



An
OHBC
White Paper

An Ecclesiology of the Local Church

The Household of Christ

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“... this concept of societal order based on the family permeates both the Old and New Testaments”

or in God’s own words.² Similarly, the New Testament uses this same language in 225 verses, 148 of them the words of Christ himself.³ What about “brother” or “sister?” There are 126 uses of these words in the New Testament in 108 verses, and 65 of these verses are not referring to brother or sister in the sense of sibling.⁴ John’s first letter is full of references to his audience as “little children.”

One of the key principles for getting what the Bible teaches by what it says is looking for *repetition* in both language and themes. This is a great example of such repetition. So if the language of “family” is used so much for believers and for God and Christ, it seems like an idea we ought to study so we can understand what the Bible means by it. One caution that must be exercised in Bible study is the danger of reading our own culture and tradition into the terminology the Bible uses. We need to ask the question “Did the idea communicated by the family mean the same thing then as it does now?”

Historical Context

Philip King and Lawrence Stager, in their book *Life in Biblical Israel* note that the structure of society in ancient Israel bears little resemblance to that with which we are familiar today.⁵ The basic unit was the household or “joint family (*bēt ’āb*, literally ‘father’s house’).⁶ As we have already seen, this concept of societal order based on the family permeates both the Old and New Testaments in statements about our relationship to God and Christ as well as each other, and, as King and Stager note, are the basis of Israelite cosmology, or how they view the world.⁷ Another word that we could use instead of cosmology is *worldview*.

Structure of Ancient Israelite Society

Since the first Christians were Jewish, they would have shared this worldview with their ancient relatives, and their ideas about society and how they should organize themselves would likely have been based on this view of societal order. Let’s consider

what that picture looked like. Israelite society was structured around family groups. Their history was traced through their lineage as sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel). This lineage defined their identity, and is the reason that genealogy is so important in the Old Testament as well as in Matthew, which was primarily written for a Jewish audience. They also viewed themselves as the children, the family, of Yahweh.

A good example of how this hierarchy worked in community life is shown in Joshua 7. In vv 1–2, we read, “But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things, for Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things. And the anger of the LORD burned against the people of Israel.”

The offending individual, Achan, is identified not just by his own name, but by his family tree. Later in verses 16–18, we read, “So Joshua rose early in the morning and brought Israel near tribe by tribe, and the tribe of Judah was taken. And he brought near the clans of Judah, and the clan of the Zerahites was taken. And he brought near the clan of the Zerahites man by man, and Zabdi was taken. And he brought near his household man by man, and Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken.”

The process by which the offender was finally identified was by working their way through the families down to the individual, and when punishment was meted out in verse 24, not just Achan, but his whole family was stoned and burned along with him.

Later, when Israel had kings, they viewed the hierarchy like this. The whole nation was seen as the house of Yahweh, the house of the king was his whole family and all the families of the kingdom, and the house of the father, the *bēt ’āb* was one’s close blood kin. Ancient Israel’s settlement pattern was built around this structure as well. They were organized based on family relationships, not on some abstract city planning concept, so villages grew outward from the oldest family

house as the family expanded over time, each one attached to the next into a kind of compound.

The Ancient Israelite Family

Just as society centered around the family, culture centered around the home. In fact, all of life was centered around the home. In their agrarian society, the family was the labor force that worked the fields that kept the family alive. Every person had a job to do, from the oldest to the youngest, men and women, adults and children. It was not uncommon for three generations of a family to live together. King and Stager note that there were six main features of these families:

- They were *endogamous*, meaning they favored marriage between close blood relatives.
- They were *patrilineal*, meaning that descent and inheritance is counted through the father's line not the mother's.
- They were *patriarchal*. The eldest male, the paterfamilias, was the head and ultimate authority in the household.
- They were *patrilocal*. When a girl married, she was brought into her husband's family and became a member of it, leaving her family behind.
- They were *joint families*. This meant that more than one generation lived together, though, because life expectancies were so short, it would be rare to have more than three generations in one household.
- They were *polygynous*, which meant that one man could have more than one wife. This was much more common among the upper tiers of the society. Despite this, monogamy was still the ideal.⁸

A couple of other aspects of ancient Israelite society and family are further important to some of the clues we have about

how the first-century church lived together and *why* they did. Widows were in a difficult situation in that culture. Because it was a patriarchal and patrilocal society, widows could find themselves left without a family with which to be identified and therefore with no way to feed themselves or no place to live. The book of Ruth illustrates this clearly for us.

The proper, respectful treatment of elderly people was another important aspect that we should note. The Lord instructed Israel that "You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD" (Lev 19:32). In Isaiah, this same concept is stated in how divine judgement will be shown in Israel: "And the people will oppress one another, every one his fellow and every one his neighbor; the youth will be insolent to the elder, and the despised to the honorable" (Isa 3:5). Finally, in a picture of Israel restored, Zechariah writes "Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age" (Zech 8:4).

Finally, how the community governed itself is notable, as well. Each village had a council of elders, made up of the leaders of the family or families that made up the village population, who gathered at the gate of the village or in a courtyard to deliberate. They conducted the political and judicial life of the village, rendering judgements and resolving disputes.⁹

The Church as *bēt 'āb*

So this is the background for how the early church would likely have thought of and structured themselves. We can see this in action in the days following Pentecost as recorded in Acts. What do we see happening in the first few chapters? As we said earlier, where and how they waited is in line with their having this family view of themselves. Waiting together in a house (1:13), staying together and pooling their resources (2:1, 44–45; 4:32, 34–37), worshiping together and

“Just as society centered around the family, culture centered around the home.”

sharing meals (2:46–47). We can also see it in how they naturally flowed into a leadership structure drawn from their culture. It was drawn from Israel's patriarchal society, not from a Greek, more egalitarian view.

In an interesting article refuting the theory that Jesus was a revolutionary egalitarian and that the early church was thus an egalitarian community of equals, John H. Elliott, Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Francisco, wrote:

A key feature of the Jesus movement in the Pauline period, scholars agree, was its household orientation: its mission focused not on individuals but household groups; believers assembled in houses for worship; and the household or family (*oikos*) provided a chief metaphor, as it did for Jesus, for characterizing relations and responsibilities within and among the believing communities.¹⁰

Throughout his article, Elliott refers to the hierarchical, specifically patriarchal, leadership structure as the key features of the family-oriented first-century church, which are also the key features of the structure of the household as defined in the culture of biblical Israel according to King and Stager.¹¹

It seems reasonable to conclude, then, that the early church did in fact think of itself in light of the household concept as it was understood in Jewish culture back to Old Testament times. So if there are similarities in the early church and the Israelite family, what did that family look like? Let's step back a bit and draw some parallels.

We certainly see the church as God's covenant people, his family, just like Israel did. So the church universal can be seen as equivalent to the house of Yahweh or the ancient nation of Israel. Just to fill in the next step, because we really don't have time to explore it, and because this tier is not the point of our discussion, the various

denominational groups could possibly be seen as the equivalent of the king and the families in his kingdom, although this is admittedly a weak comparison.

The third tier, and the one that is really most relevant to our discussion, is the local church as *bēt 'āb* or house of the father. The suggestion here is that we need to see ourselves much more like the basic family unit of ancient Israel's culture than our modern notion of family, because it seems reasonable, as we have said, to think this is the way the early church saw themselves. The examples from Acts we have already noted support this idea, and we can look at some examples from the epistles as well that indicate some of the same characteristics as the Israelite family.

Paul instructs us in 1 Cor 6:14 not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers, which, since it has often been applied to marriage within the believing community, would correspond to the characteristic of *endogamy* we discussed earlier. Paul's statement, however, seems broader than just marriage, and would apply this same principle to all our close relationships. Keep it in the family.

Certainly our identity and inheritance are *patrilineal*. We have received our name, our lives, and the future fulfillment of our salvation from God our Father. Likewise, Christ is the ultimate head of the church, its patriarch, but in the local church context, his under-shepherds, the elders, serve in that role locally. We see this in how the apostles were the patriarchs of the early church and in the fact that Paul appointed elders in all of the churches he planted.

The principle of *patrilocality* can be seen in the teaching of Jesus as well as in discussions of citizenship in Paul's writings. Jesus challenged people to leave their families behind in order to follow him, just as a bride would leave her's for that of her new husband. Paul refers to our having new citizenship, leaving our old allegiances and making a new one to Christ when we become part of God's family. The bride of Christ metaphor is in play

here as well. That is what the church is, and we must leave other relationships behind in order to be the kind of bride Christ both demands and deserves.

We also see, in Acts particularly, a picture of a *joint family*—sharing what they had, property being held communally, and so on. Their worship is always discussed in a community context, never an individual one. This model was carried, as we have said, by Paul in his missionary travels. In Rom 16:5 he sends greetings to the church that met at Prisca’s and Aquila’s house, and in 1 Cor 16:19 he sent greetings to Corinth from the local church that was meeting at Aquila’s and Prisca’s house in Ephesus. In Col 4:15 he sends greetings to Nympha and the church in her house. Philemon was another whose church met in his house.

Care of widows was the reason for instituting what we have come to call deacons in Acts 6. The church was caring for the widows in its family, and these seven men were charged with making sure that got done properly.

In regard to treatment of the elderly, Paul gives Timothy instructions very similar to those in Leviticus where he says “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity” (1 Tim 5:1–2). Note that his instructions are, in essence, to treat each other as you would members of your family.

In regard to leadership, the village elders provided the model for church governance by a group of elders. Acts 14:23 relates Paul’s and Barnabas’ appointment of elders (plural) in every church they started.

All this seems to add up to an ecclesiology, a view of the church, whose origins are in the ancient Israelite household, the *bēt ’āb*. This is definitely not the business, or corporate, or club-like model we see so much today. It also isn’t very much like the picture of family we have in our culture today. It is a picture of interdependency,

not of independence. It is a picture of intergenerational community, not cellular family isolation. And it is a picture where the good of the family is the highest priority, not the desires or needs of the individual.

The most important parallel between the house of Israel and the church today, and all the subsets of both, is that they were and we are God’s covenant people. We’ll talk more about how that works out theologically in the local church as *bēt ’āb* in the next section. Our relationship with God, whose foundation is our being in Christ, is the fundamental common thread. The Household of Christ—that’s what we, together as family, are called to be here in this place.

Summary

In summary, then, the first Christians, before they were even called Christians, would have thought of themselves as a family, a household, the central unit of Israelite society from ancient times. This is why they used terms like “brother” and “sister” for each other. It fits the picture of God as Father. It connects with the picture of the church as Christ’s bride and Jesus’ teaching that one must leave all other relationships behind to follow him, just as a bride would do in their culture to become part of her husband’s family.

Their meetings and worship were always family affairs, mostly taking place in homes, but even when they met at the temple they stayed together in this new family group for worship. They had meals together in the house where they met. Individuals saw their possessions as belonging to this family, making them freely available to whomever had a need.

This was a family based on kinship through a common father—not an earthly one, but their heavenly Father. This kinship defined their identity, it was their view of where they belonged, a family into which their new birth brought them, not a society they decided to join.

We also have seen that what was of highest importance to them would have been

“The most important parallel between the house of Israel and the church today ... is that they were and we are God’s covenant people.”

the welfare of the family, the household, and only individuals secondarily. Each one's individualism was subordinated to the identity, work, and needs of the family. The family operated under the leadership of its head, God its Father, and in subjection to its husband, Jesus Christ.

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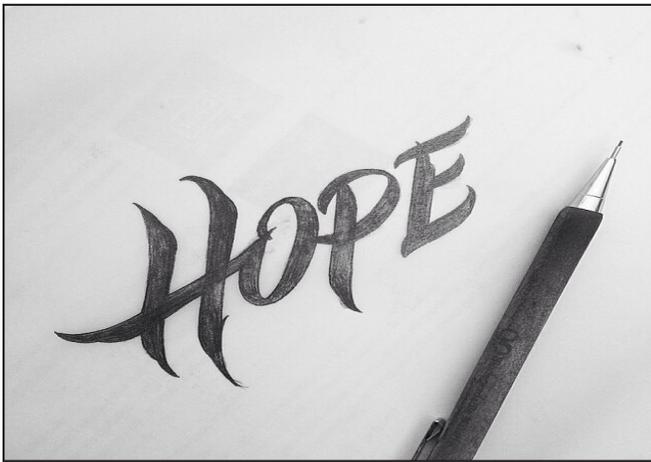
Experiencing Covenant Together

Part 2

1 Peter 2:9–10

This is how we should view the church today. What is important about this part of our ecclesiology, our view of the church, is our identity as the Household of Christ, not necessarily the details of how that was lived out in the first century. We live in a different time and place. Our cultural norms are different—not better, just different. Should we meet in houses? Maybe or maybe not. That isn't the point. The point is that when and where we *do* meet we must see each other as the Household of Christ with all the relational implications that carries with it.

Should you all go sell all your possessions and lay them here at the elders' feet to distribute as any has need? Maybe or maybe not. Again, that isn't the point.



The important thing is that we have the attitude about our things, our resources, that makes us ready to lay it all down for the needs of Christ's household. See the pattern?

Covenant People

In his first letter to the church in northern Asia Minor, Peter writes to encourage a church that has suffered hardship. His encouragement to them to endure, and even thrive, is founded on one primary point—who they are in Christ. He reminds them of this by illustrating how the new covenant in Christ was prefigured by the old sacrificial system, and shows them that they are the people of God by this covenant and thus have every reason for hope.

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for

“All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers,
and the flower falls,
but the word of the Lord remains forever.”

And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture:

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in him will not be
put to shame.”

So the honor is for you who believe, but
for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”

and

“A stone of stumbling,
and a rock of offense.”

They stumble because they disobey the
word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal
priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his
own possession, that you may proclaim
the excellencies of him who called you out
of darkness into his marvelous light. Once
you were not a people, but now you are
God’s people; once you had not received
mercy, but now you have received mercy.
(1 Pet 1:13–2:10)

Did you hear the language here? All the uses
of the pronoun translated “you” are *plural*. So
while it is appropriate for each of us to take
this passage to heart individually, the real
message here is to God’s people collectively.
Peter is saying that God’s intention is to set
apart for himself a race, a priesthood, a nation,
a people. Where else in the Bible do we hear
language like this?

When the LORD your God brings you
into the land that you are entering to
take possession of it, and clears away
many nations before you, the Hittites, the
Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites,
the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the
Jebusites, seven nations more numerous
and mightier than you, and when the
LORD your God gives them over to you,
and you defeat them, then you must devote
them to complete destruction. You shall
make no covenant with them and show no
mercy to them. You shall not intermarry
with them, giving your daughters to their
sons or taking their daughters for your
sons, for they would turn away your sons
from following me, to serve other gods.
Then the anger of the LORD would be
kindled against you, and he would destroy
you quickly. But thus shall you deal with
them: you shall break down their altars
and dash in pieces their pillars and chop
down their Asherim and burn their carved
images with fire.

For you are a people holy to the LORD
your God. The LORD your God has
chosen you to be a people for his treasured
possession, out of all the peoples who are
on the face of the earth. It was not because
you were more in number than any other
people that the LORD set his love on you
and chose you, for you were the fewest of
all peoples, but it is because the LORD
loves you and is keeping the oath that he
swore to your fathers, that the LORD has
brought you out with a mighty hand and
redeemed you from the house of slavery,
from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.
Know therefore that the LORD your
God is God, the faithful God who keeps
covenant and steadfast love with those who
love him and keep his commandments, to
a thousand generations, and repays to their
face those who hate him, by destroying
them. He will not be slack with one who
hates him. He will repay him to his face.

You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment and the statutes and the rules that I command you today. (Deut 7:1–11)

Familiar language? Any similarities to 1 Peter? You see it has been God’s intent from the beginning to create a people for himself—all the way back to Gen 1:26 where God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” We see this desire of God to create a people for himself play out all through the Old Testament beginning with Adam, through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel), and, as we will see, through Jesus in the New Testament.

Beginning with Noah, God defined his relationship with humans on the basis of covenants. The covenant in Gen 9 was God’s promise to Noah and all living things on the earth never again to destroy life on the earth by flood as he had just done. In Gen 15 and 17, God makes covenants with Abram, later renamed Abraham; the first promising Abram the legacy of a great nation of descendants and the second restating the first and setting apart those descendants of Abraham as God’s people by the physical sign of circumcision. Later, God renews this again with the nation of Israel during the Exodus and in all the Levitical laws. With David in 2 Sam 7, God makes a covenant to establish the throne in his family forever.

Jeremiah introduces the coming new covenant in Jer 31:31–33.¹² What kind of new covenant is this? This is a new covenant unlike the one with Israel’s fathers. A covenant under which the law will be written on hearts, all will know God, and he will forgive all our iniquity, remembering our sin no more. Certainly this is pointing to the covenant under which we now live as believers in Jesus.

So if this new covenant is part of

the flow of covenants with God’s people throughout the history of redemption, how does this idea of the Household of Christ fit in?

This idea began to come together for me during an Old Testament History and Theology class. As we looked at the story of Achan in Joshua, and as I read about ancient Israelite culture in the King and Stager book mentioned earlier, I started to wonder if there were lessons we could take from this in our view of the church. This was the main point of the first section of this paper.

At the same time, we were reading another textbook, Elmer Martens’ *God’s Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology*. This book proposes a grid, or structure, or methodology, for interpreting the Old Testament. Martens proposes that God’s design for building his kingdom has four parts:

1. deliverance or redemption;
2. community;
3. knowledge of God; and
4. the abundant life¹³

Martens’ suggestion is based on Exod 5:22–6:8, where God promises to bring Israel out of Egypt (deliverance/redemption), make them his people (community), that they will know Him, and that he will give them the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey, in fulfillment of his ancient promise to Abraham (the abundant life). Layered over all of this is the broader grid of God’s covenant with man, and Martens’ grid could be described as the process by which God is bringing his covenant with man to fruition in his kingdom.

In the last chapter of his book, Martens makes the connection of all this Old Testament theology to the New Testament, looking at Matthew and Romans in particular.¹⁴ He finds the deliverance/redemption theme in Matt 1:21, which says “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Of course the ultimate act of deliverance/redemption on the cross in Matt 27 is the culmination of all the

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previous pictures of deliverance/redemption in the Bible.

Jesus declares his intention to build a community when he says, “on this rock I will build my church” (Matt 16:18). Martens notes the parallel here between God’s self-declaration, “I am the Lord” in Exod 6:2 and Peter’s confession “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” two verses before Jesus’ church-building declaration,¹⁵ an interesting parallel in the context of our discussion here. In the Exodus passage, it is recognition of who God is that leads to their being made his people.¹⁶ Peter’s confession is his acknowledgement of who Jesus is, and Jesus’ church-building statement parallels God’s people-making promise in Exodus.

Note that there is no implication here that the church replaces Israel as God’s people. The clear teaching of the New Testament is that the church and the remnant of Israel are joined together as the one people of God through faith in Christ. This is found in Rom 11, Gal 3, Eph 2, and Col 3.

In Jesus, we have the opportunity to know God in a new and more intimate way. Jesus’ statements in Matt 11:27 and 26:64 (as well as more explicit statements in John 6:46 and 14:9) tell us that seeing him was the same as seeing God the Father. As we read the gospels, we see God in a more comprehensible way as Jesus imaged God in his humanness. And, of course, the passage from Isa 7:14 quoted by Matthew in the birth narrative in 1:23 gives Jesus’ name as “Immanuel,” God with us.¹⁷

While the idea of land as an inheritance or gift is largely missing in the New Testament, the notion of the abundant or good life, for which the land was a symbol, is prominent. The whole Sermon on the Mount is a description of life as it should be in the kingdom and, if the kingdom is the place of our new citizenship as believers, then it can be seen as taking the place of the Promised Land in God’s design. In fact, one could say it is the culmination of God’s design. In that place,

life is characterized by God caring for us as we seek the kingdom first (Matt 6:33), by eternal life (25:46), the ‘joy of your master,’ (25:21, 23), and is painted as a place of abundance in the two wedding feast parables (22:1–14; 25:1–13).¹⁸

We won’t take time to look at the Romans parallels in detail, but I encourage readers to review this for themselves. The deliverance theme is presented in 1:16–18 (“the righteous shall live by faith”) and 5:12–21. The idea and nature of community is presented in chapters 9–11. Knowledge of God is presented in the context of intimate relationship in chapter 8 particularly. Finally, the notion of land is not found explicitly, but the idea of new life in the kingdom and its benefits is. Chapters 1–8 describe its benefits and chapter 12 through the first half of 15 describe what it should look like as we live it out.

Putting It Together

So how do we connect all this together? We have a way of looking at God’s kingdom design that fits the whole Bible. We have a picture of how Israelite culture worked, and the conclusion that the church should model itself on the household that was the center of life in Israel. And overlaying all this is the identification of Israel and the church as God’s covenant people.

As I was pulling all this together, I began looking for other material to shed some light on it all. In the course of this search I came across a very helpful article by the well-known Old Testament scholar, Christopher J. H. Wright. In this article he says that, in the Old Testament covenants, “the primary locus of tangible realization of the privileges and responsibilities of the covenant relationship was the family.”¹⁹ In other words, the household, as the primary unit of Israelite society, was the place where *covenant* met *life*, where the covenant relationship between Israel and God was primarily realized. If this is so, then the church as the Household of Christ

in the new covenant has an equivalent role in our experience of the covenant relationship Wright proposes.

Although the primary topic of the article was a discussion of the fifth, seventh, eighth and tenth commandments, not the church or Israelite culture and sociology, Wright’s context for his discussion of these four commandments was the family, the household. Wright provided a helpful illustration of his view of all the relationships involved, as he puts it, “in Israel’s theological self-understanding.”²⁰

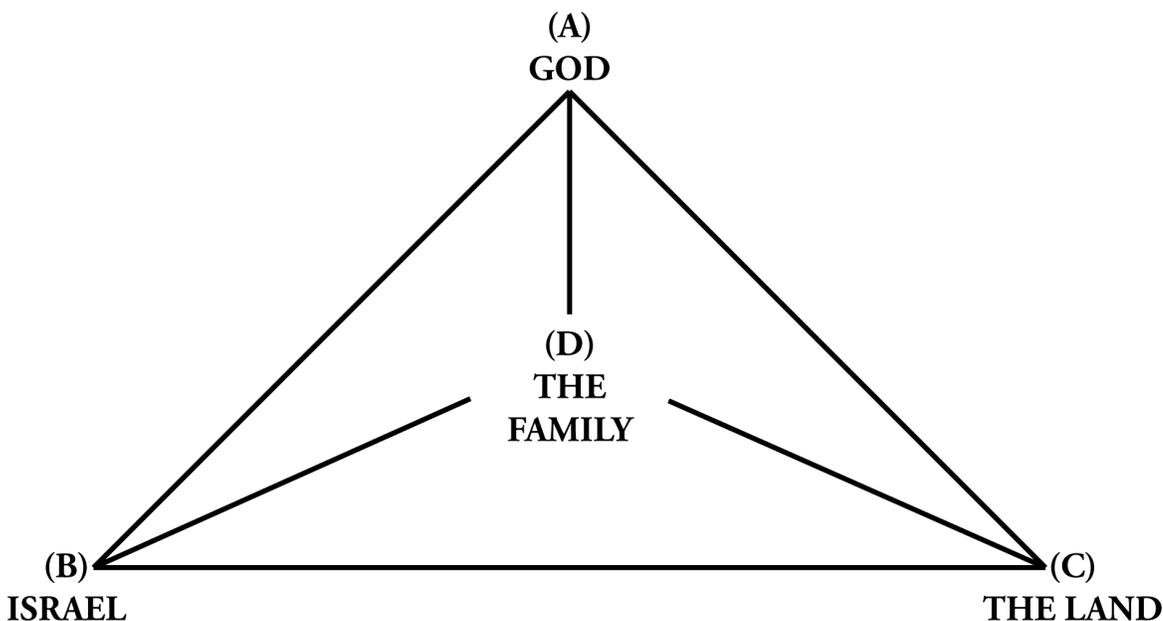
There are three fundamental relationships in this triangle. First and foremost is the relationship between God and Israel as a people. Second is God as the creator/owner of the land. And the third is the land given to Israel as inheritance or gift onto which we layer Martens’ idea of the land as the symbol of the abundant life.²¹ Wright places the family, or household, or *bēt ’āb*, at the center of the triangle representing its position as the “basic fabric upon which Israel’s relationship with God rested,”²² consistent with King and Stager’s view of these family units in ancient Israel’s culture.²³

covenant relationship (AD).²⁴ In defending this notion he refers to the fact that the land was held by families and inherited through the paternal line, as well as the fact that the Old Testament prohibited land from being permanently sold to someone outside the family. In addition, he discussed the role of the family in worship and teaching children about God. The instructions in Exodus 12 about the Passover meal come to mind here. This was a family meal to be celebrated in the family home that was protected by the blood of the Passover lamb on the lintel and jambs of its entrance.

This way of describing the role of the household as mediator of the covenant relationship rings true, and Wright goes on to argue that the commandments—which are the main subject of his article dealing with honoring parents, adultery, theft, and coveting—are designed to protect the household.

Ecclesiological Implications

So how does this translate to the church? If the New Testament church is equivalent to the *bēt ’āb* of Old Testament times, then it must



Wright asserts that “The family, therefore, was of pivotal importance in the ‘mediation’ of the

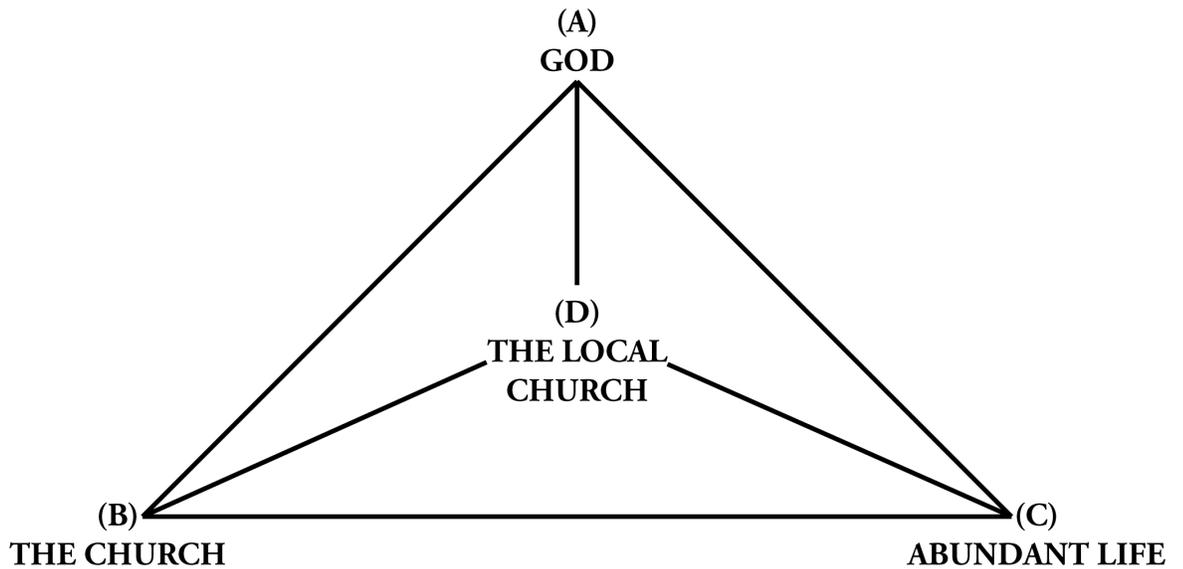
take the central position of mediating the covenant relationship. The church universal

is in the position of the nation of Israel, not as a substitute (as we noted earlier), but as a part of the broader scope of God’s people with Israel and the nations grafted together. The abundant life which Jesus came to give to his sheep as he said in John 10:10 is in the position of the Land in the Old Testament context. And of course God remains at the top, the prime relationship. If we accept this notion of the place of the church in our covenant relationship with God, there are several implications.

creates the Father-child relationship we have with God. But it is not the primary covenantal relationship. God’s covenant was and is with a people, and as Wright argues for Israel, so I am suggesting for us that the church is the means by which we are to experience that covenantal relationship with God.

This occurs in our worship and our study together, mirroring what Wright describes as the “didactic and catechetical functions”²⁵ that took place within the household in Israel, and the fact that whole

“... the church is the means by which we are to experience that covenantal relationship with God.”



First, notice that the individual’s relationship with God is only important in the sense that he or she is a member of the household as a result of it. This goes against the grain of our American individualistic culture. We tend to read the *singular* “you” into almost everything the Bible says about relationship with God and with Jesus. We talk about the “personal relationship with Jesus Christ” as the most important relationship we have. But is that right? Is that really biblical?

Go back to the passage from 1 Peter. Remember the number of the pronoun “you” in that passage? They are all *plural*. Jesus came to save a whole people, not a collection of individual persons. So yes, the individual relationship is important since it is what makes us members of the family. It is what

families were involved in worship together. As we look forward to the culmination of the kingdom, the picture we have is not of individuals, but of a people as the singular bride of Christ.

So the first implication of this picture of the church is that we must see our individual identities in Christ as being of lesser importance than our identity as the local church in covenant relationship with Christ as a family unit of his covenant people.

Meaningful church membership is the second implication of thinking of the church this way. Membership *does* matter. In fact we could go so far as to say that we can’t think of ourselves as members of God’s extended family, the totality of his covenant people in the church universal, apart from membership

in our immediate covenant family, the local church. Again, this is quite foreign to American family culture.

We live apart, independent, and often quite distant from the members of our natural families. My closest family member is two hours away, and we rarely speak or spend time together except on holidays or other special occasions. We bring this kind of attitude toward family into the church far too much. We not only don't have connections with each other generally, we don't really want to have them. Being close after all might mean we have to get involved in each others' lives, and we don't really have time for that. We have our own stuff to deal with.

This is foreign to the picture that the Bible paints of how we are to live together as God's family. Look at the letters of Paul to the churches. Look at what he says about how we are to treat each other. All his instructions are designed to protect the church from harm, much like Wright suggests in his article that the fifth, seventh, eighth, and tenth commandments were designed to do for the household in Israel. And much of the content is the same, by the way.

If we really saw the local church as a crucial part of our experience of our relationship with God, how would that change our attitude toward each other and toward being involved with each other? If we understood, as illustrated in the story of Achan from Joshua 7, that one person's sin impacts the health of the whole family, and that there are family consequences for that sin, how would we feel about holding each other accountable? How would we feel about being held accountable? To use an example from teaching our children, wouldn't we see this as keeping each other from putting our hand on a hot burner for our good, or being kept from doing so?

What would our attitude be toward getting involved in a brother's or sister's life when they are going through hard times—whether financially, relationally, or spiritually?

How would we respond to the brother or sister who, figuratively speaking, put his or her hand on that hot burner against our advice? Wouldn't we begin to see these things as essential to the well-being of the family, and not as something we have no stake in? Wouldn't our compassion and love for them because they are our family compel us to help and comfort and even sacrifice?

What about church discipline? How would we view this all-too-neglected part of our life together if we had this view of the church? Wouldn't we see it as a natural part of our life together, just like we view discipline in our homes?

What about disagreements? Of course, we don't have those, right? Wrong! Every family has disagreements, but they deal with them. They have to because they have to live together. If we really saw ourselves as family like we have been discussing, would we disagree less? I don't think so, but what we wouldn't do is leave our disagreements unaddressed, as we too often do, not just in our local church, but in every church. And, just like we teach that divorce is not a biblical option for dealing with mere disagreement in a marriage, leaving is not the way the church as family should deal with disagreement either. If we saw the church as our family, we would work through it, maybe slowly and probably painfully, but we would do it because "we" matters more than "me."

Certainly life together like this would affect both our attitude toward and actions in ministry and mission. We'll explore those implications in more detail in the next section.

These are the things that meaningful membership means. And make no mistake here, membership is *not* optional. If we are believers, we are a part of God's family, and we either behave like members of this family, or we're disobedient. It really is that simple.

Just imagine what it might be like to live church this way. (I have determined, by the way, that I'm going to stop using the phrase "do church." More and more I'm convinced

that church is far less about *doing* than it is *being*.) What would it look like to live as the church we have been talking about? Psalm 133 comes to mind:

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore. (vv. 1–3)

Isn't this the kind of picture we saw in Acts 2 and Acts 4? The church was a unified family living, working, and worshipping together. Anointed with the Holy Spirit like the anointing oil on the head of Aaron, and not just a sparing smear on the forehead, but

enough to run down and get all over him—the riches of grace lavished upon us, as Paul says in Ephesians 1. And don't get the last verse of the Psalm backward. Don't read it to say that the result of unity and this kind of anointing is the blessing, eternal life. The unity and anointing is confirmation of the blessing. We see this sequence in Luke's account of the days leading up to Acts 2 and 4. Jesus blessed those first members of the first church in Jerusalem just before he ascended in Luke 24:50–51.

Will we together ask God to bless us, to confer his favor on us? Are we willing to change our thinking about who we are, to be the church the Bible describes, a family, the Household of Christ, and to really make it mean something covenantal when we call each other brother and sister? I pray that we are.

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was sold into slavery instead. David was the family's tender of flocks. Jesus worked in his father's carpentry business. James and John worked the family fishing business.

So what is our family's business as the household of Christ? Matthew 28 gives us the answer: making disciples everywhere we go. This is another one of those plural instructions. It is directed to the group. Not each go, but all go. Just as every member of the family had a job to do and different skills to contribute, each of us has a role in the family's task. So how are those roles, those tasks, defined? Though we often think of Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts in a relatively detached way, if we see it in the context of each member of the family having a job it really starts to have some very practical application.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Rom 12:3–8)

Paul's teaching fits very well with what we have been talking about. Using the body analogy instead of the family analogy, he talks about us being one body made up of many members or parts, each of which has a different function. This corresponds closely with the idea we have been discussing of one family with many members. It is in this

context that the variety of gifts is both given and put to use. Since we have these different gifts, he says, let's use them.

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. (1 Cor 12:1–11)

Likewise here, Paul puts the discussion of gifts and one body in the same context. He talks about varieties of gifts and of service coming from the same Spirit and Lord and empowered by the same God, all used for the common good. Sounds a lot like a family working together for the same goal doesn't it? I'm guessing that at your house you have an arrangement like we have at mine. My job is cars, yard, taking out the trash, technology, a lot of the cooking, and killing anything bigger than a Kleenex bug. My wife's jobs

are managing the money, cleaning the house, taking care of the pets, laundry, and grocery shopping. This works pretty well for us. It means almost nothing gets forgotten and neither of us has too much on their plate.

The tasks of God's family here at Orange Hill are similar. The Pastor's and the Elders' primary task is equipping us with knowledge of the Word of God and for ministry. They also provide overall leadership for the family, acting as the "paterfamilias." The deacons' role is caring for the more physical needs of the family, and guarding and promoting the unity of the family. The staff helps facilitate ministry opportunities for us all to join in on. The worship team leads us to the throne room of God every Sunday morning. Our nursery workers lovingly take care of our children as Jesus did, letting them come into his tender embrace. Awana workers and Sunday School teachers point our kids toward God's word and teach them the basics of what worship is about. Our facilities team takes care of the house in which we meet, exercising stewardship over the facility God has entrusted to us. The Good News Club team is a crucial part of growing God's family here as they bring the gospel to the students at Sanders. All of us have a job to do and gifts that help us do it. You get the idea.

Let's put all this together. Jesus gave us all, as his church, his body, his family, a job to do. It is the business this family is in, the disciple-making business. Just like the Jewish family of ancient times and the first Jerusalem church, everyone has an assignment toward accomplishing that common goal. Did you get that? I said, and Paul says, and Jesus says, *everyone*. That's why each of us as believers has a gift, a service to do, and an activity associated with the gift and service. This is one of those two-ways things. *Either* we are using the God-empowered gift the Spirit has given us for the service the Lord has assigned you in connection with the body, the household, the *bēt 'āb* of Christ, *or* we are being disobedient. It's just that simple. The only other possibility

is that we aren't part of the family.

Mutually Dependent

Take a look a little further on in 1 Corinthians 12. Starting in v. 12, Paul spends the rest of the chapter talking about how the body works. He talks about how each part needs every other part. He talks about how the body doesn't function properly unless each part is doing what it was designed to do. Can we get by with only one hand, or one eye, or one ear? Sure, but we call that being handicapped. We can't do everything the human body was designed to do as well as we should in that condition. There are certain things we are not able to do at all. God's design is not for a church, a body, a family that is handicapped like this.

If I don't take out the trash or mow the lawn or take care of the cars or make sure the technology in the house works, it impairs my wife's ability to do the things for which she is primarily responsible. One reason is that, to the extent those things have to get done, she has to do it to cover my responsibilities. This means she has less time to do hers, and some may not get done. If there is a problem with the home computer where our financial records are kept, she can't do the financial management task or at least not as efficiently. My absence or failure to do my jobs makes her's harder or impossible, which harms us both. We need each other to make it all work.

The same thing is true in the body, the household, the *bēt 'āb* of Christ. God has empowered gifts and service and activities for each of us in the context of the local church that are necessary for the ministry to which he has called us collectively—making disciples right here in the Austell/Mableton area. We need each other in order to do that job effectively, in order to keep the family going, in order for the body not to be handicapped. As a spiritual body we are as mutually dependent on every part as the human body. Like a family is dependent on the contribution of each member to keep it alive and do its work, so is the household of Christ. So here is the

*“So here is
the question:
How is
your part
working?”*

“It doesn’t matter what gifts we have—if we don’t love each other and our bridegroom, it’s all for nothing.”

question: How is your part working?

The Better Way

Too often we look at the next chapter of 1 Corinthians as if it stands all by itself. Here’s an exercise in looking at literary context, one of the important Bible study techniques. Why is 1 Corinthians 13 here, where it is in the letter? Does the fact that it follows this discussion of gifts and the mutual dependency of the body tell us something about what Paul means to say? I think it does. Paul finishes chapter 12 talking about the need to celebrate the diversity of the body and avoid being jealous of each other’s role or gift. He is telling us to recognize the value of every one.

He begins chapter 13 by saying that if I have a certain gift and exercise it with the utmost skill, but do it proudly and self-centeredly, I’m just making noise and amounting to nothing. I’m not contributing to the well-being of the body, to the good of the family. It is in the context of how the body, the family, should function that this message about love appears. The point is that without love it all falls apart. It doesn’t matter what gifts we have—if we don’t love each other and our bridegroom, it’s all for nothing.

In chapter 14, Paul returns to a discussion of gifts as they should be used in the context of the church. In chapter 15, he points us back to the head of the household, the head of the body, Jesus Christ, and to the gospel of his grace, concluding the chapter with an encouragement to hang in there, doing Christ’s work together with our gifts out of love for each other and the Lord.

What’s the point here? I think it is this. We can do all the right things the right way, but if there is not an environment of love in this family, it is all for nothing. Does that always mean, as an old song says, “blue skies and rainbows and sunbeams from heaven?” No! That’s why Paul reminds us that “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it

does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor 13:4–7). If we’re a family, we’re going to have some friction, we’re going to disagree, we’re going to get grumpy and cranky. Just as in our families, it is our love for each other that makes us want to work things out, to stay together no matter what happens, to rally to each other in times of need, to work together for the family’s good. This is Paul’s point, and the reason chapter 13 is where it is, and why the reminder about the gospel follows.

Conclusion

We are meant to be a family—brothers and sisters under a common Father, related by blood shed on the cross by our bridegroom Jesus Christ. He is the head of the family and our identity is in him. This is what is meant by the statement “we are the body of Christ.” We are his family, we are who he is in some way.

God is creating for himself a people, his family, of which each of us is, individually, a part. It is with this people of his that he has made a covenant in blood by which all men may be reconciled to him, and it is through this family, this body, the church that this relationship is primarily experienced.

This body, this people, this family is engaged in the family business—the making of disciples, the growing of the family. In a very important way, we’re doing what Adam and Eve were originally charged with doing: being fruitful, multiplying, and filling the whole earth. In this task we each have a role within the context of the family. Your job is your job, not someone else’s. If you don’t do it, it will not get done, and both the work and the family suffers.

The more I have thought about this, the more convinced I am that we need to start thinking this way about who we are as the church here in this place. Just as faith motivates good works and good works are a sign of saving faith, being the church that God intended will motivate us to do what we have

been called to do as a body, and one of the ways we should measure whether we are what God wants us to be is by what we are doing.

Many of you understand this, and have understood it for a long time. Some of you don't. Some of you believe you are part of God's family here, but your job is not being done. Your "doing" doesn't demonstrate your "being." It's time for you to really join the family, because this isn't an enterprise where there are any spectators. We're here to work.

Let me finish with a comment on something I said earlier in this paper. It goes along with Paul's encouragement to keep love central to how we work together as God's family, the church. In the previous section,

we said that we needed to remember that "WE is more important than ME." Let's add something. We should also remember that "HE is more important than WE." This puts our focus in the right place. It is because of Christ that we are family. It is our adoption by him through faith that makes us part of this family.

I thank God that you and I are brothers and sisters here in this household of Christ. Let's rededicate ourselves to being the church, his family, and to carrying on our work in the family business—making disciples—with fresh vigor.

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ENDNOTES

1 Paul K. Jewett, "Sabbath Day's Journey," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 252.

2 Deut 32:6; 2 Sam 7:14; Psa 68:5; 89:26; 103:13; Prov 3:12; Isa 9:6; 63:16; 64:8; Jer 3:4, 19; 31:9; Mal 2:10.

3 Matt 5:16, 46, 48; 6:1, 4, 6, 8-9, 14, 15, 18, 26, 32; 7:11, 21; 10:20, 29, 32-33; 11:25-27; 12:50; 13:43; 15:13; 16:17, 27; 18:10, 14, 19, 35; 20:23; 23:9; 24:36; 25:34; 26:39, 42, 53; 28:19; Mark 8:38; 13:32; 14:36; Luke 6:36; 9:26; 10:21-22; 11:2, 13; 12:30; 22:29, 42; 23:34, 46; 24:49; John 1:14; 3:35; 4:21, 23; 5:17-23, 26, 36, 37, 45; 6:27, 32, 37, 40, 44-46, 57, 65; 8:16, 18-19, 27-28, 38, 41-42, 49, 54; 10:15, 17-18, 29, 30, 32, 36-38; 11:41; 12:26-28, 49-50; 13:1, 3; 14:6-13, 16, 20-21, 23, 26, 28, 31-15:1; 15:8-9, 15-16, 23-24, 26; 16:3, 10, 15, 17, 23, 25-28, 32; 17:1, 5, 11, 21, 24-25; 18:11; 20:17, 21; Acts 1:4, 7; 2:33; Rom 1:7; 6:4; 8:15; 15:6; 1 Cor 1:3; 8:6; 15:24; 2 Cor 1:2-3; 6:18; 11:31; Gal 1:1, 3-4; 4:6; Eph 1:2-3, 17; 2:18; 3:14; 4:6; 5:20, 31; 6:23; Phil 1:2; 2:11, 22; 4:20; Col 1:2-3, 12; 3:17; 1 Thess 1:1, 3; 2:11; 3:11, 13; 2 Thess 1:1-2; 2:16; 1 Tim 1:2; 5:1; 2 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philem 1:3, 10; Heb 12:9; James 1:17, 27; 2:21; 3:9; 1 Pet 1:2-3, 17; 2 Pet 1:17; 1 John 1:2-3; 2:1, 13, 15-16, 22-24; 3:1; 4:14; 5:1; 2 John 1:3-4, 9; Jude 1:1; Rev 1:6; 2:27; 3:5, 21.

4 Matt 5:22-24; 7:4; 12:50; 18:15, 21, 35; Mark 3:35; Luke 6:42; 17:3; 20:28; Acts 9:17; 21:20; 22:13; Rom 14:10, 13, 15, 21; 16:1, 23; 1 Cor 1:1; 5:11; 6:6; 7:12, 15; 8:11, 13; 16:12; 2 Cor 1:1; 2:13; 8:18, 22; 12:18; Eph 6:21; Phil 2:25; Col 1:1; 4:7, 9; 1 Thess 3:2; 4:6; 2 Thess 3:6, 15; Philem 1:1-2, 7, 16, 20; Heb 13:23; James 1:9; 2:15; 4:11; 1 Pet 5:12; 2 Pet 3:15; 1 John 2:9-11; 3:10, 15, 17; 4:20-21; 5:16; 2 John 1:13; Rev 1:9.

5 Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 4.

6 *Ibid.*, 39.

7 *Ibid.*, 5.

8 *Ibid.*, 36-38.

9 *Ibid.*, 60-61.

10 John H. Elliott, "The Jesus Movement Was Not Egalitarian but Family-Oriented," *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 11, no. 2 (2003): 173-210.

11 King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 36-37.

12 "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Jer 31:31-33)

13 Elmer A Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (N. Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 1998), 15.

14 *Ibid.*, 342-346.

15 *Ibid.*, 344.

16 "Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.'" (Exod 6:6-8)

17 *Ibid.*, 345.

18 *Ibid.*, 346.

19 Christopher J. H Wright, "The Israelite Household and the Decalogue: The Social Background and Significance of Some Commandments," *Tyndale Bulletin* 30 (1979): 101-124.

20 *Ibid.*, 103.

21 Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology*, 13.

22 Wright, "The Israelite Household and the Decalogue: The Social Background and Significance of Some Commandments," 104.

23 King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 39.

24 Wright, "The Israelite Household and the Decalogue: The Social Background and Significance of Some Commandments," 104.

25 *Ibid.*, 104.

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*Now to him who is able to keep
you from stumbling and to
present you blameless before the
presence of his glory with great
joy, to the only God, our Savior,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
be glory, majesty, dominion,
and authority, before all time
and now and forever. Amen.*

— Jude 24–25