

## Charisma and the Disruption of the Family in Early Christianity

“The Christian Family” has become a household term of the churches, whether of Catholic, Protestant or other persuasion. Strengthening the institution of marriage and fighting against abortion have become typical and indeed central objectives of Christian preaching and teaching in our generation. Papal encyclicals, weekend seminars, Sunday sermons, and an ever-increasing number of publications and productions, including video-tapes, disseminate this message, bringing it into virtually every Christian home. It is not surprising that the theme now also figures in the doctrinal statements of some churches (e.g. the Seventh-day Adventists). The concept of the Christian family, however, cannot be found in early Christian sources, including the New Testament. Neither Jesus nor St. Paul or St. Augustine ever mentioned such an institution. In Matthew’s gospel, it is completely absent, and in 1 Timothy, it is only vaguely foreshadowed. The rhetoric relating to the family has to rely on sources other than those that are considered normative for Christian discourse.

The present paper explores the New Testament attitude toward the family and family concerns and tries to account for the absence of a notion of domesticity. It is divided into three sections. First, I will present a reading of the relevant passages of the gospel of *Matthew*. Dating from ca. A.D. 80, it is the text printed at the beginning of the New Testament as read in all Christian communities. I will then look at *1 Timothy*, a pseudo-Pauline letter dating from the early second century, that is one generation after Matthew’s gospel; this letter also forms part of the New Testament. The third and concluding part of this paper will evaluate the message of Matthew and 1 Timothy in sociological terms.

### The Family in the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew’s gospel ends with the disciples’ visionary experience of Jesus. Their master has been crucified, but his tomb was found empty. This was understood to mean that the Lord is not dead, but alive, although on a higher, divine level. Existence on that level makes Jesus invisible, but his disciples are sure of his presence and sometimes rely on actual communications from him, experienced in ecstatic raptures. In a first vision Jesus directs his closest followers to a certain place in Galilee. This place is the setting for the last verses of the gospel:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Matt. 28:16-20)

What Jesus tells his disciples is to perform the ritual of baptism and to teach. The question to be asked is what the content and subject matter of the teaching would be. And the search for the answer sends us back to the gospel, for the gospel is an account of the deeds, sayings, and teachings of Jesus. In order to find out what Jesus taught - e.g. about the family - we have to read it from the first to the last page. Now the ideal would be to sit down and read Matthew's gospel from beginning to end, marking with a red pen everything Jesus said about the family. I have done this and discovered a series of eight quite unambiguous statements that reveal how Jesus felt about conventional family and kinship duties. Here is the series:

(1) Matt. 8:19-22. "And a scribe came up and said to him, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.' Another of the disciples said to him, 'Lord, let me first go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their dead.'"

To follow Jesus means to have no permanent residence, no home. It also implies the rejection of family duties, here exemplified with reference to one of the basic duties of sons in the ancient world: to care for their aged parents and, eventually, to give them a decent funeral. The first lesson a disciple of Jesus has to learn is this: As a disciple, I must give up home and family and share Jesus' homelessness.

(2) Matt. 10:34-38. "Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me."

Jesus demands clear priorities: the love of Jesus (and the implied love of the community of the believers) is more important than the harmony in one's natural family. The message of Jesus disrupts the peace and harmony in the patriarchal and hierarchical family, dominated by fathers and mothers. Allegiance to the Lord overrules domestic loyalties.

(3) Matt. 12:46. "While he [Jesus] was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, 'Who is my mother and who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he 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.'"

This passage takes us one step further. Once the Christian has left the parental or conjugal home, the family members try to win him or her back. As is to be expected, Jesus refuses to obey. Like him, any new believer now belongs to a new family that replaces the old "natural" one. All Christians have mothers, brothers, and sisters in the new community which is understood as a new family under the paternity of God who is their father.

(4) Matt. 18:5.10. "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. [...] See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven."

This statement puzzles commentators to this day. The correct interpretation seems to be as follows. Children are not defined as children of their natural parents; their true father is the heavenly father, and they are protected by angels who are very close to God. At a practical level, this means that they must become Christians. By the first century, the idea of separating parents and young children in order to give a new type of education to a new generation was already a time-honored idea; in the fourth century B.C. Plato would start his ideal state by sending all parents out of town and raising only those children who were under ten years of age (Plato, *The Republic*, bk. VII, end). Now we know from the ancient Jewish historian, Josephus, that the Essenes actually practiced the adoption of children in order to raise them in their religion.<sup>1</sup> Among the Christian groups, this practice is attested for the Manichaeans of the third and fourth century.<sup>2</sup> So it is quite possible that some first-century Christians imitated the Essene model by taking children away from their non-believing (and probably very poor) natural parents. The Christian foster parents would raise them, of course, as Christians. While we know little about the exact circumstances of this form of parenting, there is evidence that early Christian missionaries extended their activities to children. The relevant source is the earliest pagan book on Christianity, written around A.D. 180 by the (otherwise unknown) pagan philosopher Celsus<sup>3</sup>. According to Celsus, the children involved were not infants, but school children who can be persuaded to acknowledge the Christian teaching as the truth. While the polemical report of Celsus does not imply the actual abduction and adoption of pagan children by Christians, missionary activity clearly aimed at undermining the authority of their parents and teachers. Such activity can certainly claim the support of that saying: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me."

(This scriptural passage has inspired the questionable practice of secretly baptizing non-Christian children. In the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas argued against it, but in the eighteenth century Pope Benedict XIV instructed his clergy not to abolish the practice, but to restrict it -- as is known, to no avail.<sup>4</sup> Here one can refer to the famous Mortara-case of nineteenth century Italy. In 1858 it became known that the then seven-year-old Edgar Mortara, son of Jewish parents, had been baptized by the family's Christian maid during an illness. Ecclesiastical authorities managed to separate the child from his family and had him raised in Rome. The abducted boy never returned to his parents. Edgar Mortara died a Catholic priest in 1940.)

(5) Matt. 19:11-12. "Not all men can receive this precept, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it."

This is a quite straightforward recommendation not to marry. The true disciple of Jesus will stay unmarried. Marriage would mean to be involved with other people, especially with non-believing relatives of one's spouse, and thus endanger one's commitment to the Christian cause and community. "I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come," is the convincing excuse offered by someone who is invited (Luke 14:20). It is known that Jesus and St. Paul both remained unmarried, and that the Catholic church bases her doctrine of clerical celibacy on this recommendation of Jesus. The earliest and best commentary on the word of Jesus is that of Paul (1 Cor. 7:32-33): "The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife." In other words: the exemplary Christian remains celibate.

(6) Matt. 22:30. "In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven."

This is Jesus' answer to the question about the marital status of men and women in life everlasting. Jesus' teaching is unambiguous: there will be no marriages in heaven. Men and women will be like angels, that is they will be asexual beings who serve and worship God. In other words: those Christians who follow Jesus' advice in staying unmarried in this life are actually anticipating an important aspect of eternity here and now. They are leading an angelic life.

(7) Matt. 26:17-30. Let me omit the quotation here. Jesus celebrates the central Jewish ritual, the Passover, with his disciples. Now Jewish custom (as observed to this very day) would have the Passover meal with the appropriate scriptural readings, prayers and hymns in the family, and the ritual would be led by the father (Exod. 12:3). Jesus departs from this custom by celebrating the Passover not with his kin but with his disciples, that is the community of his followers and believers. The natural family is replaced by the new community. In order to mark off this new practice, Jesus established an entirely new ritual here, the eucharist. In Christian history, the eucharist was never celebrated in a family context; it is the wider community that attends, and eventually special buildings - churches - were built for the purpose.

(8) Matt. 27:57-60. "When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body, and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock; and he rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb, and departed."

This is the last passage from Matthew's gospel on which I will comment. The report has to be understood in the light of our first quotation from Matthew, the text in which Jesus told a man not to bury his parents. The burial of Jesus

continues and completes the teaching on the family. When the living follower of Jesus leaves his or her home and renounces the duty of caring for family funerals, what is then to be done when a member of the new community dies? Well, the answer is easy: the new community will take care of the funeral. The living believers belong not to their natural families but to the community, and the same is true of their dead bodies. The natural family is denied any authority over Christians, alive or dead. *To conclude: Jesus, as represented in the gospel of Matthew (and in the other gospels, for that matter), has a strong bias against the family.*<sup>5</sup> The gospel of Matthew is absolutely serious about this; its teaching about leaving the family belongs to that which must be taught to people of all nations "to the close of the age" (Matth. 28:19- 20).

The question to be raised at this point is, of course: Did the early Christians actually practice what was preached by Jesus and fixed, in canonical form, in the gospels? In order to find the answer, we must turn to our second source, the First Letter of Timothy.

### The Family in 1 Timothy

When we move from the gospel of Matthew to 1 Timothy, we move in both time and space. The letter was written one generation later, that is in the early second century. The setting is no longer Palestine or Syria but Greece. In this letter, an unknown author, who writes under the name of Paul, addresses an early Christian bishop named Timothy. What does Pseudo-Paul have to say about the family? As we did in reading Matthew's gospel, we must start our reading of 1 Timothy with its last page. Pseudo-Paul concludes his exhortation with the following injunction: "In the presence of God who gives life to all things and of Jesus Christ, (...) I charge you to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. (...) O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith." (1 Tim. 6,13-14.20-21)

What is the false doctrine which Pseudo-Paul rejects, calling it godless chatter, contradictory, and missing the mark of faith? And what is the commandment that has to be kept unstained? In order to answer these questions, we must again turn to the text of the letter itself and look what Pseudo-Paul has to say about the family. Again, we will be surprised by a whole series of clear commandments.

(1) 1 Tim. 1:9. At the beginning of his letter, Pseudo-Paul announces that he is going to explain the sound doctrine. Among those whom he considers false teachers he mentions "murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers". These expressions refer to those who as adults neglect their duties toward their aged parents. In this letter, to care for one's aged parents is of paramount importance. - With the next passage we turn from the care for the aged to giving birth and caring for children.

(2) 1 Tim. 2:15. "Women will be saved through bearing children." This statement places women firmly in the home and gives them a clear task: to give birth to children (and, we may add, to nurture and raise them). Childbirth is not just a natural fact, it is also endowed with religious meaning. It is instrumental in saving women from eternal damnation. Although not explained, the implication seems to be that celibate and childless women may have to face a harsh destiny. It goes almost without saying that birth presupposes marriage. 1 Timothy believes in neither female nor male celibacy as an ideal. Our next passage is clear on this point.

(3) 1 Tim. 3:2-5. "Now a bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher, no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and no lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church?"

While the first reference implies that a Christian is supposed to care for his aged parents, here the bishop (and, a few lines further on, the deacon) is presented as the model of correct behavior. The bishop is married to a wife, has children (whom he keeps submissive), and manages his household. And what about the ideal of celibacy that figures so prominently in Matthew? The next reference gives the answer.

(4) 1 Tim. 4:1-4. "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, through the pretensions of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and enjoin abstinence from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected."

Obviously, Pseudo-Paul has a version of the message of Jesus which is strikingly different from that transmitted in Matthew's gospel. He would count the Matthean Jesus and his radical followers among those liars who forbid or at any rate discourage marriage and promote celibacy. Pseudo-Paul's reference to forbidden food has nothing to do with eating in the literal sense of the term. Eating is a metaphor for sexual intercourse. Those who forbid "eating" actually want married couples to abstain from intercourse. Pseudo-Paul, whose Bishop Timothy is married and manages a household with children, rejects such an attitude. Sexuality, for him, is something good, because it is created by God.

It is interesting to see how Pseudo-Paul legitimates his rejection of continence and celibacy. He frames his arguments with references to the highest authorities he can possibly think of. At the beginning, he invokes a prophetic revelation ("the Spirit expressly says"), and at the end he refers to God's creation. Instituted by the Creator in Paradise, marriage belongs to the immutable order of creation. For the author of 1 Timothy, prophecy and creation unite their voices in arguing against the ascetic life style.

(5) 1 Tim. 5:3. This passage deals with widows who have children or grandchildren. Such widows should not be supported by the community but by their own family. Pseudo-Paul addresses these children and grandchildren: "Let them

first learn their religious duty [literally: piety] to their own family and make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God."

Again, intergenerational solidarity within families is emphasized. The young members of a family must care for the older ones, especially for old widows. A widow who is under 60 years of age is told to remarry (v. 14.). The image Pseudo-Paul has of unmarried widows is rather negative: "They learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers, but gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not." (v. 13)

(6) 1 Tim. 5:5. "She who is a real widow, and is left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day."

Pseudo-Paul has a very restricted view of celibacy. While in Matthew, every good Christian should lead a celibate life, here the unmarried state is restricted to women. The letter actually defines that such a widow must be over 60 years old and must have raised children, who are no longer around to support her. Only under these well-defined conditions would the Christian community financially support a widow and pay her for the prayers she offers for her benefactors. Given the short life expectancy in those days, the officially recognized widow must have been a very rare figure.

(7) 1 Tim. 5:8. "If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

This passage sums up how Pseudo-Paul feels about the family. To care for one's kith and kin is the hallmark of a good Christian. We must remember that Pseudo-Paul is absolutely serious about his view. "In the presence of God (...) and of Jesus Christ (...) I charge you to keep the commandment." What the Matthean Jesus taught would appear to Pseudo-Paul as "godless chatter and contradictions" and "missing the mark as regards the faith" (1 Tim. 6:13-14.20). Thus we are very far away from the life style and ethos of the gospel of Matthew. Here we have one of the clearest cases of division within the New Testament which cannot easily be harmonized. *While the community of the unmarried Jesus consists of people who have left their families to form a religious, purely spiritual group, the church of the married bishop can be described as a cluster of families in which celibacy is restricted to a very small number of old widows.* How can we account for this radical difference? In order to answer this question, we have to turn to the sociology of religion.

## Charisma and the Disruption of the Family

Whatever we can ascertain about the original message of Jesus, and however divergent the views of scholars may be, all agree on the God-centered, purely religious outlook of Jesus. Here was a man living entirely in the presence of the divine; God's searching and penetrating gaze beckoned and overwhelmed his soul. The message of Jesus issued directly from being possessed by a definite experience of God and a notion of the divine will.

The revelation Jesus brought from the heavenly Father was not theoretical doctrine but practical advice to throw away cares, to rely only on the loving Father, and thus to find rest. "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden," Jesus called, "and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matt. 11:28-29) For some members of the new movement, to be drawn to God meant to leave everything behind. They followed Jesus on his wanderings through Palestine, devaluing wealth, occupation, and family. God would provide for all the necessities of life, just as he provided for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.

His closeness to God gave Jesus a type of authority sociologist Max Weber calls "charismatic". Charisma is an extraordinary talent, understood as a divine gift that gives the bearer authority over others. Charismatic leaders are able to motivate people to change their lifestyle and beliefs radically. Charismatic figures are also free from any institutional legitimation. They assert their independence by standing above normal occupational and family life.

Devoting his existence to the one cause by which he is obsessed, the charismatic leader cannot fully engage in the normal range of commitments. Although this non involvement has many dimensions, it is epitomized by celibacy and the denial of family duties. Significantly, Jesus departed from the Jewish wish of having many children. He remained unmarried and childless as well as alien to an ideal of family and domesticity. Jesus called his disciples and followers out of their families and united them into a community in which marriage formed no structural element. Far from being a stabilizing factor in society, charisma tends to disrupt marriages and families.

In Bishop Timothy's church the enthusiasm of the early days has vanished and given way to the soberness of a middle-class community with middle-class ideals. In this community, the old charismatic ideals were either no longer entertained or had never been practiced at all. Enthusiasm cannot be made permanent and institutionalized. As Peter Brown has put it: "The silent majority of those who awaited the coming of the kingdom were careworn and decent householders, long used to the punctilious rhythms of Jewish life. Secure in their moral horizons, they were in no position to allow the fabric of their social person - their wives, their children, their kinfolk, and the few ancestral fields that they would inherit when they buried their father - to evaporate at the call of the wandering few."<sup>6</sup> Symbolic for the difference between charismatic world renouncement and 1 Timothy's worldliness is that letter's advice about drinking: "No longer only drink water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." (1 Tim. 5:23) Such are the petty concerns of settled families rather than of people, who, like Jesus, one day feast so that they are called drunkards and the next day do not know where to lay their heads, and often risk their lives. (See Matt. 8:20; 11:19) Risk is a concept totally foreign to a community whose members regard safety and tranquility as the greatest felicity, wishing as they did "to lead a quiet and peaceable life" (1 Tim. 2:2). The natural solidarity between the



generations, ignored if not despised in the time of the charismatic effervescence, has become a major concern. It should be clear, however, that 1 Timothy does not advocate a specifically Christian domesticity. This letter's patriarchal household still lacks the notion that the family is a spiritual community or "little church," with the father serving as a priest and presiding over domestic ritual. One has to wait for many centuries before the idea of a specifically Christian family makes its appearance in history.<sup>7</sup>

The ideals expressed in 1 Timothy, sometimes termed "early Catholic" (instead of the more appropriate "early Protestant"!), did not displace the earlier, enthusiastic and charismatic ethos. Historically, both models of the church have made their impact. Sometimes they combined to form a two-class system, with the celibate life for priests and members of religious orders, and the married and settled life for the laity. The tension between the two models can still be felt in contemporary Christianity. The charismatic model could not easily be displaced, because Jesus' own view was remembered too well and transmitted in writings like Matthew's gospel that were to become canonical. The charismatic approach to religious reality was also firmly embodied in the sacraments of baptism (which essentially substitutes natural parents for godparents<sup>8</sup>) and eucharist (which is a community rather than a family meal). Whenever the model of 1 Timothy becomes prevalent, it is eventually undermined by the charismatic spirit. Conversely, charismatic non-involvement based on heroic denial of this-worldly realities is unlikely to remain unchallenged. It is precisely this unresolved tension that makes the history of the relationship of family and Christianity so refreshingly varied and full of surprises.

## Notes

1. "They [the Essenes] neglect wedlock, but choose out other persons' children, while they are pliable and fit for learning; and esteem them to be of their kindred, and form them according to their own manners." Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2:120, in *The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 605.
2. A fourth-century African bishop once revealed that as a child his mother had given him to the Manicheans, see Augustine, *Confessions* 3:12 (*Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 27:39). Further information is given in Samuel N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 29, 31, 54, 137. - In North Africa, around A.D. 200, Christians have funds "to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents" (Tertullian, *Apology* 39).
3. The source merits to be quoted: "In private houses also [*asserts Celsus*] we see wool-workers, cobblers, laundry-workers, and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels, who would not dare to say anything at all in front of their elders and more intelligent masters. But whenever they get hold of children in private and some stupid women with them, they let out some astounding statements as, for example, that they must not pay any attention to their father and school-teachers, but must obey them; they say that these talk

nonsense and have no understanding, and that in reality they neither know nor are able to do anything good, but are taken up with mere empty chatter. But they alone, they say, know the right way to live, and if children would believe them, they would become happy and make happy their home as well. And if just as they are speaking they see one of the school-teachers coming (...), the more cautious of them flee in all directions; but the more reckless urge the children to rebel. (...) If they like, they should leave father and their schoolmasters, and go along with the women and little children who are their playfellows to the wooldresser's shop." Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3:55; trans. Henry Chadwick, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953, 165f.

4. The relevant documentation can be found in the standard collection of official Catholic teaching: *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, ed. Heinrich Denzinger and Adolf Schönmetzer, 32nd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), nos. 2552-2562.
5. In our generation, the Heidelberg scholar Gerd Theissen has done much to recover the "charismatic homelessness" as an ideal entertained in early Christianity; see his *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978). For recent work on this attitude, see Bernhard Lang, *Grußverbot oder Besuchsverbot?* *Biblische Zeitschrift* 26 (1982), 75-79 [on not using family connections in early Christian missionary traveling]; Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 23-46 [on the anti-family bias of New Testament Christianity and its implications for the Christian world view].
6. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 44.
7. Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986) is an excellent historical and sociological study of the notion of the Christian family.
8. Maurice Bloch and S. Guggenheim, *Compadrazgo, Baptism and the Symbolism of a Second Birth*, in: *Man* 16(1981) 376-386. - I should like to thank Colleen McDannell and Jane K. Williams-Hogan for their kind help with this paper.