

When *the* Church Was A Family, Joseph H. Hellerman, B & H Publishing, 2009
The Ancient Church As Family, Joseph H. Hellerman, Augsburg Fortress, 2001

Reviewed by Stephen Kemp, 8/25/2011 (revised 3/29/2016)

“It is hardly accidental that the New Testament writers chose the concept of family as the central social metaphor to describe the kind of interpersonal relationships that were to characterize those early Christian communities. There is, in fact, no better way to come to grips with the spiritual and relational poverty of American individualism than to compare our way of doing things with the strong-group, surrogate family relations of early Christianity. This is the central focus of this book.” From the introduction of When *the* Church Was A Family by Joseph H. Hellerman.

“The centrality of the family matrix for early Christian social organization calls for a careful examination of the nature of family in Mediterranean antiquity and the appropriation of the surrogate family model on the part of the early Christians. This leads to the subject matter of this book. I will demonstrate in the following pages that the ancient Mediterranean family provided the dominant social model for many of the early Christian congregations. Specifically, local churches understood themselves to constitute surrogate patrilineal kinship groups, and local leaders expected their members to behave in a manner consonant with such a model of interpersonal relationships.” From Chapter 1 of The Ancient Church As Family by Joseph H. Hellerman.

This review must begin with a disclaimer. I read these books because I had already come to similar conclusions as the author on the basis of what I consider to be biblically normative teaching. I hoped that they would help me deepen my convictions through additional substantive research in Scripture, church history, and sociology. The essence of the church as “a family of families” (or better, “a household of households”) is already expressed as a foundational concept in the *First Principles of the Faith* discipleship resources and *Leadership Series* courses of BILD International and the Antioch School of Church Planting and Leadership Development, ministries with which I am associated. These books did much more than provide data that back-filled my understanding of the church as family. They significantly enhanced my understanding by forcing me to sharpen my thinking in many areas, both as a scholar and a practitioner of the church as family.

Interestingly, I read these books on a trip to India (and even wrote the review on the return trip) because I was eager to benefit from the extended isolated focus that you can have during an international flight. However, my focus on these books extended far beyond reading them on a plane. I found myself vigorously recommending this book to leaders of church planting movements all over India. As it seems that God is currently pouring out His Spirit in a special way in India, particularly in North India, these leaders have the opportunity to shape the future of the church. It is my sincere hope that they take seriously the normative biblical teaching that is explained so clearly and effectively by Hellerman in these books. Entire church movements may depend on it. Other church planting movements have derailed because of pragmatic adoption of Western evangelical models and ideas rather than doing fresh theology-in-culture built on serious consideration of the biblical authors’ intentions of normative teaching that transcends culture.

The significance of these books is implied in their titles, particularly in the bold yet subtle claim of the title “When *the* Church Was A Family.” Although it is easy to overlook it on the book cover, “the” and

“a” are italicized, stating that the church “was family” in its essence, not just “like a family” in some of its characteristics. Don’t minimize the significance of this implication. In the final chapter of one book, Hellerman powerfully makes the point. “Here, finally, is the rub, is it not? When we define Christian community in such a way as to embrace the biblical teaching about relational solidarity, while at the same time rejecting the robust boundaries we see reflected in early Christian literature, we are left with nothing but an emasculated, localized, postmodern, Western version of ‘community’ that bears little resemblance to the surrogate family model of the ancient Christian church, and which is actually no longer worthy of the name Christian at all” (WCWF, p. 219). I concur that the stakes are indeed this high, both for the church in the West and the emerging (as distinct from Emergent) church in places like India.

One may have a tendency to think about The Ancient Church As Family (ACAF) as a thorough presentation and analysis of the data and When the Church Was A Family (WCWF) as a popularized version, particularly because ACAF is drawn from Hellerman’s dissertation and WCWF makes consistent illustration in and application to Hellerman’s church. However, this would do a grave disservice to the contributions of the books. The illustrations and applications to Hellerman’s church provide substantial additional analysis and insight, particularly as they are connected with the much more substantive critique of Western evangelical culture that is found in WCWF, such as rejection of the false common hierarchical prioritization of God/Family/Church/Others (pp. 73-74) and comparison of the ancient Mediterranean concept of family as group with the Western emphasis on individual autonomy and Western evangelical concept of salvation as personal conversion. ACAF does more analysis of biblical and historical data, but WCWF does much more analysis of ecclesiology in both abstract and practical forms. Thus, it is crucial that one read both books, not just one to benefit fully from Hellerman’s contribution.

It should also be noted that these books are especially readable for works based on so much data. This is particularly true of WCWF. Its illustrations and applications don’t feel tagged on, but are well edited and fit rather seamlessly into the more direct treatment of the data.

Framework of the Books

The framework of ACAF begins with a consideration of “Christianity in Its Social Environment” that explores evidence of the characteristics of various voluntary associations and concludes that the family is “the dominant social model” (p. 25) for church. Chapter 2 “Mediterranean Family Systems: Structure and Relationships” thoroughly examines kinship in terms of a “patrilineal descent group” (commitment to ancestral bloodlines rather than relationships of an individual) giving special attention to the sociological understanding of family in the historical context of the events of the early church and the writings of the New Testament. The rest of the book explores the church as family according to its origins as found in Judaism, Jesus’ teaching, and the Qumran community (Chapter 3), the letters of Paul (Chapter 4), second century Christian writers such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus (Chapter 5), and North African Christianity as expressed in *Passion of Perpetua* and the writings of Tertullian and Cyprian (Chapter 6). Chapter 7 provides a brief summary of the highly corporate nature of the ancient family and the priority of the sibling bond, but also a substantial fresh evaluation of the significance of the ancient church as family rhetoric and family praxis.

A similar framework is used for the first part of WCWF while it integrates its analysis of biblical data, early church history, and sociological perspectives with contemporary illustrations and applications, especially from the author's own church experience. Chapter 1 "The Group Comes First" introduces the sociological concept of family as being group-oriented rather than individual-oriented, while Chapter 2 "Family in the New Testament World" focuses on the manifestation of family as group in the ancient Mediterranean context for the early church and New Testament writings. Chapter 3 "Jesus' New Group" deals with data from the Gospels about Jesus' teaching about family, including his hard teachings such as "I came to turn a man against his father" in Mark 10, and Chapter 4 "The Churches of Paul" deals with data from Paul's letters including analysis of the data and strategy of use of family terminology. Chapter 5 "The Church in the Roman World" explores the role and concept of family as expressed in the writings of the early church, as well as writings of some of the enemies of the early church.

The second part of WCWF addresses matters of crucial importance for contemporary Western evangelical culture, such as "Salvation as a Community-Creating Event" (Chapter 6), "Life Together in the Family of God" (Chapter 7), "Decision Making in the Family of God" (Chapter 8), "Leadership in the Family of God" (Chapter 9), and a Conclusion that both summarizes and stimulates the reader to implementation because "our friends and neighbors" (and maybe we ourselves) ". . . have never experienced church as we see it functioning in early Christianity" (p. 224).

Key Contributions

Hellerman has made numerous contributions to our understanding of the nature of the church. First, he has provided a solid sociological foundation built on biblical data and normative teaching, early church history, and ancient Mediterranean understanding of family (including 38 pages of endnotes and 12 pages of bibliography) without going overboard and letting sociology trump biblical and historical data. I affirm Hellerman's claim that "This is the first study, to my knowledge, however, that has sought to carefully construct a structural and behavioral model of the ancient Mediterranean family and then utilize the model as a grid with which to understand a broad sampling of conceptions about Christian community, from the time of Jesus of Nazareth to the mid-third century C.E." (ACAF, p. 213). Hellerman has not just made a significant contribution, but has made a very substantial foundational contribution through his extensive treatment of biblical and historical data, even drawing evidence from the statements of enemies of the early church (ACAF, pp. 127ff). One can only hope that he continues his work in order to produce an even more extensive presentation of his research that seems to be nearly exhaustive.

Not only does Hellerman present extensive treatment of the data and his analysis, he provides several great charts to capture his presentation in graphic forms that are much more effective than narrative (which ironically is what I am using to describe his charts). For instance, his chart comparing the characteristics of various forms of voluntary association makes extremely clear the specialness of the church as family. Similarly, his comparisons of how we related to God make abundantly clear the strengths and weaknesses of how we view church as family. Further, the chart correcting our incorrect prioritization of God/Family/Church/Others with God's prioritization of God's Family/My Family/Others (WCWF, pp. 165-6) clearly addresses a popular concept that may not even be articulated very often, but controls our participation in church, namely that we generally fail to see the manner in which "my family" is truly intertwined with "God's family."

There are numerous individual pieces of insight regarding the church as family that are noteworthy in addition to the range and magnitude of his research. For instance, most of us dismiss the injunction to

“greet one another with a holy kiss” as just a cultural expression of affection. Hellerman suggests on the basis of author’s intent that the purpose of this injunction in 1 Corinthians 16:20 is to maintain (and restore as necessary) concord within a family prone to discord (WCWF, p. 79). Similarly, the commands in 1 Corinthians 6 are seen with much more meaning when you see the issue as litigation within a family not just a community (ACAF, pp. 104-5). Tolerance of divorce in 1 Corinthians 7 (“let it be so” and “is not bound”) is explained as “the priority of sibling loyalty over spousal loyalty” (ACAF, pp. 107-8). One fascinating historical reference is Cyprian’s blaming the church’s failure to be a family as the cause of a widespread persecution (ACAF, p. 209).

A truly noteworthy dimension of Hellerman’s research is the analysis of biblical and early church writers based on rhetorical strategy using family terminology. The data alone is interesting as one sees the enormity and widespread use of family terminology, but Hellerman claims that it is much more than just incidental language. For instance, he makes that case that the density of terminology in correlates with Paul’s intention to deal with family discord (with the highest proportion being in Philemon (ACAF, p. 119). The lack of density of family terminology in Philippians correlates with the fact that Paul does not have concerns with their status as a church family, even though the church is a positive reflection of the family model Paul values (ACAF, p. 124).

Hellerman engages effectively with other scholarly conversations. For instance, he presents the case made by others that the emphasis on church as family was mere rhetoric on the part of leaders to manipulate and control followers. His response climaxes with consideration of the evidence that comes from the statements of those enemies of the early church. Rather than criticize its leaders for manipulation, they deride the community on the basis of its activities as a family group who ridiculously care for one another more than their own families.

The lack of serious work in this regard and the fact that our conceptual framework is so different than “the ubiquitous nature of the evidence,” (ACAF, p. 223) should lead us to not underestimate how much most of us read our Western evangelical ideas of family into New Testament teaching. Hellerman helps us to understand what is lost when a Western emphasis on democratic individualism trumps the ancient and biblical concept of group. Perhaps this is most pointedly expressed in his sociological and biblical treatment of the priority over sibling relationships (based on bloodline) over relationships made by individual choice, such as modern marriage. He deals straightforwardly with Jesus’ commands to leave one’s family and follow Him. Hellerman exposes our largely unexplored presuppositions and moves us toward more appropriate understandings and applications of biblical teaching about the church as family.

Hellerman adds tremendous depth from which to evaluate the legitimacy of the increasingly popular tendencies to claim legitimacy based on fairly shallow understandings of the nature and practices of the early church. While the author expresses affinity with many aspects of the Emergent Church (WCWF, pp. 9-12), it is clear that the depth and authenticity of the early church as family goes much farther than is expressed in the use of arts in most Emergent Church worship services. Similarly, much of the house church movement has been implemented on the basis of very Western evangelical concepts of family. Both groups would be helped tremendously by focusing on the actual teaching and practice of church as family in the early church.

Concerns and Issues to Explore Further

An unfortunate consequence in making a pioneering contribution, such as Hellerman has done in these two books, is that gaps in the data and analysis are likely to be present. It is in taking seriously Hellerman's work that some of these additional matters become evident. Thus, my concerns are really just expressions of my desire to continue on the path that he has blazed. The idea of church as family (properly understood) is of utmost importance.

As I read the books, there were a few pieces of data that were conspicuously missing. For instance, I wonder why there is not a single reference in either book to 1 Peter 4:17 which uses the phrase "family (or household of God)." I consider this to be the single-most direct reference to the foundational concept of church as family. The only rationale that I can come up with is that Hellerman was focusing on the Gospels and Pauline Epistles, not the General Epistles. Yet, in works characterized by such extensive data, I would have expected at least some reference to 1 Peter 4:17.

Hellerman focused on the uses of family terminology that are metaphors for the church. However, he only seems to mention the biblical non-metaphorical uses of family terminology when they are in reference to the metaphorical uses, such as discussion of marriage. He doesn't seem to recognize the essential integration of the metaphorical and non-metaphorical uses. In other words, the teaching of the "household texts" (Ephesians 5-6, Colossians 3, 1 Peter 4) is not something separate from the church as a metaphorical family, but essentially intertwined with what a church family is. This is made particularly clear when you dig deep into the instructions to husbands, wives, children, parents, and even masters and slaves. The explanations for wives submitting, husbands loving, children obeying, father not exasperating is directly related to the nature of the church. Wives submit as unto the Lord. Husband love in order to make wives pure like Christ did for the church. Children obey because of a promise (generational blessing). Fathers don't exasperate because they are to raise children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Even though these instructions may be based in God's design for the family, in most cases, they explicitly address God's design for the church family.

Similarly, there is no emphasis on terminology that draws on the family concept of relationships without using family terminology, such as older men/younger men, older women/younger women. In most of the world where family as group is practiced, such as India, they have deeply rooted patterns of referring to older men as "uncle" and older women as "auntie." I think this is what Paul had in mind with his references. And when we examine the instructions that are given to the older men and older women in particular, we see that it includes instruction on how to be a good member of a non-metaphorical family, namely older women teaching younger women how to be godly wives, even in relation to unbelieving husbands (1 Peter 3). The fundamental notion of intergenerationality of a church is expressed not only in parental relationships, but also the normal relationships of older to younger.

The master/slave relationship is a little harder for us to grasp as contemporary Westerners, but it is also clear in most parts of the world where family as group is part of the culture. It is common to have members of the household who have no direct family relationship. Thus, I think it is better to refer to the concept of church as household, not church as family. Further, use of the term household helps us rise above our Western evangelical tendency to think of the biblical references in terms of Western nuclear family.

Still further, there is little reference in Hellerman's two books to some of the other explicit non-metaphorical instructions in the Bible, such as those about widows and elders "who manage their households well." Once you embrace the idea of church as household, you very naturally make the connections between family needs and church needs. Paul doesn't dismiss the role of non-metaphorical

family just because the church is a metaphorical family. Biological families are still first in order of responsibility for the care of widows (1 Tim. 5), much like the role of older men and women doesn't trump the role of parents.

The concept of the church as household also helps us to understand and appreciate Paul's guidelines for church leaders, such as for elders to "manage their own households well" and be "husbands of one wife." The fact that churches predominantly met in homes during the historical period addressed by Hellerman in his books makes it even more relevant to think about the qualifications of church leaders in terms of household abilities. While most discussion of women keeping silent in the church has been focused on patriarchal complimentarianism versus egalitarianism, the passages themselves connect the instructions with false teaching. When one recognizes the critical role of women as benefactors making their homes available and their households suitable for gatherings of the church, you see how important it was for women to learn, not just "be silent." If the churches are to be strong, the women who are hosts for the meetings of the church need to be strong. While this may not satisfactorily address the concerns of egalitarians, it does help us see the instructions, even for "weak women" was not to keep them weak, but related to helping them be strong in their roles as leading women in the early church, much like is described in Proverbs 31, 1 Tim. 3, Titus 2, and exemplified by Phoebe and Priscilla.

The importance of the household as a reality, not just a metaphor, is exemplified in the manner of expansion of the church. Not only were there millions of believers by the end of the fourth century, but the gatherings of the metaphorical household of God were almost exclusively in the actual homes of benefactors. The concept of church as family and its expression in the real homes of real families seems to have been keys to the dramatic expansion of the early church in fulfillment of the Great Commission. Further, the meal may be much more defining that Hellerman indicates (ACAF, pp. 6-8). If the church is a family and if a church meets in homes, then it is not surprising that the early church often even referred to its weekly gathering as "the Lord's supper."

The flexibility of the metaphorical use of family terminology may reach its apex in 1 Thess. 2 where Paul refers to himself with terms and imagery as Timothy's father, mother, and brother within a span of eleven verses. The significance of the church as family is not limited to individual local (modal) expressions, but extends to network (sodal) expressions. Sodal apostolic leaders not only frequented the homes of modal leaders and church family members, but family terminology was used to describe the relationship of those sodal leaders to various local churches in the apostolic network, such as Paul's relationship to the churches of Corinth and Philippi.

Lastly, I have a few comments that I think reflect on the author's presuppositions that are not particularly related to the church as family. For instance, Hellerman seems to make references to "American" and "U.S." rather interchangeably. I have used the term "Western evangelical" in this review because I think it more accurately fits what we are describing. There are plenty of exceptions to "American individualism," particularly among the poor and non-white ethnic groups of America. In my mind, Hellerman's critique is most helpful when we envision Western evangelicalism which is characterized not just by American individualism, but also the American dream and middle-to-upper-middle-class values of mostly white suburban and rural America.

I also wondered sometimes whether Hellerman was overly enamored with the concept of family as group rather than individual, particularly in WCWF. There were many statements that relished in the idea of family as group being better than family as individual, without going further to describe what

was particularly better (or different) in the church family than the generic ancient Mediterranean family concept.

It is possible that Hellerman may be misunderstood and/or quoted out of context regarding the priority of the commitment of siblings over marriage spouses. To say that one is more deeply rooted than the other is not to say that either one is shallow. The fact is that it is a much bigger deal to abandon your kin than divorce your spouse. This in no way minimizes the commitment of married partners, but it does do justice to the statements in the New Testament that make provision for continuation in the church family despite broken marriage relationships. For the spouse married to an unbeliever, it is just a matter of time until they will be eternally separated.

Emphasis on kinship defined by bloodline in the ancient Mediterranean concept of family seems to be weakened in several ways at important points in the books. For instance, Hellerman concludes ACAF with a statement about “the social matrix most central to early Christian conceptions of community was the surrogate kinship group of siblings” (p. 225) as the central conception of the “sons and daughters of the early church,” but siblings are just one major expression of key relationships in a family. The strong emphasis on horizontal family relationships (siblings) and almost entirely absent emphasis on vertical family relationships (parents, uncles/aunts) suggests that Hellerman has let his own concerns about anti-authoritarianism inappropriately narrow his actual treatment of the biblical data regarding the ancient church as family. In a personal conversation, Hellerman said, “. . . my task in both books was to explore the horizontal, not the vertical, but a more robust biblical ecclesiology will, obviously, need to do both.”

Further, various references to an emphasis on plurality of leaders in the family of God, as well as the inadequacies of solitary leadership roles in the second century, made me wonder if Hellerman is operating with an anti-authoritarian agenda (it was confirmed in a personal interview with Hellerman). This concern is raised further by the absence of emphasis on apostolic authority as a dimension of the household of God, as well as the commands to exercise somewhat harsh discipline by elders in the Pastoral Epistles. While it is true that there is no reference in Scripture to church leaders as “fathers,” there are plenty of passages in which leaders refer to others as “son” (1 Tim. 1:2). The use of the term “father” for leaders rather quickly became a part of the early church conception of church as family. Thus, I wonder if the statement that the church was “without earthly father” (ACAF, p. 144) is somewhat misleading. It seems like the statement may be an attempt to be overly protective of the potential for abuse of concentrated authority, but may actually be a subtle undermining of a dimension of the ancient church as family, namely the paternal care and proper exercise of authority in the church, particularly for the protection of the church family from false teachers.

In his attempt to distinguish between the original modeling and teaching of Jesus from the later modeling and teaching of Paul, Hellerman sometimes seems to make the hermeneutical mistake of treating the Gospels as an earlier and perhaps more authentic source for discovering the teaching of Jesus. However, the Gospels were written by the apostles, mostly after the epistles had been written. References to the modeling and teaching of Jesus in the Gospels were not done in a manner that consistently acknowledged the antecedent theology of the epistles. While it is true that the modeling and teaching of Jesus precedes the modeling and teaching of the apostles, the Gospels are written with the modeling and teaching of the Epistles in mind. The Gospels not only show that Jesus was modeling and teaching about a surrogate kinship group, but show how Jesus anticipated the additional dimensions that would be modeled and taught by the apostles as the actual continuation of the modeling and teaching of Jesus (Luke 1:1, Acts 1:1) with the coming of the Spirit and the launching of the church in Acts. The consistent presentation of the modeling and teaching of Jesus as something that

has precedence over the modeling and teaching of Paul, as well as the intentions of the apostolic authors of the Gospels, does not do justice to the fullness of the expression of family in the Epistles.

I suspect that Hellerman has thought about most of these issues, probably more deeply than I, but has chosen to focus on the data associated with the metaphorical references to the church as family. Hopefully, he has another book in the works that addresses the relation of the church as family with the actual experiences of families and households, particularly as the church family redeems and sustains real families and households as the foundational social structures created by God.

And I hope that the starkness of the titles of Hellerman's books shock you into paying appropriate attention to the data and analysis in them. Everyone seems to want to have a "New Testament church." Hellerman may have done more than just about anyone else to help us know what a New Testament church really was, namely, a family.