



Emily Hunter McGowin

# Households of Faith

Practicing Family in  
the Kingdom of God



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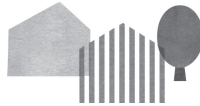
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# Searching for the Biblical Family



**I was twenty years old**, newly engaged to be married, and holding a thoughtful gift from my adoring fiancé. Why then was I crying? I had just finished the first few chapters of a book that claimed to explain what it really means to be a Christian wife, and for the first time in our two-year relationship, I was confronted with the prospect that I might not be able to conform to the wifely ideal my soon-to-be husband was expecting.

Nothing in our conversations thus far suggested we had different expectations. Yet this book offered a vision I found foreign and unfeasible. The author said I was to be entirely devoted to my husband's vocation, ready to drop everything to tend to his needs. The author said I was the God-ordained "keeper at home," someone whose focus was on the house and children, so that my husband's focus could be on his work. None of this made sense to me because I knew I was headed toward a future teaching theology, and I would be pursuing a PhD for that reason. How could I be the kind of wife this book was so confidently insisting I should be when my vocation seemed to work against it?

With some trepidation, I called my fiancé. I was wondering whether this conversation would be a turning point in

our relationship. Would he be okay with me rejecting this wifely ideal? Or would he insist that this was the way it had to be?

Though I had been a student of theology for a few years, that anxiety-filled moment was my first time truly grappling with the family blueprint of my evangelical tradition. A *family blueprint* is what I call any idealized model of the family that people are expected to emulate. There are many such family blueprints on offer in the world. The one with which I was wrestling was and is an especially pervasive and powerful model among evangelicals today. My fiancé and I heard it taught from pulpits and in Sunday school classes, it was reinforced in books and conferences, and it was even symbolized in our wedding gifts (where casserole dish covers were engraved with my name, not his).

Like many of my friends, I assumed the biblical family had a well-defined, long-established shape dictated by divine principles drawn from Scripture. An unspoken part of our future “I do,” then, was a mutual agreement to conform as much as possible to that “biblical” ideal. By properly imitating God’s design, we thought we would not only bear witness to God’s truth in Scripture, but also serve as a living sign of the gospel in the world. Also, we felt assured that this life would secure our family’s overall happiness and success.

And what is God’s design? The family blueprint I was given says that God created male and female to fulfill different roles. Adam and Eve are the archetypes for gender-based roles in marriage. Men tend and keep creation and women, their subordinate helpers, assist men in their work. Men work in the public sphere while women work in the private sphere. The result of sin entering the world is that women often try to usurp men’s authority and men tend to be domineering over women. Through our redemption in Christ, though, human beings can conform to God’s good purposes in marriage and family. The husband’s loving headship over his wife symbolizes Christ’s loving headship of the church, his bride, and the wife’s loving submission to the

husband symbolizes the church's loving submission to Christ (Eph 5:21-33).

In practice, the family blueprint I was taught said wives should take responsibility for the home and education of their children while husbands earn the household income and support their wives and children. Husbands are the "spiritual leaders" of the home. They exercise God-given authority over their wives and children, which they are supposed to express in self-sacrificing, Christlike love. Wives, on the other hand, are supposed to offer gracious submission to their husband's headship. Unusual circumstances might require both spouses to work outside the home, but that does not change the divine ideal. In fact, if wives submit graciously to their husband's leadership, then husbands will grow strong in their God-given role and children will flourish.

This family blueprint is derived from a particular way of telling the story of the Bible and it depends on a view of gender drawn from US culture and certain interpretations of Scripture. I have been interacting with this blueprint since I became a Christian in my teen years, but it wasn't until I saw it crystallized in a book written for me that I began to consider it might be wrong. Still, many Christians today are convinced the family blueprint I've described is not only the biblical family—the divinely ordained ideal for all—but also the traditional family, the form of family practiced for most of history.

### **The Family and Families**

We all have family blueprints in our background. Let's imagine a church in your neighborhood begins to promote a sermon series called "The Biblical Family." The church advertises the series through their website and marquee sign. They also send out glossy card stock mailers to every household within a two-mile radius listing the topics to be covered in these "practical and timely" messages. Now, take a moment and picture the images on their website and the mailer you pull out of your

mailbox. What does the family in the picture look like? Who is in the picture? What are they doing? And what topics would be included in the series?

If you were born and raised in the United States and shaped by Anglo-American culture, as I was, more than likely the image of “the biblical family” that surfaces in your mind is that of a smiling husband and wife and a couple of kids living in a single-family home in the suburbs. Maybe there’s a white picket fence and a dog too. Within such a vision of family, the sermons are likely to assume a middle-class standard of living, as well as a high degree of family independence. The sermon series, then, might include teaching on the roles and responsibilities of husbands, wives, and children, perhaps with special instruction on things like sex, parenting, and money management. Perhaps you’ve received preaching and teaching of this kind in your church before. It’s very common!

For those not born in the United States, however, or for those who have grown up primarily in non-Western cultures, family is not so limited a sphere. Non-Western visions of family include what many call extended family: grandparents and great-grand-parents, aunts and uncles, cousins, godparents, and maybe even longtime neighbors and friends. Non-Western notions of family often assume a high level of interdependence and prioritize the well-being of the extended family over the interests of the individual. A sermon series within this vision of family might include concerns not addressed by those who imagine family in a narrower way. Perhaps it would include messages on honoring elders’ wisdom, the value of tradition, caring for the next generation, and the submission of individual desires to family needs.

One such broader notion of family is portrayed in Disney’s *Encanto*. While there is far more to the story than just the size and scope of the family Madrigal, the vision of a large extended Colombian family living and learning together under one roof captured the imagination of millions. Westerners, especially, are

living in a time when social bonds appear to be loosening and communal trust is disintegrating, but *Encanto* portrays a close-knit, albeit imperfect, family caring for each other and seeking healing together. The appeal of such a story is not difficult to understand.

Acknowledging the differences between cultural notions of family, even just with respect to their size and scope, highlights the problem with any family talk. There's a difference between "The Family" as an abstract ideal and families as embodied, enculturated realities. There's a difference between the "Christian family" in theory and your family in practice—the complex, multifaceted texture of your life together. Yet, many of us have come to consider as natural and God-given what was really created in the nineteenth century: one male wage-earner, one female homemaker, a consumerist household, gender-role specification, and small family units that largely fend for themselves.<sup>1</sup> But what constitutes family and what family life looks like has varied considerably throughout history along with Christian teaching on family.<sup>2</sup>

Not only have many Christians assumed a family form that is by no means universal, but they often ignore the fact that families through the ages have been deeply impacted by sin—both inside and outside families. One reason I think *Encanto* has been so powerful is the unflinching way it portrays both the traditions and the traumas our families pass down. Just because a particular family form evolved over time does not mean that form is divinely approved. By no means! Not only that, but countless families through the centuries have been catastrophically sinned against, subjected to unjust situations that broke family bonds and destabilized communities with consequences that persist into the present. Theorizing about families without reference to such failures in Christian history is a grave error.

Where I live in North America many ways of practicing family have emerged through the years, all of which, in varying degrees,

reflect the ravages of sin on the most intimate of human relationships. I'll just describe a few. The Pueblo peoples of the Southwest had families in the seventeenth century in which kin loyalty, social obligation, and property rights were determined by the mother's bloodline, not the father's. Men moved into the homes of their wives after marriage, and the wife's father and brothers were vital to the children's upbringing—more so than the children's biological father. Such matrilineal households proved puzzling to Spanish Catholic missionaries when they arrived and sought to "civilize" Pueblo families through evangelization.

The marriages of enslaved Black persons in the pre-Civil War American South were often illegal, their families spanning multiple plantations. A couple's ability to reside together, let alone with their children, depended on the whims of their enslavers who had control over their lives and bodies. Enslaved women were regularly raped to produce more children born into lifelong slavery due to their mother's status, and enslaved husbands, if they happened to be nearby, risked torture and death if they dared protect their wives. Given hundreds of years' worth of oppression and violence, the ongoing resilience of African American marriages and families is remarkable.

Among slaveholding White southerners, on the other hand, the eldest patriarch had total control over his household, which would have included him and his wife, their children, their grandparents, enslaved people with their children, and sometimes the families of their adult children. All these fell under the patriarch's moral, legal, and financial jurisdiction. Though there was no doubt affection among family members, southern White plantation families were held together by a combination of honor-shame codes, coercion, and violence. This is not exactly what US Christians mean when they invoke "the traditional family," yet it was the norm for multiple generations.

Finally, White middle- and upper-class households in the post-Civil War period took the form many romanticize today:

a wage-earning father and stay-at-home mother who presides over her children and manages the household. The sign of a man's financial success in the industrial period was his ability to have a "kept woman" not required to work beyond the home. Of course, poor families were never able to attain this ideal. Irish Catholic immigrants, for instance, sought unsuccessfully to create "proper" families, but poverty and competition for labor often prevented them from marrying, or forced both spouses into paid labor. The immigrant neighborhood and parish church became the household's primary means of support.<sup>3</sup> The "traditional" family of the Victorian period, then, was only traditional for a small segment of the population.

What do these historical snippets tell us? All families have a context that inevitably shapes its form and practices for good and ill, and all families are impacted by sin and injustice, both inside and outside the household. The variety of families through the ages warns us against idealizing our experience and perception of family—something we're all prone to do. Just because our family, or the families around us, have taken a particular shape, doesn't mean it represents a universal standard (The Family) that applies to all peoples everywhere. In fact, our tendency to romanticize families of the past too often overlooks heinous evils hidden behind our soft-focused ideals. Without an awareness of our cultural embeddedness, Christians who seek to live in the light of God's revelation are apt to read our idealization of the family into the pages of Scripture and read it back out again as divine design. Our interpretation of Scripture then becomes the "biblical family" to which all Christian families are called to conform. It's too easy to become like Spanish colonizers scattering and brutalizing Pueblo families in the name of God.

For too long, many Christians have promoted an idealized cultural construct as the only faithful way to practice Christian family, but this family paradigm emerged during the Victorian period. It was later commodified and sold as biblical through

the medium of radio and television in the early twentieth century and then championed politically during the rise of the Religious Right in the 1970s and '80s. It's past time, therefore, that we take a critical look at what we've been offered all these years. Perhaps we'll see that Scripture doesn't say all that we've been told it says, and perhaps the so-called biblical family is more beholden to Western European history and culture than it is to the Bible. Indeed, the sermon series at the church down the street, as well as the podcasts and books it produces, may assume things about family that are neither good nor true.

### What Is the Biblical Family?

Ah, but one might object: all these historical forms of family failed to live up to God's design—sin and injustice prevented them from doing so—but that doesn't mean there isn't a design. Fair enough. Where then are we given the design for this "biblical family"?

The Bible, which is Spirit-inspired and trustworthy in all it teaches, tells a lot of stories about families. But telling stories about families is not the same as providing a model of family. The Bible provides wisdom and instruction about family relationships—husbands and wives, parents and children, fathers and sons, and more. But Spirit-inspired wisdom does not translate into a family ideal, nor are all trustworthy instructions directly transferable into the twenty-first century context.

This is not to say the Bible is not relevant—it is! "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). But what exactly is being taught, rebuked, and corrected is not unambiguous when we move from the world of the text to the world of today. As Anglo-American scholar John Walton has often said, "Scripture is written *for* us but not *to* us." To move from the text in the past to the world in the present requires good hermeneutics—the careful work of interpreting, explaining, and applying the words of Scripture to

our contemporary moment. When we are careful with our hermeneutics, we realize the Bible includes much that could be relevant to a theology of families, but not all of it can be easily or neatly harmonized.

### **Families in the Old Testament**

Many Christians point to Genesis 1–2 for the divine design, which depicts the creation of man and woman and their vocation in the Garden of Eden. I will address Genesis in more depth later, but for now I'll simply point out there is no reference to prescribed roles in Genesis 1–2, nor is there any delineation of gender-based spheres. Instead, what is affirmed is that male and female share God's image, share human flesh, and share a vocation, and the first couple dwelled in Eden—a place from which they are exiled in the very next chapter, never to return. Whatever might be gleaned about the relationship between wives and husbands from Genesis 1–2, it is not a blueprint for families who now live as Eden's exiles.

In the rest of the Hebrew Bible, families are central to the overarching story of God's covenant relationship with Israel. Jewish kinship was arranged by tribe, clan, and family. Tribe pertained mainly to territorial organization—that is, the land apportioned to the twelve tribes—but clan and family pertained most directly to daily life. One married within one's clan and worked in households to care for the land, resources, and people on it. The strongest source of identity was the "father's house," made up of all the descendants of the living male ancestor, except for married daughters who left to join their husbands' families.

In such an extended family, fifty to a hundred people might live together in a cluster of homes with shared spaces for cooking and socializing. Interdependence was vital for the family's survival, and the propagation of children was central. The cultivation of land and livestock, the maintenance of property and water rights, the establishment and strengthening of social ties, the

preservation of a covenant relationship with God, the communication of faith, history, laws, and rituals—all this and more was bound up in one's progeny.<sup>4</sup> Children, then, were the flesh-and-blood sign of God's promise to bless and multiply his people. As a result, childlessness was viewed as a curse, a state to be pitied and avoided at all costs (Gen 30:1-22; 1 Sam 1; Deut 25:5-10). To be blessed with many children, especially sons, was God's blessing (Ps 127:3-5; 128:3-6), and one's descendants were how one's life endured after death (Gen 48:16; 2 Sam 18:18).

It's no surprise then that the story of Israel is in large part the story of Israel's families. None of Israel's notable families, however, could be credibly held up as examples. Take, for instance, the family of Sarah and Abraham, the matriarch and patriarch of Israel's faith. God forges a covenant with Abraham, leading him and his household out of Ur and into the land of Canaan. God promises he will bless and multiply Abraham's descendants so that they will outnumber the stars in the sky (Gen 12:1-9). Still, Abraham and Sarah's childlessness unto advanced age seems to present a serious barrier to God's promise. On two occasions Abraham's fear in foreign lands leads him to pretend Sarah is his sister to the point that she is taken into the harems of other men (Gen 12:10-20; 20:1-18). Though Sarah is rescued in both cases, these incidents further endanger the possibility of Abraham's promised heir.

Eventually, Abraham and Sarah take it upon themselves to make another way. Sarah gives her enslaved Egyptian woman, Hagar, to Abraham as a surrogate, and Hagar is forced to become a concubine in Abraham's family. Though God is faithful to Hagar, offering her protection and a promise to her and her descendants, she and Ishmael are eventually expelled at Sarah's insistence. In the end, despite their flaws and failures, Sarah conceives and bears a son, Isaac, through whom the rest of Abraham's descendants come.

We could also talk about Isaac's sons, Esau and Jacob, both of whom take multiple wives. As a result, they produce considerably

more children than a single husband-wife union usually would. In the case of Jacob, we know the polygamous family yielded numerous conflicts and sibling rivalries, most famously between Joseph (the son of Rachel) and his brothers (the sons of Leah, Zilpah, and Bilhah). The whole book of Genesis relates story after story about the conflictual families descending from Sarah and Abraham, but they are decidedly not held up as examples to emulate. Instead, the focus of Genesis is God's covenant faithfulness to Abraham's descendants despite their innumerable failures. If you're looking for a family blueprint, you won't find it in the patriarchs.

The same could be said of the many other families whose stories are told in the Hebrew Bible. The stories of the kings, especially Saul, David, and Solomon, and their respective families feature prominently. God makes promises to them, too, even forming an eternal covenant with David that is eventually fulfilled in Jesus. But are the families of Saul, David, and Solomon paradigms to imitate? Definitely not. All engage in polygamy, and none are exemplary fathers (not even good-enough fathers!). Though David is described as "a man after God's own heart" (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22), he makes grievous mistakes and causes terrible suffering for those under his power. And there's no denying that his family is deeply disordered (see, for example, 2 Sam 13). In their stories of rape, rebellion, and murder, David's children demonstrate the ineligibility of the Davidic family for idealization. There's no family blueprint here either.

The Law, Wisdom literature (like Proverbs and Job), and the Prophets offer teaching on family that stands in stark contrast to the disorder we see in the historical books. Rather than stories, these texts offer rules of governance, wise instruction, and exhortation to return to the Lord's ways. Children are exhorted to listen to and obey their parents so that their lives might be long and prosperous. Parents are encouraged to teach and discipline their children faithfully. Wives and husbands are warned away from behavior that creates disorder and undermines the household.

Perhaps most memorable is the exhortation of Deuteronomy 6:4-9:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Later in the same passage, the lawgiver says: "In the future, when your son asks you, 'What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?' tell him: 'We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand'" (Deut 6:20-21). In other words, it is the responsibility of parents to teach their children God's story and the covenant obligations of God's people. To do so, God's law is to be part of the structure of daily life: discussed at home, on the road, lying down, getting up, and more. The expectation is that faithfulness to the Lord will be passed on within families, from older generations to younger.

Even so, none of the instructions found in the Law, Wisdom literature, or the Prophets provide a clear *structure* of family to which God's people are expected to conform. How to live within their families? Yes. What form the family must take? No. Rather, the Hebrew Bible assumes the form of family that was most common in their historical and cultural context—one that is patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal—and offers wisdom about how to live faithfully within it.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the emphasis of the Hebrew Bible is decidedly on the family's *function* rather than its form.

## Families in the New Testament

Compared to the Old Testament, the New Testament spends little time on families as such. The first-century context that forms the background to the Gospels and Epistles was influenced by both Greco-Roman culture and Jewish practice. In the Greco-Roman world, the family was a hierarchically arranged social institution. Practically speaking, it was organized mainly for the benefit of male elders and social elites. One's access to material and social goods—everything from food to education to marriage partners—depended entirely on conformity to prescribed roles, which were dictated by one's class and gender. The behavior of family members was governed by an honor-shame system where male honor depended on the protection and enforcement of women's modesty and chastity. Within this family system, one's identity was primarily familial and only secondarily individual.<sup>6</sup>

The Gospels tell stories about Jesus' birth into a family. Mary and Joseph submit to the Law's requirements for their son (Lk 2:22-38) and flee the country to protect him from Herod's murderous rage (Mt 2:13-23). Luke's Gospel contains the only story we have of Jesus as an adolescent. In it, he confounds his parents by remaining behind in Jerusalem with the teachers in the temple (Lk 2:41-52). Once an adult, Jesus exalts children as exemplary recipients of the God's kingdom and models for discipleship (Mt 18:1-5; 19:13-15; 21:14-16; Mk 9:33-37; 10:13-16; Lk 18:15-17). But families are more ambiguous in Jesus' teaching. Jesus never dissolves biological kinship or its obligations, but he certainly reorders biological kinship under the higher and more important calling of loyalty to him and his kingdom. Jesus never puts forward an ideal to which he expects families to conform. On the contrary, his example and teaching are destabilizing to those who want to shore up a family form, including prescribed gender-based roles.

The Acts of the Apostles speaks of households being converted, but again offers little direction to families as such. The

sermons of the apostles don't speak to how families ought to conduct themselves apart from Peter's assurance that the promise of God is "for you and your children and for all who are far off" (Acts 2:39). Still, the families that appear in Acts are revelatory of the cultural expression of family in first-century Palestine.

For example, in Acts 10 Peter is summoned to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Cornelius "and all his family were devout and God-fearing," and he requests Peter's visit at the behest of an angelic message (Acts 10:2). Upon arriving at Cornelius's home, Peter announces the good news of Jesus Christ, his life, death, and resurrection (Acts 10:34-43), and while Peter is still preaching, the Holy Spirit descends on the gathered listeners (Acts 10:44). Based on their reception of the Spirit, Cornelius and his household, along with relatives and friends in attendance, are baptized (Acts 10:24, 48).

Later, on the outskirts of the city of Philippi, the apostle Paul and Silas meet Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from Thyatira (Acts 16:11-14). As they speak with her, "the LORD opened her heart to respond to Paul's message" (Acts 16:14), and she comes to faith in Christ. As a result, "she and the members of her household were baptized," and Lydia welcomes Paul and Silas into her home (Acts 16:15).

While staying in Philippi, Paul and Silas are wrongly imprisoned on the pretense of disturbing the peace and advocating unlawful customs (Acts 16:20-21), but they are miraculously delivered from bondage by an earthquake. When the terrified jailer realizes what has happened, a dramatic conversion takes place:

Then [the jailer] brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. (Acts 16:30-33 NRSV)

In each of these stories, Gentiles and their households come to faith in Christ, and the families of Cornelius, Lydia, and the Philippian jailer did not look like the Western nuclear family today. Rather, their household (*domus*) would have included the head of house (usually the oldest male relative or *paterfamilias*) and spouse (if there was one), any children, stepchildren, or adopted children, aged parents (if they were still alive), enslaved persons with their children, and possibly some free persons working in the family business. They also would've had family gods, which were expected to be served by all in the household. So, when the religious allegiance of the head of house changed, the religious allegiance of the entire household changed. The shift in religious commitment resulted in the entire family receiving baptism, the sign of their collective repentance and God's promise to include them in the new covenant community.

Only once we get to Paul's epistles do we encounter the first passages that read like a family blueprint—and this is certainly how they've been interpreted by many. After all, the epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians contain a section often called "the household codes," and the pastoral epistles include specific instructions regarding the families of overseers.<sup>7</sup> But such instructions are tempered by Paul's clear preference for celibacy (1 Cor 7:7-8). If unmarried or widowed Christians find celibacy too great a burden, he says they are free to marry (1 Cor 7:9), yet he affirms the single state is best for unhindered service in God's kingdom (1 Cor 7:32-35). In fact, Paul says each person should remain in the state in which they were called because "this world in its present form is passing away" (1 Cor 7:31).

Based on the imminent return of Christ, Paul says singleness is preferable and significant alterations to one's social status, occupation, and living conditions are unnecessary. This means that even in the case of slavery, which assuredly goes against the neighbor love and one-body-reconciliation to which Christ calls us, Paul does not insist on abolition or outright manumission.

Rather, he teaches how enslaved persons can live for the Lord amid their present condition, and how enslavers ought to treat slaves in view of the gospel.

What does all this mean for passages of Paul's writings that talk about families? Just as in the case of slavery, Paul's instructions for husbands, wives, and children do not entail an endorsement of his audience's family structure or their gender-based roles. Rather, Paul assumes the existence of the *paterfamilias* and then counsels believers how to live within it under Christ's present lordship and imminent return. Paul's instructions to husbands, wives, children, and slaves pertain not to a divine, universal design, either for families or for slavery, but rather how to live faithfully in allegiance to Christ within one's current state. In other words, Paul was not answering the question: What is the proper structure for the Christian family or household? Rather, Paul was answering the question: How should Christians live in their current social situations in light of Christ's current lordship and soon return? Even in the so-called household codes, Paul isn't offering a family blueprint.

Discerning the so-called biblical family is much harder than it appears. Much Christian teaching today assumes a family model that is not clearly outlined in Scripture. Read on its own terms (for us but not to us), the Bible does not offer a paradigm of the family for its readers to emulate. Instead, it assumes the existence of families in various forms and settings, and offers stories, wisdom, ethics, and theology for understanding and living within those families today.

### **Discerning and Improvising Family**

Let me be clear: I am not saying there isn't a transcendent, divine purpose for families. I think there is! But for now, let's take a deep breath and loosen our grip on the language of "biblical family" or "traditional family." Most of the time, what we mean by those terms is not something the Bible teaches but a set of contextually

constructed norms. Such norms emerged over time through a variety of political, social, and economic circumstances, but they have been turned into universal “biblical” ideals, which are then used to regulate people and behavior.

Besides, what makes us think that the goal of the Christian life is to mimic scripturally sourced models? Yes, Paul invites his churches to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1), and Jesus commands us explicitly to follow him and learn from him (Mt 11:28-30), but the Bible does not provide neat and tidy blueprints or roadmaps, whether for families or friendships or work or government. (If it did, perhaps Christians wouldn’t spend so much time fighting over the details of how God wants us to live!) The nature of Christian discipleship defies such an approach. One thing shared by the people the church calls “saints” is their ability to live faithfully and creatively within their circumstances in light of God’s revelation and church teaching.

So, the goal of Christian discipleship is *not* conformity to a divine blueprint. Rather, the goal of Christian discipleship is to obey Jesus’ command to “Follow me!” by imitating him in the Spirit’s power with God’s people in our current setting. In short, we must discern and improvise. To *discern* is to figure out what time it is and how we ought to live given what time it is. Canadian-American philosopher James K. A. Smith says it this way: “Discernment in the midst of history is our central burden: listening for the beat, feeling for the tempo so we can keep time with the Spirit.”<sup>8</sup> To *improvise* is to produce something from whatever is available to us in the moment. Jesus is the ultimate exemplar for our lives, of course, but the pattern he gives us will inevitably be repeated differently in our unique situations. And we can only improvise faithfully as we are filled with the Spirit of Christ.<sup>9</sup> Both discernment and improvisation require effort, intentionality, and practice, and both are essential to following Jesus as individuals and families today.

After my disorienting encounter with “Christian wifehood,” I finally got Ronnie on the phone to discuss things. He was

surprised by my tears. As he listened patiently, out tumbled all my concerns about the book, about me, and about our future marriage. I ended through sobs: “I just don’t think I can be this kind of wife. I’m worried you’re marrying the wrong person!” His response was gentle but decisive: “Honey, I bought that book because I thought it would be encouraging to you. Obviously, I didn’t read it, and it’s not. If it’s not workable, if it seems wrong for us, then trash it. We’ll just make it up as we go along.”

His words turned out to be prophetic. We have been discerning and improvising ever since. We had to discern and improvise when we discovered two months into the first semester of my PhD program that I was expecting a second child. After weeks of prayer, soul searching, and tears, we decided the best thing would be for Ronnie to take a part-time position to make caring for our children his full-time job. He was imitating Christ by emptying himself, taking on the form of servant in unselfish love for me and my dream (Phil 2:7). Did this conform to the family blueprint we were told to follow? Definitely not. But it was the wisest, healthiest decision for our family—and we have no regrets.

We had to discern and improvise again when we moved our family to Denver after my teaching contract ended and my PhD was nearing completion. I couldn’t find work teaching in higher education, but Ronnie was invited to help plant a church. So, I took a full-time job in the private sector, putting my research skills to work in commercial property development while writing and applying for academic jobs on the side. For the first time we were a single-income family, and I was the sole breadwinner. Ronnie helped found a church and took care of our school-age children while I worked outside the home. Now it was my turn to deny myself to make sure our family was provided for while Ronnie pursued his dream. Did this conform to the family blueprint we were taught? Again, definitely not. But there’s no doubt it was the right thing for us at that time.

Then, like so many other families, we had to discern and improvise again in the spring of 2020 when our state implemented a stay-at-home order amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Ronnie was serving as interim pastor to a small, mainly elderly church, and I was in my second year of teaching theology at Wheaton College. Suddenly, we had a month, which turned into three months, which turned into a full year, of working from home while the kids did school from home. There was no blueprint for how to do that. So, through trial and error, we worked together to assemble a schedule and assign duties that would allow each of us to do our work and maintain our sanity. It wasn't perfect, by any means, but we managed to get through that difficult year and a half with our sense of humor and mutual affection intact.

For over twenty years, Ronnie and I have been doing our best to follow Jesus by imitating him in the Spirit's power with God's people in our current setting. I don't want to suggest our way of doing things is the best way or the only way—and that's precisely the point. I realize that compared to the family blueprint many of us were brought up with, discernment and improvisation may sound alarmingly loosey-goosey. But gospel-fueled discernment and improvisation are what most healthy Christian families have been doing through the centuries without even recognizing it, and discernment and improvisation are what God's people have been doing with various degrees of success and failure since the church's earliest days.

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