

Affectionate Families:  
Artistic Implications of the Family Community

by Jared Griffin

The short stories of Shusaku Endo, a twentieth century Japanese author, often beg the question of parenting role definitions, characteristics and principles. While no one has completed a psychological analysis of Endo's family life, the author lends the information that his father deserted his family during Endo's childhood. Endo's mother, with her husband gone and left to her own resources, resolved to raise Endo and his siblings by herself. Endo portrays this heavy maternal influence in his short story, "Mothers", in which he criticizes the traditionally stern and harsh characterization of the fatherly role of God and offers a presentation of Christ as the new mother, caring, sacrificing, and offered as a suffering servant model. The narrator in the tale reflects on the visits to his mother's grave identified by a haunting sculpture of the Virgin Mary: "At times the face of the Holy Mother of Sorrows seemed to resemble my mother's face when she died. I still remember clearly how she looked laid out on top of her quilt, with that shadow of pain etched into her brow" (Endo, 131). As talented a storyteller Endo may be, he also cleverly remarks on the connection between Christian spirituality and the role of parents. Describing a hidden church in the Japanese mountains, the narrator highlights several scrolls adorning the walls. One scroll in particular was

a drawing of the Holy Mother cradling the Christ child – no, it was a picture of a farm woman holding a nursing baby...These people had joined their gnarled hands together and offered up supplications for forgiveness to this portrait of a mother. Within me there welled up the feeling that their intent had been identical to mine" (Endo, 134-135).

According to Endo, an appropriate Christian spiritual consideration of parenting is crucial to the raising of a child. He deconstructs the role of Christ as one who has “not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34. ESV), and constructs a familial model that emphasizes Christ’s affections: piety, charitable love, forgiveness, spiritual discipline, etc. Obviously, Endo is not a professional parenting psychologist. He does not draw upon sociological statistics and studiously objective claims concerning parenting role models; however, he employs what Parker Palmer refers to as “a knowledge that springs from love (that) will implicate us in the web of life” (Palmer, 9). Christian spirituality contains many fragmental applications, but unless it is applied holistically, in Parker’s “web of life”, it avails the Christian nothing. In essence, Palmer indicates that a Christian who is right with God must also be right with one’s community, and Endo promotes that one’s closest community is one’s biological and relative family. To fully understand the spiritual implications of the family one must realize the family as an artistic recreation of the Trinity through an accurate definition of a Christian family, a discussion of its intended principles, and an analysis of the communal nature of family.

In defining the concept of family, Christ’s teachings and example provide proof that family development must first be a spiritual matter. As Abba Felix alluded, the problem is spiritual, not technical (Palmer, 45). Christ’s model of spirituality in family never failed to cause a stir in antiquity and continues to be a much debated topic within and without the Christian community. His central notion of family is recorded in Matthew 12: 46-50,

While he (Jesus) was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers!” For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (ESV)

At first glance, Christ does not seem to be providing such a respectful appropriation towards his family. In fact, “Jesus’ words have been taken to imply a lack of respect for his mother; but...there is a tie which is closer even than that of family” (France, 215). What bond could be stronger and more intimate than a familial one? From Christ’s response, one could gather an answer of “a spiritual bond.” The spiritual attachment of family is a transcendent intimacy implied by Palmer’s “*knowing*”: the bond when “Adam *knew* Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain,” (Gen 4:1. ESV) and the bond with God in “*knowing* Christ Jesus my Lord...and be found in him” (Phil. 3:8. ESV) (Palmer, 58). In the same manner that Christ knows the will of his father, members of a family should know each other. “As marriage incorporates its divinely-given design to be the intimate, permanent bond arising out of the interplay of sameness and difference, this human relationship reflects the exclusive relationship of love found within the Trinity” (Grenz, “Theological,” 623). The connection between family members, and between family units in a community, is not the romantic emotion of love; rather, it is the “exclusive relationship of love.” This is what Christ meant by discipleship in the Great Commission and Palmer’s intention of the term “know.”

The doctrine of the Trinity specifically implicates a familial model in which three entities interact, or “know”, each other so intricately that they act as one being and perform with one divine will. This divine life of the Trinity may be summarized in the term, “perichoresis,” which implies a vision of the separate dancing members moving as one. W.H. Auden involves humans in the intimate activity in his poem, *Horae Canonical: Complines*:

That we, too, may come to the picnic  
 With nothing to hide, join the dance  
 As it moves in perichoresis  
 Turns about the abiding tree. (Auden, 641)

Consequences of this model “declare that the eternal God is not an undifferentiated reality...The one God is the social Trinity...God is fundamentally relational” (Grenz, “Theological,” 617). Human beings, created *Imago Dei*, are hence social beings and the most fundamental section of society is the family. The family as a unit, therefore, bears the image and likeness of God and bears the responsibilities thereof. This intimate directive is involved in the family community in relation to God. After all, “Everything we know about God has a direct application to our behavior” (Mohline, 67). Evidence will show that the inherent mechanics of a Christian family lie in direct response to the relationship between family members as representative of the intimacy in the Trinity.

Human nature allows men to assume objective realities as truth, but God acts on an entirely different, often more abstract, level. Families, for instance, represent the intimate “knowing” that occurs between the members of the Trinity: “there exists another with whom God is infinitely consenting, else God is denied this aspect of God’s infinite consent and excellency” (Weber, 307). In the representation of God consenting with Christ and the Holy Spirit within the Trinity, an accurate view of families may be as a form of art. “God usually creates art that is both functional and symbolic in itself. But sometimes God creates purely to symbolize a certain truth” (Spencer, 23). Christians rarely deny the functionality of families, for they serve a purpose in obedience to God as part of the Creation Mandate, but the family community also relays a symbolic truth to the world. Perhaps if humans nurtured the spiritual bonds in their families as well as they do the aesthetic value of artistic creation, piety and a fear of God would continue to blossom, eliminating the troubles that plague communities.

The greatest responsibility of family members is their relationship to each other. A solid bond, an intimate connection, will secure the success of the unit. During the Gospel of Matthew exchange, Christ motions towards his disciples when referencing his family. This action indicates that the family of God is not based on “intellectual assent but on practical obedience; that is the essence of discipleship” (France, 215). With the many legal, civil, and emotional modifications of the traditional family, modern sociologists have agreed with France: “Rather than to look at family as a concrete ‘thing’...they advocate seeing the family as an ideological construct” (Peters, 61). The ideology of a Christian family, in particular, centers on Christ’s leadership in discipleship. Discipleship of God is rightfully directed by Christ, but also the discipleship of each other which is especially paradigmatic in marriages.

Marriage, the intimate “knowing” of man and wife, reflects the same “knowing” of the Church by Christ as well as the “knowing” of God by his Son.

Understanding the metaphorical significance of marriage ought to motivate each couple to live out in the various dimensions of their life together God’s desire that their relationship be an ongoing witness to the character of the eternal God and an appropriate picture of the glorious connection that binds Christ and the Church” (Grenz, “Theological,” 623).

The relation of Christ to his Church is often compared to the husband and wife relationship. The apostle Paul wrote this famous passage in his letter to the Ephesians: “...husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself...just as Christ does the church” (Eph. 5:28-29. ESV). Therefore, within the context of the family community, the spiritual bond between the husband and wife serves great importance to accurately representing Christ’s care for the church. This intimate, artistic spirituality is recorded in Genesis when Adam “knew” his wife, Eve. Again, one has reached another level of familial symbolic importance to God, that of a sexual nature. Most Christians tend to cringe at the thought of God

as a sexual being, but as an extension of the intimate interconnectedness between the members of the Trinity, the sexual relationship between a husband and wife serves precisely as an artistic recreation of that consent. God proclaims, “Let us make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness” (Gen. 1:26, emphasis mine). God’s reference to himself in the plural tense “finds its outworking in the creation of humankind as male and female, that is, as a plural sexual creation” (Grenz, “Is God Sexual?”, 210). There is no mistake in man’s connection of love and intimacy with the connotation of sex. Grenz further explains that “the bonding that characterizes the divine life is similar to the interaction of sameness and difference found in human sexuality” (Grenz, 211). As this symbol of the “knowing” that occurs between the members of the Trinity flourishes in a marriage, the spiritual strength within the family also grows, increasing the effectiveness of their witness to God’s desire to relate with man. All relationships, especially those nurtured in the family arena, are images of God’s glory. This notion is specifically played out in the marriage relationship and the relationship between parents and their children with the goal of becoming a unique Christian fellowship in which earthly labels are emphasized, not replaced, by a spiritual bond.

Christ redefined the traditional blood ties between family members, thus breaking down presumptions concerning the promise of families - children. Mark 10:13-16 relays the story:

And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, Let the children come to me, do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God...whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them. (ESV)

Children are not meant to be treated in the seemingly harsh manner of Mosaic Law; rather, they are to be edified as God’s created beings because in children one finds the kingdom of God. In children families discover and nurture the next generation of Christian community; they are the

bearers of tradition and the future searchers of truth. But, like marriage, children bear a metaphorical meaning in Christian spirituality.

Christ and Paul often present an approach to the kingdom of God as only being accomplished if one is like a child. Matthew 18:4 states, “Whoever humbles himself like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” The implication is two-fold. On one hand, one must obtain child-like piety in order to achieve righteousness before God; the other hand, though, requires a humble acceptance of others who are pious (France, 271). Humility is reciprocal, and nowhere is this more important than in a family. Christ became a servant to his Church, of whom he “knows,” in order for his Church to serve him. Likewise, a father must serve his children so that his children may serve others; a husband must serve his wife to create a relationship of mutual piety.

The formation of a pious life begins well before the creation of a pious family and is a requirement to becoming a member of God’s family. This idea is proposed most clearly in Jonathan Edwards’ *Religious Affections*. Edwards states: “Evangelical humiliation is a phrase that describes the Christian’s sense of personal inadequacy, of his unworthiness, and his responsive attitude of heart to God in all his need” (Edwards, 126). With an attitude of true humility, one can clearly identify sin and recognize its consequences in how it affects one’s standing with God and within one’s own family. This pious state prepares the heart to achieve an understanding of the spiritual bonds between members of the family community. To understand the family as community means to literally stand underneath it and observe it from its roots up, and this requires the most basic act of piety (Palmer, 67). The goal of piety is to strengthen the spiritual bonds between one and God, and one and the members of a community, in this case, the family. God’s sense of irony is clearest here, in that, the community that harbors

the strongest spiritual bond will appear to be the weakest, the most inadequate, and the most unworthy. This should change the way one judges other families. This is God through a looking-glass. The truth about families may not be what it seems.

As a portrait of Trinitarian communication, families convey a message, not only of the strength of evangelical piety, but of love and kindness. The evidence of a strong family community is found in their love for God and each other, for “no other virtue or disposition of mind is more often and expressly insisted upon as a mark of a true Christian,” or in this case, a Christian family (Edwards, 150). The love of a spiritually bonded family is conveyed in many aspects. For example, love serves as the basis for compassion and forgiveness. These two branches of love conspire within the family and as an external symbol of God’s own compassion for his creation. A truly bonded family displays the “character of compassion and concern to relieve the poor, indigent, and afflicted” in response to Christ’s example of healing and kindness (Edwards 150-151). The Christian family is the fundamental artistic continuation of Christ’s life acting within the larger Christian community called the Church, Christ’s bride.

Another product of piety and love within a familial community is that of forgiveness. This does not imply merely excusing wrongdoings, but applies to the whole spirit of the family. Edwards insists that to have a forgiving spirit is one of “the absolute necessit(ies) of having (it) as the tone and character of every Christian” (Edwards, 149). Within the context of a Christian family community, forgiveness repairs severed, or weakened, spiritual bonds. “What forgiveness achieves, when it works, is that it restores the two people to the relationship they had before the offense took place” (Hare, 56). The representational value of forgiveness between family members is clearest in God’s forgiveness of man’s sin by Christ’s atonement on the cross. At first, this sounds like traditional evangelical rhetoric, but, taking into account the artistic



nature of family and community, Christ's sacrifice bears a slightly new meaning. Through a family's act of piety, they recognize the terse affects of sin and relay the guilt of that sin to Christ. There are "at least five areas of humankind's personality (that) become affected by faith in the person of Jesus as the Christ – the human mind, will, emotions, self image, and the relationships to others" (Mohdine, 69). Christ's sacrifice, his humble example, affects relationships; in that, guilt and sin no longer separate members of the community.

How is this transference of sin and guilt between separate entities possible? It is conceivable only through the intimate "knowing" that Christians seek of God, and God, through his Trinitarian bond with Christ, allows Christ to take the guilt and bury it. Hare compares this to a merging of identities which creates a partial identification, like that which "can happen between a husband and wife, so that each can be ashamed or proud of what the other does" (Hare, 59-60). Through a pious spirit, a fallen person can identify himself with Christ, not only for the purpose of his identification, but so Christ can identify with him and relieve him of his fallen nature. Nowhere is this aspect of salvation more significant than in the family community, in which husband and wife "know" each other and can identify with each other in order to forgive and atone for each other's misgivings; and in which parents "know" their children and convey the grace and kindness towards them so that their children may return the virtue; and in which brothers and sisters "know" their siblings for the same purposes. The idea of partial identification is surprisingly represented the most in families. True, families are contrived of individual members, but every member contributes a portion of one's identity to the family as a whole so that they become one family. In the same manner, a Christian humbly gives his or her identity to Christ as Christ gave his saving identity to them. The soteriological implications of a Christian family are great, indeed.

The Christian family as an affectionate, artistic community is but a small portion of the larger context of Christian community, yet it serves as the basic formation of a culturally dynamic spiritual movement. Basically, a Christian family as communal “means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this” (Bonhoeffer, 21). As Bonhoeffer continues, and as explained before, he shows that a proper Christian community recognizes that forgiveness and atonement can only come from Christ’s sacrifice on the cross (Bonhoeffer, 21-22). There is a new bond that strengthens communities and families. No longer does blood and law unite family members and separate family entities, for Christ delivered a spiritual bondage, an intimate “knowing”, which he demonstrated with his disciples. Families must recognize the spiritual significance of this “knowing” and how it relates to the Christian community’s identity at large. Individual identities are not as important in Christian community, as Paul explains in Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28. ESV). This can be summarized as meaning that

Christian identity is most profoundly determined by One who transcends and transforms us – Christ. Christian identity is not just about being all that we can be as individuals. It is about becoming more and more Christ-like...This transformation does not take place in isolation but in the context of Christ’s body” (Witherington, 227).

There may be an inherent hierarchy in Christian community and family, as there may be in the Trinity, but this may not be stressed as much as one thinks in the life of Christ. In the aforementioned exchange with the disciples, “rather than encouraging the establishment of lines of authority and submission, Jesus’ life calls us to mutual submission to one another” (Grenz, “Theological”, 617). This is supported by Ephesians 5:21, “...submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (ESV). No matter what the Creational model and the Pauline model

propose to be, the underlying intent of the Christian familial community is piety – to God and to the other members – out of a representation of God’s love and of his own intimate communication within the Trinity.

As a result of one’s awareness of modern society, the application of piety to the familial community is grossly underused. Family members, particularly Christian family members, do not arbitrarily humble themselves simply because familial community is not widely reinforced by western culture. That is why Christian families must actively, and thus symbolically, practice piety in obedience to Christ’s example of humility which was, in itself, an artistic expression of the submissive efforts between the members of the Trinity. Obedience is constantly stressed in family relations, especially in children’s responsibility to their parents, but is sometimes viewed as a constraining aspect of child-rearing. The call for obedience is often seen as a refutation of freedom, in that, “we regard freedom as the autonomy of the self-seeking self, the self cut loose from the traditional and communal bonds, and we think of obedience as the act of slaves, not free persons” (Palmer, 65). Through humble obedience to the artistry within the Trinity, parents provide such an example for their children, so that the notion of obedience will not be observed as oppressive, but rather impressive. Edwards stresses in *Religious Affections* the spiritual witness Christians provide and the amount of piety Christians convey will impress itself upon others. Parental obedience to God is an invitation for the children to do the same. The charge of obedience “will neither actively suppress nor passively concede our differences, but will invite them to interact in faithful relationship” (Palmer, 66). As God’s objective with man is to obtain a relationship, so should be the parents’ objective with their children. The success of the family community is dependent upon the strength of these relationships, and, as shown before, the strength of spiritual bonds is found in piety.

An understanding of the symbolic infrastructure of the Trinity illuminates the purpose of the family including its definition, inherent principles, and the artistic implications in the larger Christian community as modeled by Christ. This is not some arbitrary formula created by God for the sole purpose of requiring man's obedience as proof of faith. The family community is a byproduct of God's own community with the Trinity, infused into mankind at creation. The tremendous success and strength of the Trinitarian model is a result of the equilateral submission and intimacy between the members, so this serves as the pinnacle for earthly families. Christian families are artistic creations of God as they represent the spiritual bond between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Family communities should seek to obtain this "knowing" that occurs between the members of the Trinity. This is not to suggest a warped sense of "spiritual incest," because familial member labels have been redefined by Christ. Even though God may not recognize man's physical labels, he sees the importance of the spiritual value of relational bonds. The question, then, is how important do we view the symbolic nature of families? The answer is not that much. For example, college campuses, Christian institutions included, offer more courses and degrees centered on art and literary metaphor than courses and degrees focused on families. Is it any wonder that debates and lawsuits are enacted over artistic and expressive freedom while traditional family values have disintegrated? In searching for a connection, families should be valued, not because of traditional measures of success and based on an insistence of Christian morality, but as an artistic expression of the spirituality of God. God values art, more than the Smithsonian, more than the Louvre, more than the struggling Gene Kelly in *An American in Paris*. Family as metaphor, as symbol, and as art, may perhaps serve as the greatest apologetic for traditional family values, as the greatest witness to God's love and forgiveness, and as the greatest model for piety in community.

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