

Jesus' Family Values - Deirdre Good

An excerpt from the conclusion of *Jesus' Family Values* by Deirdre Good (Church Publishing: New York, 2006).

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Summary:-

What do we know about families in the New Testament? In *Jesus' Family Values*, I examine evidence from the gospels and Paul in light of evidence from surrounding cultures. In the New Testament we find different configurations of households most of whom had slaves. Jesus' own family of origin is described in Luke and Matthew. The community of disciples he left behind is much like an association or guild. I address the text as a lesbian living in a same-sex committed relationship asking what values the New Testament reflects and how they might speak to modern families today.

Excerpt:-

Just as we seek guidance in scriptures that are thousands of years removed from us, the actors and authors in those writings also sought guidance in their scriptures and showed us how. Paul is a prime example of this; he honors the scripture by wrestling with it, and while some of his interpretative maneuvers are opaque to us, his intention to be responsible to scripture shines through clearly. We cannot responsibly excise bits of scripture or deny what they meant in their own context, insofar as the meaning is accessible to us. But we can study the patterns of scripture, the direction of scripture, the underlying major themes in scripture, and bring those to bear on the interpretation of those passages that seem confined to the time and place when they were first written.

Paul's letters, amongst the oldest parts of the New Testament, commend "staying as you are" in light of impending apocalyptic catastrophe. For this reason, Paul counsels the Corinthian community in single-minded devotion to the Lord over and above the exercise of passion for which marriage is the containment. To community members whom he calls "brothers (and sisters)" Paul commends humility, patient affection, and competition in honoring each person in the body of Christ, that is, "sober judgment." After Paul, the authors of the "household codes" counsel wives, children, and slaves to obey their husbands, fathers and masters. The author of Ephesians borrows the analogy of Christ and the church, enjoining husbands to cherish wives as they would their own bodies, while wives submit to husbands as the church submits to Christ. Jesus, like Paul, identifies disciples or community members as siblings in a family focused on doing the will of the one heavenly Father. In Mark, Jesus prohibits divorce unequivocally, but in Matthew's gospel Jesus allows divorce under a single circumstance - adultery. In Matthew, certain disciples make themselves "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom" as unmarried examples of single-minded devotion to God, an idea that is absent from the other gospels. Married disciples in Matthew, Mark and Luke profess to have left wives, families,

professions and households to follow Jesus. In some passages, Jesus commands his would-be followers to repudiate family, wealth and property for the sake of the kingdom; in others, he commands individuals to return to family and community.

Thus the New Testament portrays a variety of ways in which the early believers became followers of Jesus in the differing circumstances of single, married, and community life. For us to isolate and commend one set of moral instructions over another fails to acknowledge the authority of the whole teaching. There is no unified teaching on marriage, divorce, households or families in the New Testament. Since we can find implicit commendations of differing patterns of life - or, if you will, New Testament "lifestyles" -- in various communities, it would seem imprudent to single out any one form of behavior as authoritative. All must be regarded as provisional, since other models might rightfully also derive their authority from the New Testament. Furthermore, a multiplicity of community and personal life patterns is explicitly warranted by Paul's celebration of the diversity that constitutes the Body of Christ. Similarly, the authority of the Gospel is self-limiting and self-defining through the very fact that the church has canonized four distinct, often irreconcilably different, and equally authoritative Gospel witnesses. It is very important to pay attention to the sociological and literary contexts of the gospels and Paul's letters. To understand Jesus' own household, the so-called "Holy Family" of Matthew's gospel, or the extended family of Luke, or the households from which disciples come, we need to take the contours of Roman households into account: husbands, wives, children, extended family members, slaves, and adopted children could and did characterize middle-sized households in outlying places of the empire, including Galilee. Family members also belonged to guilds in which members called each other "brothers." Literary context, on the other hand, shapes meaning and helps to interpret passages in light of a whole text. When we hear readings from the Old Testament, the epistles or the gospels, we are encountering only isolated fragments of a larger whole. It is important to know that the version of the Lord's Prayer closest to the one we say in worship today occurs in the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, the first extended teaching of Jesus in Matthew's gospel. Jesus teaches the disciples (and others who may have heard the sermon) a concise prayer, the praying of which brings the community of the Heavenly Father into being. Similarly, today we say the Lord's Prayer together in the eucharist just at the point before we receive communion. As part of the community of the Heavenly Father we say the Lord's Prayer together, petitioning God for the bread that sustains our lives. We may also visualize a literary description through art. An icon or painting called "The Holy Family in Egypt," depicting Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus in Mary's arms, may look like any husband, wife and child. I know it is Matthew because they are in Egypt, and so I can "read" this picture as a representation of Matthew's description of Joseph taking "the child and his mother" in and out of Egypt. In Matthew, Joseph is not the father of the child. The family may be holy, but it is not a husband, wife, and their child. Christian tradition has understood Matthew's wording to imply a distance between Joseph on the one hand and "the child and his mother" on the other. Thus, even if Joseph, Mary and her child look

like a family unit, deeper investigation reveals that a closer analogy to the Holy Family may be to a family in which the child is born of the mother with an adoptive father.

By contrast, depictions of the Holy Family in Luke do not locate the "family" in Egypt but portray the infant Jesus with an older child, John, and his mother Elizabeth. Luke's accounts of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus focus on the relationship of the cousins, Elizabeth and Mary, and their miraculous births; they include characters like Elizabeth and Zechariah, Anna and Simeon, who appear nowhere else in the New Testament. Luke's notion of an extended family is of a piece with his larger vocabulary for houses and households, including terms for inns and innkeepers, the verb "to receive as a guest," and descriptions of a household that would terrify most of us: father, mother, son, daughter, and daughter's mother-in-law. Luke describes large houses with domestic and outdoor servants, medium houses with a few slaves, and poorer houses without slaves of any kind.

Reading ancient texts like the gospels or letters of Paul is hard work. It's not just a question of investigating ancient sociological or literary contexts; it's a question of asking critical questions about bringing ancient texts to bear on modern realities. Our interrogation of ancient texts, more often than not, lays bare not so much the texts as our own presuppositions. But our fidelity to these texts and their authority for us makes it imperative that we continue to do it in full awareness of the provisional character of our readings and applications.

What does this look like in practice for twenty-first century Christians? If it looks like irreconcilably different worshippers gathered around the table of the Last Supper and celebrating salvation by Jesus Christ in vastly divergent patterns of life, is that not entirely congruent with the multiple witnesses presented in Scripture? Can we consciously and as a matter of policy exclude any member of the Body of Christ without damaging the whole? When I kneel side by side with someone whose construction of family looks radically different from mine, I witness to a God whose ways are not our ways, whose judgments cannot be limited by our finite understanding, whose generosity and creativity must not be circumscribed by our tiny hearts and minds.

Our decision to include all forms of family in the community of God may be misguided. Some configurations of family may be tares in the wheat of God's kingdom. But if, as Gamaliel said in Acts 5:38, "this plan or this undertaking is of human origin it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them." If we condemn, we contravene God's own commandments. The sure knowledge we have is that if we err on the side of generosity and magnanimity, we do not stray far from the nature of God, and we have a sure claim on God's forgiveness.