

EXCERPT



## *Households of Faith* *Practicing Family in the Kingdom of God*

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**The Christian world tends to have a blueprint for what families should look like**, and these models of the family can be hard to live up to. In some circles, picture-perfect families are idealized and even idolatized. Theologian Emily McGowin casts a holistic vision for what family can be in light of God's kingdom. She says, "No matter what your family looks like—big or small, biological or chosen, with children or without, homeschooling or public-schooling, multiple incomes or one or none—ask the following together every morning: How will Jesus by his Spirit teach us to love today?"

## There Are No Ideal Families

And there are no families from nowhere. Families are made up of people with bodies. Such bodies bear the signs, seen and unseen, of age, gender, sexuality, racialization, class, disability, illness, and more. We are families shaped and powered by overlapping cultures, languages, and memories. And we are families living within spaces and places during epochs of time with specific histories. Whether we like it or not, these overlapping contexts have a significant impact on the lives of Christian households, including their ability to cope through trials and cultivate the kind of virtue essential to the Christian life.

Not only that, but the people who make up families have family histories of their own, along with the various experiences that their lives have given them. And Christian families take many forms beyond the oft-assumed nuclear family. Many kinds of Christian households exist, including single adults, single-parent families, couples with no children, divorced and remarried families with stepchildren, families headed by grandparents, and more. All these families with their complicated stories and challenges are the real-life households of God's people. The kingdom of God and the church of Christ serve as the framework within which embodied, encultured, and historical families live—and all of them need to be empowered to be faithful witnesses to the kingdom of God today. The particulars of our histories and our present are precisely the things with which the Holy Spirit is working to make all things new.

The way you were parented, for instance, significantly shapes how you care for children, whether yours or someone else's, many times in ways you aren't aware of. A childhood marked by parental abuse can lead to difficulty in forming intimate connections, which makes forming a healthy family difficult. But the impact of a neighborhood or community on one's family can't be overlooked either. Think of the influence of something as simple as the zoning code on our daily lives, dictating where apartment complexes and gas stations can be built. Or the difference it makes for household members to be able to exercise flex time at work or to work multiple days from home. Things like ready access to sidewalks, green space, and fresh food have a massive long-term effect on a family's health.

So much Christian talk about families deals in abstract ideals rather than embodied realities. Even framed within the church and the kingdom of God, Christian thinking about family must be rooted in real families living in the real world. Honoring this reality means naming and dealing with the many factors of our embodied contexts: jobs and schooling, recreation and chores, conflict and desire. These are not incidental things. They determine the vital, nitty-gritty stuff with which our households must contend every day. Because this is where God's Spirit is at work—here and now in our lives as they actually exist.

Central to the good news of God's kingdom is that God has come amongst us in Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel. The transcendent Creator of the cosmos has come near in the flesh-and-blood person from Nazareth under the reign of the Roman Empire. Jesus had an ancestry of his own, going back hundreds of years amongst God's covenant people, Israel, and out of his people's stories and practices, at the table of Mary and Joseph, he learned and grew.

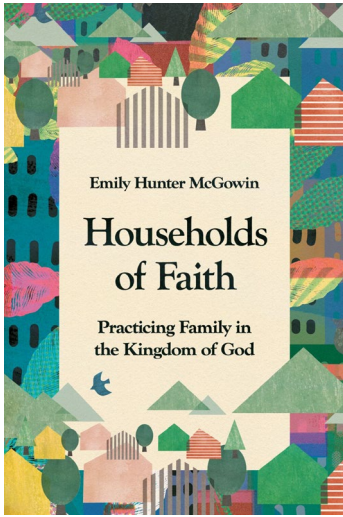


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Somehow God-in-the-flesh grew in wisdom and stature and favor with God and neighbor (Luke 2:52), and through his exemplary life, public torture, death, and victorious resurrection, he initiated the new creation foretold by Israel's prophets. Gentiles, those outside the covenant people, have been welcomed in too. The sign of God's universal welcome is the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son to unite all of us to God and each other.

The incarnation means the love of the triune God extends to particulars, as my friend Beth Felker Jones says—fingers and toes, kitchens and dens, porches and playgrounds. And if God's love extends to such parts and places, then God's transforming presence is found there too. The crucial task of Christian families is to learn how to see and know God (discernment) and live in the already of God's kingdom (improvisation) amid the daily chaos of household life. I agree with American Catholic theologian Holly Taylor Coolman that the point of the Christian family in whatever form it takes is to *be apprentices of love*. As they learn how to love together, Christian families embody God's kingdom in preparation for new creation.

Even though Ronnie and I are what I jokingly call "professional holy people," we also lose sight of the big picture while trying to keep up with our responsibilities. It's hard enough to feed our family, pay our bills, do our jobs, serve our church, maintain our friendships, and, somehow, get our kids prepared for adulthood, without also thinking about God's kingdom too. And we're doing all of this in an increasingly hurried and overstimulated world that is saturated with opinions. We live in the age of the expert, both the professionally affiliated and the self-proclaimed, and these experts have more and more outlets through which to spread their perspective on how things ought to be done. No matter the topic, whether it's dating, fitness, personal finance, friendship, breastfeeding, nutrition, or sleep, there's an expert, a book, a podcast, or a TikTok for that. Since most of us are not conversant in the relevant literature, we are, in many ways, at the mercy of news media, friends, and family who broadcast or share the opinions of others. While access to all this information can be an empowering thing, it can also be overwhelming. At every turn, families are often asking, *Are we doing this right?* Depending on who you ask, you can get a very different answer. The constant questioning creates a lot of anxiety and fear, which it so happens, is essential for selling the products and services.

At the same time, there's no doubt that we live in perilous times. Human beings always have. Jesus himself said we should expect no less. Despite enormous progress in medicine and technology, humanity doesn't seem any closer to overcoming our penchant for mutual destruction. Speaking in the 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. named our communal sin concretely as the three evils of society: racism, economic exploitation, and violence. While the rise of the internet, satellites, and smartphones have brought us many good things, there's no doubt the three evils have continued in new ways in the present day. Choosing to live as Christian families within this environment, in whatever form our households take, isn't for the faint of heart. Yet, Jesus' calling "Follow me!" remains. We must do our best to discern what that means here and now.

With this book, I hope to speak a word to Christian families of all kinds that is neither a rigid, unattainable ideal nor an uncritical, feel-good placebo. I am not promoting a particular blueprint of family to which all Christians are expected to conform, nor am I trying to obliterate the notion of family as outmoded and useless. Instead, I am seeking a new paradigm for the family within the framework of the church and the kingdom of God, rooted in the Scriptures and the best of the church's traditions, that I hope will be empowering and encouraging as we learn to live as households of faith today. So, I invite you to join me in thinking carefully about difficult matters amid the lived complexity of your daily life. I know it's hard. But not only do I think we can do it; I really think we must do it.

-Adapted from the introduction



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## ***Households of Faith*** ***Practicing Family in the Kingdom of God***

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**Emily Hunter McGowin** (PhD, University of Dayton) is associate professor of theology at Wheaton College. She is the author of *Quivering Families* and *Christmas*, and coeditor of *God and Wonder*. Her articles have appeared in *Christianity Today* and *The Week*. She is a priest and canon theologian in the Anglican diocese of Churches for the Sake of Others. She and her husband, Ron, also a priest, live in Chicagoland with their three children.

## **Is There Such a Thing as a Traditional Family?**

Theologian Emily McGowin casts a holistic vision for what family can be in light of God's kingdom. Jesus is our first teacher about families in the kingdom of God, and families rightly understand themselves only in relation to God's kingdom and the church.

In *Households of Faith*, McGowin recovers biblical portraits of households of faith that are not limited to just the biological nuclear family, that can be multigenerational households of married and single, with or without children, acknowledges the realities of how sin and trauma damages families and communities, and calls Christians to practice family as apprentices to love who discern the times and improvise faithfulness together.

- When and how did the idea of the “traditional family” first emerge?
- In what ways do our family blueprints impact how we see and live out family in our own lives? How do our family blueprints impact how we view other families?
- What do you mean when you write that “for too long, many Christians have promoted an idealized cultural construct as the only faithful way to practice Christian family”?
- What does the Bible actually say about families?
- Does the Bible teach or say anything about a “traditional” family?
- In what ways are Jesus’ teachings about families surprising?
- What is the already-not-yet nature of the kingdom of God, and how can we begin to imagine the church and family in light of it?
- How do we even begin to answer the question—what is family for? And what does that mean for families in real life?
- What do you mean when you say that the Christian family’s goal is to “be apprentices to love together”?
- What do you mean when you write, “The point of Christian families is not conformity to an ideal or the creation of a utopian home, but the cultivation of an outpost of God’s kingdom—just one humble household in the eternal household of God”?
- You say that “families can be treacherous places” and go on to write: “The question is not whether evil powers and injustice persist, but rather how to address such realities and structure our family lives so that we can resist their influence.” Practically speaking, how *can* we structure our family lives to resist the influence of evil?
- What does it look like for single people to love within the household of God?
- What does it look like for married people to love within the household of God?
- Why are sabbath, baptism, and Eucharist important for teaching us how to love today?



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