, you are bearing children in a way that is opened up to the promise that was given to Eve, opened up to promise of the salvation of Christ. Likewise, when people get married, there is an entrance into something of the new creation order, as that marriage can serve as an icon of the union of Christ and his church. And so all of these relationships are seen as things that are not just condemned to the old order that is about to be done away with; rather, they die and rise again and they become part of a new order that exceeds it.

For those who cannot have biological families, how much should the church be relied upon to be family?

The church cannot really be family to the extent that many people idealize it as being. The church has a family character to it, but there is a danger of overplaying that, and that can often take us in cult-like directions. And I think it also, more importantly, creates unrealistic expectations about what the church will actually do. For single people, the church can relieve some sense of loneliness, but it will not replace the family.

The other thing to recognise here is, getting back to the example of what family means in the ancient world, is that when we think about family, we think about family as the family that is the family of childhood. So you are in your family until maybe you are about eighteen and then you go off to university and you start off on a life on your own. And at that point you do not have a family in the same sense; you are an independent individual.

But within the ancient world, your family was your context of life more generally. It was something that you lived out for the entirety of your life; it was not something that you left behind in that same way. And those identities that you had as a member of the family—as a brother or sister, as a son and a daughter—these things were profound and powerful identities reaching into adulthood. For instance as a son, you would be working with your father; you would be providing for your mother; you would be working alongside your brothers; you would be engaged in a broader family network of the extended family. And so all these things would be very significant for your day-to-day life.

We tend to restrict our notions of family to the young childhood family, and as a result I think we struggle to understand just how expansive the realm of the family was. And so to say that the church should be ‘family’—I mean, what sort of ‘family’ is it to be? We look to the church for sentimental bonds—the sentimental bonds that we look to the family for. Within the ancient world, within the world of Jesus’ day, what was the family? And how could the church take the place of the family? The family was a site of deep belonging: it was the site where you found business, it was the site where you had all your connections into adulthood, and these deep responsibilities. And so to say that the church replaces that and can be relied upon to be that, I think that is unrealistic. And I do not think this is what we see the New Testament put forward.

The New Testament puts forward a lot of familial language in association with the church. But I think that language very much depends upon the church being formed of natural families. And as the church is formed of natural families that are taken up into the logic of a greater family, the natural form of the family is opened up to something greater. And so I do not think it is a case of leaving behind of the natural order of the family and replacing it with another family. Rather, it is an opening up of the natural order of the family into something greater.

Now this is something I think we see within the ministry of Christ and his disciples. When we look at the list of Christ’s disciples I think what we will recognise is that there were a number of relationships that were familial ones. John the Baptist was probably Jesus’ second cousin. When we look at the list of the women at the cross, and compare them across the gospel accounts, it is almost certain that James and John were Jesus’ cousins. Peter and Andrew were brothers and they worked with James and John, and they were probably related to Christ too in some distant way. James the Just and Jude were Jesus’ brothers; then we see James the Less was also probably one of Jesus’ cousins (that is suggested in antiquity). So there are these relationships that are very pronounced familial ones within Jesus’ discipleship group. And the core disciples were family relations: if we think that the beloved disciple is John, then we are talking about Jesus’ cousin. We are not talking about an order that replaces or displaces the order of the family; rather, this is an order that exists within family networks and very much takes up family networks and opens them out into something greater.

So when we look at the story of the early Church, we see John and James as central disciples, Peter and Andrew as other key disciples who are closely connected with James and John. These are networks that were existing that were opened up to the gospel. In the same way, when Jesus asks “Who are my mother, sister and brothers?” when his mother and sister and brothers are outside looking for him, we are talking about a situation where there is division within his own household. And the order of disciples that he is building around him is one where his aunt is involved, his mother is involved, at least a couple of his brothers come to be involved, and we see various of his cousins and second cousins—this is a family network. And there is a division: Christ has brought a sword into this family network, dividing different parties from each other. As Christ talks about more generally, this division between parties is something that is seen within his own ministry, within his own family.

As we look at this, then, I think we should be very wary of pitting the church as a sort of different sort of family that is opposed to the natural family or a replacement or something that displaces the natural family. Rather, the natural family continues to be our primary context of life, our primary context of discipleship, but it is to be opened out to a broader, extended family. And that extended family is significant.

We need to recognise the order of the extended family to understand, for instance, some of the relationships that are taking place. So when we talk about brother-sister relationships within the church, we are talking about the sort of relationships that existed between groups of cousins. Within the world of Jesus’ day, cousins (and people within the extended family) would often be part of a broader family business. And the guys would be working alongside each other and the women would be working alongside each other. And there would be very much an order where they would be closely related—working towards the same ends—but that order of the family would not be the sentimental order, where we are just spending ‘quality time’ together, which is what we tend to think of when we think about the modern nuclear family.

And so again, we need to be very careful about the way that we apply these concepts and the way that we just recognise that within the ancient world, or within the early church, there was a family order that grounded the life of the church more generally. The church tended to meet in houses, in homes. And it was an order that was built around networks of family relationships and built up out of those; it was not just something to displace the family order.

However, it did bring a sword into the family order: it called for the family order to die and rise again, to become something new, to be reordered towards a greater end. And there is a sort of unplugging and re-plugging—you are taken out of it and then related to it in a new way. You no longer relate to it in the same sense that you once did. Rather than being the primary context of identity and calling, the natural family is now opened up to something greater—towards something that is ordered towards the Kingdom of Heaven.

I think that is a key thing to recognise: the church cannot just replace the natural family. Rather, the church is an extended family in large part formed by opening up the natural family into a broader familial-like order. We have a sort of extended family within the life of the church as various families are brought together in a common realm of life and communion, and as we work and labour together and as we worship together, that that family order is expressed.

3.) The New Testament certainly seems to de-emphasize biological family to some degree, what do we make of this?

I think it de-emphasises it to some degree; it emphasises the order of resurrection. The order of natural childbearing is reordered relative to resurrection and the order of the age to come. The principle of generation that is now ordering the life of the church is the order of the age to come, which is resurrection. And that changes the way that we think about bearing children, about getting married—about the necessity of those things. Now it does not mean that those are not the normal things that we should do. But they do not have the same necessity that they once did.

Beyond this, I think that there is a challenge to the biological family which was often a site of loyalties that eclipsed other things. Christ challenges those loyalties. So he talks about the need to leave father and mother, in some sense, and follow him; and the danger of those loyalties holding us back; and the fact that some people have given up family ties in order to follow, but they will get a new family; that the church represents a new family order in that sense.

But then Christ also speaks strongly against the Pharisees and the scribes who will abuse the tradition by saying that all the loyalty that was supposed to be given to the parents, it now belongs to the temple, to the service of that order. And that is a violation of the order of honouring father and mother, according to Christ. And Christ’s teaching therefore is something that does not do away with the natural, biological family.

And of course, we tend to think that the biological family focuses narrowly upon processes of procreation. The family of the world of Jesus’ day was far, far, far more than just a biological thing: it was the site of production, it was the site of social order in many respects. And so it challenges that in different sorts of ways and it de-emphasises certain bonds when those get in the way of the bonds of the Kingdom. But what we do see is the natural, biological family continues in a new form—one that has been unplugged from its primacy and then is placed within a greater order, ordered towards something beyond itself.

I think we should beware about the way that some of this language of family is being used today. There is this supposed fictive kinship that exists within the church, and this fictive kinship exists independent of familial bonds, it exists in opposition to the natural bonds of the family, as an alternative to that—I do not think that is what we see in Scripture. I think what we see in Scripture is an order within the church that is very much naturally growing out of familial bonds and working with those, expanding those to a greater order.

And when we think about the church in that way—as a realm of family in the modern sense—I think we will focus very much upon things that the church just will not provide. The church has become something very different from the family: it has become something detached from the broader life of a deeply integrated familial society. And we have lost out in that respect.

The household is no longer the site of production, it is no longer the site of significant dominion, it is no longer a site of great social order or anything like that, and social transition to the extent that it was before (I’ve done [a video](https://adversariapodcast.com/2018/05/16/video-a-biblical-theology-of-the-household/) on this in the past). But as a result of that, what we have is a very shallow family, and the church is no less shallow, because all of the things that used to exist within the more familial structure have been farmed out to businesses and other agencies within society that are largely detached from the family order. And the church, increasingly, is shaped by individual choice, by a very privatised form of worship; it is detached from deep community and from a deep rootedness in locality, these sorts of things.

People who are expecting that the church will be reliable as a sort of alternative to the family, I think will be sorely disappointed. That does not mean that we should not work towards an order that reintegrates society into a more familial order—one that is more centred upon the life of the household and then that opens up that household into this broader household of the Kingdom of God and gives everyone a place within that extended household. I think that is something we should pursue, but we should be realistic. It is not going to happen to any extent that will provide an alternative to actual families.

Likewise, if we are thinking about family purely in terms of the bonds between parents and young children and young children and parents, then that will automatically leave single and childless people in some sort of limbo. Whereas, within the ancient order and within the order of Jesus’ day, what we see is that family life is not just about the childhood family. Until we recover those sorts of things, the church cannot be relied upon for those ends. I think we need a society that is far more integrated into the life of the household for that to take place.

The emphasis upon the biological family within our society can often be idolatrous, as I mentioned within the video. The child can become a symbol of the social order and its commands, when God has been removed from the picture—that our duty to our children takes the place of God. And that is a dangerous thing.

But on the other hand, there is a tendency to read back into the New Testament a certain resistance to the natural family, to the extended family; and to read into the New Testament attitudes that are very much about modern notions of singleness. And singleness, as we experience it, is in many ways a very modern phenomenon: this isolated person who is working outside of any household, working largely for their own profit. And that whole order—that person has been uprooted from their locality, is living somewhere far distanced from their parents and their extended family in many cases—that is a very modern situation and it is quite dysfunctional. We should be careful of trying to read that back into the New Testament, with the church playing the role of the family for that sort of person.

The church should be a place where the alien and the stranger are welcomed, and those who lack families. But for it to operate as a site of welcome, it needs to be a place where there is a deep familial, communal structure. And that requires natural families, that requires the sorts of bonds that are established in the original creation order. When those are abandoned, the church is not going to be able to pick up the slack; the church will be weakened in its capacity to function as a community. What really gives the church the backbone of community is often the families that are opened up to the Kingdom of God, to this wider household. That is what really gives the church so much of its capacity to function as an extended family: the fact that it has actual natural families within it.

And so I am wary of the way that people try and push the church into this role of this replacement family, which it cannot perform realistically and which also leads to a distortion of what the Scripture actually teaches.

Much of what we think about in the New and Old Testament as examples of deep friendship connections, for instance, are friendships that are formed within the networks established by the natural family. The relationship between Naomi and Ruth is the relationship between a mother- and daughter-in-law; the relationship between David and Jonathan is a relationship between someone and his brother-in-law or a member of his father’s household. These are relationships that are knit in within a family order. And when we forget that these deep friendships find as their rooting this familial structure, I think we will try and produce things that just cannot be produced within a society that has abandoned that sort of structure. Likewise, Christ’s relationship with the beloved disciple is the relationship with a close cousin.

In all of these cases, I think we need to recognise that we are dealing with a society that has largely abandoned a very intimate and developed social structure in pursuit of individual independence and autonomy. And what we have lost will not be replaced by the church, which has succumbed to the same logic. The church is a place where we are primarily about serving our private preferences in worship and things like that—that is what it has become. And if you are giving people the impression that the church is going to pick up the slack of the family, it is not. And we can work towards improving that order, but that I think will primarily occur as we root families within local areas and communities, and then open those up to the broader family of the Kingdom of God.