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# The Bible as Feminist Pilgrim

a column on feminist biblical interpretation

## OPEN HOMES AND FICTIVE KIN GROUPS: *Jesus Reinvents the Family*

by Reta Halteman Finger

I've been thinking a lot about family lately. After many years of good health, my parents are no longer able to maintain the Pennsylvania farm where they've lived their entire married life. Plans for their future have necessitated many phone calls among them, myself, and my four siblings. Should they move into an apartment in a local Mennonite retirement community? Do my sister and her husband who live nearby want to arrange for my parents to move in with them? How much do the opinions of the rest of us count? How much can and should we expect from the larger Mennonite community?

These thoughts first come to mind as I try to write about the New Testament concept of family. Yet it is just such concerns that remind me how strongly the Jesus movement model has influenced me.

Though the New Testament writings record the beginning of a new epoch in spiritual understanding, it intrigues me that they do not use new vocabulary. Rather, they *reinterpret* familiar words and ideas, often turning them on their heads.

Thus, for early believers, Caesar and Herod were no longer their lords (*kyrios*). Their *kyrios* was Jesus, whose claim to authority shockingly derived from serving at table and washing feet (Lk 22:24-27; Jn 13:1-20; Phil 2).

Kingdom (*basilea*) was infused with a spiritual as well as temporal meaning, the place where the powerless became important (Mt 18:4). God may still be called Father, but in Jesus' experience, *pater* was not the stern, authoritarian figure with absolute control over his household, but a loving, intimate Abba. Even so, there were no fathers in the new family Jesus formed, only "brothers and sisters and mothers" (Mk 3:34-35; 10:29-30; Mt 23:9). (When the church fails to properly reinterpret these familiar words, it becomes like the rest of the world: patriarchal and hierarchical.)

### Reinterpreting Family

How did Jesus reinterpret the concept of family and what kind of new family did he create? The vignette in Mark 3:31-35 where Jesus' mother and brothers come to see him is, I think, not so much a rejection of them as an *inclusion* of many others. "Whoever does the will of God," he explains, "is my brother and sister and mother." From then on, kinship through blood was enlarged—if necessary, superseded—to include all those who chose to do the will of God.

This was not just talk, of course. People actually did follow Jesus as a group of brothers and sisters. They ate together. They talked together. They visited in each other's houses—if they

had a house (Lk 4:38). They traveled over the countryside together. After you've washed enough feet, eaten over enough campfires, and had enough arguments together, it would be hard *not* to think of those dust-blown comrades as your sisters and brothers.

This pattern of family life can be seen continuing after Jesus was no longer with the disciples. Recording the beginnings of the earliest church, Acts 2:44-47 says,

*All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread from house to house and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.*

During the last thirtysome years, most scholars (led by Hans Conzelmann) have assumed Luke was idealizing the early church when he wrote the above, taking ideas from Greek utopian writings and projecting them back into a "Golden

Age" of the church that never happened. However, more recent studies which look at the cultural anthropology of the Greco-Roman world are not so quick to wave away this communal emphasis.

In an essay, "Community of Goods in Acts: Idealization or Social Reality?" S. Scott Bartchy uses the sociological term "fictive kin group" to describe the early Jerusalem church. Such a group, though not related by blood, interacts together as if it were an extended family.

In ancient Mediterranean society, kinship was a serious matter directly affecting survival. Unlike today, no concept of basic human rights or a universal social commitment to all people existed. People would have been unable to split off into nuclear families, move hundreds of miles from home, and just send a card at the holidays. Rather, one's primary loyalty was to one's family, and any others would have to prove themselves in order to be trusted. One needed to tell the truth only to kin (and to superiors in some situations); no

obligation existed to tell the truth to outsiders. Within the kin group, homes were open to all. The doors were left open, and children were allowed to roam freely in and out of the homes and workplaces to show that family members had nothing to hide from each other.

Within this extended family there is also the obligation to meet everyone's needs. In the Greco-Roman world, the system of patronage prevailed, where those with more wealth or honor kept their good name by helping poor relatives



*"Mary, Mother of John Mark" (Act 12:11-17), by Meinrad Craighead*  
Reprinted with permission from *WomanWord* by Miriam Therese Winter. Crossroad ©1990, Medical Mission Sisters

or clients. Wealth, then, became a means to an honorable name. Recipients of gifts became indebted to their benefactors, and paid them back through lifelong expressions of gratitude and solidarity (i.e., bowing and scraping).

By eating together in various homes and sharing their possessions, the early believers, though they were not blood relatives, were behaving as a fictive kin group. With this strong emphasis on loyalty and truth-telling among the kin group, it is not surprising that the betrayal of Judas (Acts 1:16–18) and the lying of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11) were viewed with such seriousness.

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## What kind of new family did Jesus create?

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The one major difference between Jesus' family and ordinary blood kin groups of that time was that Jesus had abolished the acquisition of wealth and honor by patronage. "Lend, expecting nothing in return," he said (Lk 6:32–36). "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you" (Lk 14:12–14).

This is not patronage. This is redistribution—where the rich get poorer and the poor get richer, and relationships become radically equalized. Those who give in this way should not count on receiving great honor in this life; rather they "will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (14:14). Thus Joseph Barnabas, a patron who sold a field (Acts 4:36–37), laid the money at the apostles' feet so the honor would not go to him but would be

shared among the group.

There are other indications in the New Testament that such kinship continued far beyond Jerusalem, especially in the form of caring for all members by sharing communal meals in which the Eucharist was embedded (see my article in *DOS*, Fall 1993). Evidence of this exists up to the fourth century.

It is not hard to infer implications for women in the fictive kin group gathered around Jesus and in the early Jerusalem church. Women seem to have been a part of the band of traveling disciples from the beginning: Luke 8:1–3 suggests some of them were patrons who helped support the entire group. Jesus had valued women's work by characterizing himself as one who served at table (Lk 22:27) and by doing women's work of washing feet (Jn 13). At the same time, he was quite willing that women leave service and participate in learning (Lk 10:38–42). Women were equally responsible for their actions, fiscal and otherwise, as can be seen in the sad case of Sapphira.

Further, we also have the account in Acts 6:1–6 of the Hellenist widows' complaints about not getting enough food in the daily distribution. If widows were the more vulnerable members of the group, they nevertheless had enough clout to get results. On the other hand, I am more inclined to think that these "widows" may have been an organization of women who managed the food distribution among the Greek-speaking Christians—and they were voicing the concerns of all the Hellenists. In any case, the crisis occasioned by rapid growth of the church somehow involved women at its core.

It is true that the ancient Mediterranean world adhered to far more rigid gender roles than we experience in the West today. Men belonged to the public sphere; women in the private sphere of home and family—which also included the family

business. But the irony is that the early disciples *were* a family—a kin group—that operated in the private sphere of the home! It was a sphere where women were in charge; so it is no wonder that we find women as heads of households and leading kin subgroups.

Remember the story of Peter's rescue from prison (Acts 12). He goes straight to the house of Mary, where many had gathered to pray for him. Numerous other New Testament texts refer to women as leaders of house churches (Acts 16:11-15; Rms 16:1-16; 1 Cor 1:11; Phil 4:2; Col 4:15, etc.). No doubt the fact that the central ritual of the church was a meal—something women have intimate associations with—contributed to their involvement.

### **Bridging the Time Gap**

The Jesus movement used the family structures present in their culture and adapted them to create fictive kin groups where all believers were accepted and meals and possessions shared. How can we transpose the values that Jesus taught and lived to the 20th century? Should we even try?

The traditional answer for Catholics has been that ordinary folks are not called to live in intentional community, only celibate, "holy" persons. The Protestant tradition has been generally hostile to all communal arrangements. The early reformers, Luther and Calvin, resisted a corrupt and oppressive monasticism on one hand and the "fanatical" Anabaptists on the other. Their theologies emphasized justification by faith and redemption from sin in more abstract ways.

As an Anabaptist Mennonite, I come from a church where literally following Jesus and sharing communally has always been a priority. Because of this, I see many values in shared life, even more so in our fractured society where so many are alone and rootless. But can this really be called *family*? Can a group of unrelated individuals so commit

themselves to each other that they take on the responsibilities of a family for the long haul? Will they care for emotionally or mentally disabled members, for those who develop cancer or Alzheimer's? How far do we stretch our definition of family?

There is also a down side to intentional community life. Some "family" groups become authoritarian because of a disproportionate number of immature members or over-controlling leadership—despite Jesus' clear statements against such behavior. Certainly the presence of mind-bending, autocratic cults in America who ask members to sever family relationships does not make most Christians think kindly of intentional communities.

Even though many Christian communities and house churches are not authoritarian, there are costs for members. Our highly cherished individualism diminishes. Issues we thought were ours alone to decide are subjected to the community. Other people's problems now become our own and we help set limits when dealing with them. Will those in a community lightly tolerate members' smoking, alcoholism, or irresponsible sexual behavior risking unwanted pregnancy, STDs or AIDS? Will they interfere in rash business ventures or premature marriages? How do those from various ethnic groups or classes relate with each other?

In the midst of these pros and cons, I will hazard a few thoughts about living out Jesus' gospel of family in modern America. First, I believe that for those of us from reasonably functional families, an intentional community should never take over all the roles of a biological or adoptive family. God created families for the purposes of long-term commitments, of belonging and security. Even in the earliest Jerusalem church, biological families were important. Jesus' mother figured prominently as one of the disciples, and Jesus' brother James became the leader of the Jerusalem

community (Acts 1:14; Gal 1:19).

But many people do not have a functional family. Numbers of teen pregnancies and fatherless families skyrocket. Divorce scars and impoverishes children; abuse and incest split apart families. Loneliness and rejection drive gays and lesbians to despair. For the gospel to mean anything to victims of such societal problems, they need to be adopted into a committed Christian community in such a way that their needs for belonging and security are met and they are in turn held accountable as responsible family members.

Second, I believe the larger church community can and should take over some of the functions of the family in order to help biological families survive and to enhance the general quality of life of all family members. During my teenage years, my own family would not have made it without financial help from our Mennonite community when accidents twice hospitalized my father and rendered him unemployable for months, without health insurance or unemployment compensation.

Today I again feel grateful for my original Mennonite community. As I

finish this article weeks after starting it, my father has just signed for an apartment in a local Mennonite retirement community. I have now seen the apartment, and it is beautiful. The entire complex is bright and cheerful, full of diverse activities for the residents. Care of the elderly is one ministry a church community can provide for its members. In our society, all daughters no longer can or should care for their aging parents or parents-in-law in their homes. No longer do many older people in our society prefer to be solely dependent on their children.

This move has occasioned much family discussion. My mother, who is experiencing some memory loss, resists any change from her normal pattern of life. My sister's immediate family will still share significant responsibility, and they will need support from other family members, as well as people from their small group at church and the larger congregation.

Retirement communities are not literally biblical, since modern American sociological realities have drastically changed from those in ancient Mediterranean culture. But they can be a contemporary adaptation of the gospel's call to relate to each other as families. As workers serve the elderly, they are at the same time freeing other family members for other forms of service—such as producing this magazine!

Jesus' stipulation that we love each other in order to be his disciples is not a call to sentimentality. It is not even a request to *like* each other. Rather, it demands that we treat each other like kin, that we do all we can to enable individuals and families to survive and thrive.

RETA HALTEMAN FINGER will soon have to choose between writing articles for *Daughters of Sarah* or finishing her doctoral work at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary in Evanston.

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