

Review of *Families at the Crossroads* by Rodney Clapp  
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I. Bibliographic Data

Clapp, Rodney. *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond traditional & modern options*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995.

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II. Purpose of the author

Clapp's purpose for the book is two-fold. First, he sets out to contest the church's "glorification of the family," the idea that the Christian's primary "social responsibility is owed to his or her country rather than the church," the uncritical endorsement of capitalism as if it were God's divine economy, and the assertion that the "'traditional' family is the only 'biblical' family." Second, he wishes to explore and encourage a "more fully biblical interpretation of the Christian family's responsibilities and privileges" in the postmodern time (Clapp, 12).

III. Highlights

In the first chapter, Clapp begins the book by highlighting the changing of the times since the genesis of postmodern thought as it pertains to family models and values. In evangelical circles especially, the family has been elevated to an importance in western society that has never before been known. Although families have always had their imperfections, many of today's top evangelical champions of the "traditional" family—the monogamous, heterosexual haven and dominion of stay-at-home mothers which discourages pre-marital sex—continuously cite deviations from this norm and culprits such as public schools and teachers, television and music industries, and gay right and feminist movements in launching a full scale attack on the American family and its biblical values, thereby threatening the very fiber of American society.

After presenting his purpose for writing, the author points out the bourgeois family's departure from the earliest evangelical family values in which families were economically productive units that worked together to produce economic gain. Such an economically driven purpose for the family has been replaced with a primarily sentimental one whose chief initiative is to produce and nurture affection among family members. Clapp contrasts this to the Puritan family, along with the ideals of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, which was driven and thrived largely on rational, religious, and relational concerns rather than romantic ones. The Puritans' approach to raising children, for example, was more geared toward breaking their wills than lovingly nurturing them. They were careful not to step outside of the bounds of moderation when it came to loving their spouses and children.

The Scripture is not a timeless manual for family values but a collection of historically located stories about Israel and Jesus which utilizes a variety of different genres. The stories, examples, advice, and commands contained therein must be interpreted within their own historical and thematic contexts. Biblical family life was much different from today's family life as well as from the "traditionalist's" ideal of the so-called "biblical" Christian family (16).

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw enormous increases in the speed of travel which resulted in a drastic reduction in the "size" of the world. Increased speed of travel, communication, and convenience led to an unsturdy footing for moral values. Today, the postmodern world blows by us like the landscape seen from the inside of a commercial jetliner. These two post-enlightenment centuries demonstrated that just as many wars could be fought in the name of nationalism as that of religion, which had previously been strictly consigned to nonpublic life. Certain interpretations of scientific discoveries and theories undermined the validity of religious lifestyles. As a result, the postmodern world lost its sense of universal good, spawned individualism, and gave birth to a culture of self-absorption. Yet many continue to search for a place of safety and direction—"an Ark" (26).

Next, Clapp outlines the unnaturalness of what is today considered natural family tendencies in the Western world. Western cultural norms such as kissing are by no means universal or biological norms in human relationships. Even our concept of strict monogamy is foreign to many cultures today, as well as to those of the Bible. Homosexuality was also an accepted cultural norm in Greece, just as it is in postmodern society, which shows us that what human beings think of natural is not always best. Since the natural family can take many different forms, Christians must decide to define in detail what model of family we are zealously defending.

What is today dubbed the traditional and biblical model for family is the bourgeois family of the nineteenth century. The first trait of the bourgeois family is that it consigns the family to private life, making it an attractive refuge from the harsher world of public life. Second, it highly values the development and education of children. Third, the family is made the place from which personal ethics and self-identity are derived. Fourth, a high emphasis is placed on romantic love as the primary reason for marriage. Fifth, husbands and wives are expected to be extremely affectionate and respectful toward one another. Sixth, the woman is given a special place of dominance in the home, becoming the "protector of morals," (34) and marriage and motherhood are considered her highest calling.

The truly biblical Israelite family, on the other hand, differed drastically from the nineteenth century bourgeois family. First of all, many Israelite families were polygamous. They were also economically productive units which consisted of a "multigenerational extended family" which usually remained close together, forming a village, along with slaves. Although not entirely absent, sentimentality was not given the same position of purpose and priority for the family as in the modern and postmodern

bourgeois family model. Marriages were often arranged by family members for any variety of reasons including familial, military, and political.

All family systems have their problems because human beings act sinfully. Unlike animals which act on pure instinct, humans are able to govern their natural desires by culture and values. Humans are not born preprogrammed with the knowledge we need to survive as are the animals. Human knowledge and actions are guided by social concerns in which an entity such as the state or the church seeks its own benefit and survival. All Christians live in a sort of time between the inauguration and consummation of God's kingdom. We must learn to realize that the times and cultures around us are in a constant flux.

The bourgeois family became dominant alongside capitalism during the mid-nineteenth century. The rise of the industrial revolution also gave rise to and promoted a harsh, dark outside world. The man of the house became expected to leave his secure, comfortable family life at home and enter the world of business. In this outside world, his personal or religious values were to take a backseat to the drive for money, success, and power. The man may need to make use of deceit or other "immoral" behaviors in order to survive this harsh and dangerous world. During this time, the home became the guardian of religion and morality which were largely relegated to women and children.

Subsequently, the family has gone from being a haven from the "real world" to being permeated with the language and ideology of the market. Children are thought of in terms of money and time management and spouses are encouraged to "invest" in one another. Friendships and relationships which no longer serve their purposes should be "terminated." This model of family life Clapp calls the "economic exchange model" (63).

Instead of idolizing the family as the solution to the world's problems, Christians are called to put Jesus at the forefront of every part of our lives. Although the biblical nation of Israel arose from a single biological family, Jesus declared his true family to be those who obey the will of God. He called a community to embody his new ethic and confront the prescribed orders of the world. Throughout his ministry, Jesus continually affirmed family ties and the biblical laws which upheld them, but it is the family of God's kingdom which Jesus taught as central, just as Mary was primarily his disciple and his mother secondarily.

In chapter five the author deals with singleness and its advantages. Many churches view their singles as pre-married people in sort of a transition period awaiting truly "normal" existence. However, Clapp argues that Jesus and Paul both presented singleness as a better alternative to marriage. Augustine and other early church leaders viewed human sexuality as innately evil, but Old Testament Israelites valued marriage and procreation as commands from God and the only hope of a continued life after death. At the resurrection of Jesus, humanity was given a new assurance of life after death. In his teaching, Jesus' position on human relationships was that they are secondary to doing God's will. Paul's exaltation of the single Christian had to do with freedom for the cares of marriage for the purpose of concentrating on the work of God's kingdom. So it is the

single person who more exemplifies faith in Jesus' resurrection since, although neither celibacy outside of marriage nor sex within marriage are sinful, the single person trusts in God alone for eternal life and does not have the hope of a lineage on which to fall back.

Amidst Paul's imagery in describing the church and its functions is an array of family language, and even the "church's central sacrament," the Lord's Supper, emulates a family meal (82). Through baptism the Scriptures speak of new believers being "born again" into this new family and taking the name of Christ as "Christians." Paul's adoption language concerning new converts emphasizes their new identities in God's family, and just as the members of the church are given new identity, they are also given a new purpose and new patterns by which to live. Therefore, this richer and fuller existence to which the Christian attains from baptism onward makes it apparent that the nuclear family is not the most important institution for humanity which, if done correctly, will change the world; the church is.

Chapter six deals with fidelity and intimacy, as it pertains particularly to marriage and divorce. Just as two different bridge builders use separate sets of plans to build two different bridges, so the postmodern concept of fidelity differs drastically from Christian fidelity. Marriage in the former sense resembles a shopping mall of possible loyalties while the latter is a representation of the faithfulness of the Christian God. Although the secular world tends to insist that sex is "no more significant than drinking a glass of water" (124), Christians acknowledge a significance in sexual relations that carries lasting physical and spiritual implications, making two into one, and if practiced outside of a lifelong committed marriage, it becomes a betrayal of both God and self. However, viewing marriage in terms of the market, as a contractual rather than a covenantal relationship, lends more credibility to the concept of shopping around or sampling potential spouses prior to making a purchase. In "contractual fidelity" the terms of the relationship are conditional and self-centered whereas "covenantal fidelity" is an unbreakable promise before God and the church which vows to share and endure all things in this life (118). The former seeks a fuller experience of self through others, the latter a richer experience with others through the self. Adopting a contractual fidelity will only cripple us as people, leaving us incapable of loyalty.

Today's market-dominated culture also effects childrearing. The "economic exchange model" of relationships is not conducive to the stable, nurturing environment in which children thrive. Children are naturally selfish from the womb, primed and programmed to be obsessed with their own needs and desires. Thus, the "economic exchange model" of parenting, parenting at all makes no sense because self-interest must be suspended and even denied for the sake of nurturing offspring. In today's shrinking world, more and more people are faced with the need to coexist alongside people of other ethnicities and skin colors. The correct Christian response to being constantly confronted with people who are "different" from us is hospitality. Even so our children are strangers who have crossed our borders and interrupted our lives in ways we struggle to understand. As strangers, children learn about the world as they mimic their parents and remind us that they are God's special creatures who readily admit their dependence upon us. It is

through interaction with our children and the other strangers in our lives that we prepare to encounter and know the “supreme stranger,” Jesus Christ (148).

Keeping private life and public life conveniently separated is an illusion which is easily overcome by the current challenges of living in the real world, but it is a dividing line which Christians often fight to keep. Secularization of every aspect of society results from this false dividing line. This renders the church of Jesus Christ impotent in influencing the world and reduces the one true God to a “domestic mascot” (154). No separation between public and private life was ever imagined in either the biblical ancient Hebrew families or the first century Roman households in which the church had its origins. God cannot be hidden away in a private haven called home because He is Lord of all; Christian homes are not meant to be private havens but “missionary bases” which serve, support, and send Christ’s representatives into society in any variety of possible ways.

The Christian home becomes a “missionary base” when it ceases to live by the “economic exchange model,” when it stops being all wrapped up in itself. If it does not do so, then all the family is left with is a model which attempts to control all things, including God, for the mere purpose of cultivating its own intimacy. Christian families need to renew their commitment to the world and to the kingdom of God. Although this present age is an age of busyness in a restless individualistic world, Christianity (along with Judaism) is different in that it boldly celebrates the Sabbath principle, taking time off and allowing the world to relax as well. Celebration was a part of Jesus’ earthly ministry, and it is a part of our heavenly future in Christ. Thus, celebration is a vital aspect of living as missionaries in our homes and allowing our Christian families to be absorbed into the “first family, the church” (166). Like a rocket flying as far as it can on its own fuel and then falling back down to the earth, so is the individualist who thinks he or she can separate public and private life. It is in meticulously trying to maintain this dividing wall that burnout manifests, but true, meaningful, lasting work can be both exhausting and refreshing. This typifies the work of the kingdom of God, and, when engaged by Christian families, it is a harmonious marriage of our currently culture-separated public and private worlds.

#### IV. Critical commentary

The way Clapp sets up his main argument against the backdrop of postmodern society is both educational and insightful. He effectively challenges the postmodern evangelical ideal that the family is the highest and most important institution in society and, if done properly, will effectively change the world for the better. His reminder that truly biblical families are foreign entities to us here in the postmodern era is a real eye-opener to possibilities beyond what culture often assumes is just the way it is and the way it has always been. Clapp efficiently calls the world of families past to present remembrance and reminds us that their world was just as real as ours is today, complete with real struggles and challenges. Clapp reminds us that the ancients had to deal with many of the problems we face today such as economic and productivity issues, relational

issues such as childrearing and elder care, and social issues like caring for the poor, and many times they came up with much different answers than what today's generation proposes. Christian families today can learn a great deal from ancient families who often took care of their own rather than entrusting their relatives to the care of government.

Clapp clearly defines the problem which he confronts. Allowing the "economic exchange" culture of the market to dominate every part of life, including family and church, is a tragic mistake, and Clapp shows just how this devalues others in a person's eyes and exalts self. Such selfish attitude contradicts Scripture (Philippians 2:3) and is counter productive to the true mission of the church and of families. Clapp uses the medical industry as an example of the "belligerence of the bottom line" (57) and the effect it has on society. Creating the family in the market's image attempts to draw a permanent line between public and private life. Clapp combats this agenda by examining the details of its practice and moral values alongside those of the truly biblical, ideal Christian family.

Clapp's argument concerning the preference of the church over family, as important as family is, is a strong one, particularly when he refers to Jesus' preference of his disciples over his biological family in Mark 3:33-35. Clapp rightly preceded this very bold claim by first highlighting many of the ways which Jesus supported and upheld family values. His follow-up argument with Mary at the foot of her son's cross with John the disciple was especially compelling. Although it is clear from the context that this event was primarily for the purpose of appointing John to care for Jesus' aging mother (cf. John 19:27), Clapp's speculation of what Mary might have been thinking and learning at that time is not completely unmerited considering his line of argumentation concerning the church as "first family" (76) and his previous qualifier on page 79 in which he confesses ignorance of Mary's struggles but asserts that she, being human, must have had her share of them, as can be seen in her arranging Jesus' brothers to "restrain him" when she thought he was out of his mind (Mark 3:20-34).

In his chapter on the "superiority of singleness" (89), Clapp asserts that both Jesus and Paul exalted the single life over marriage. Although it is certain that the apostle Paul spoke more highly of singleness than marriage, Jesus did not make similar claims. Clapp cited Matthew 19:10-12 as support for the claim that Jesus prized singleness. However, in this passage Jesus merely declares concerning singleness, "Some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it" (Matthew 19:12). It was his disciples in verse ten who concluded that it was better for men not to marry if divorce was to have such strict requirements, almost as if asking Jesus this as a question soliciting his response. Another statement of Jesus concerning marriage and singleness has to do not with this present age but with the age to come. "At the resurrection," he says, "people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven" (Matthew 22:30, cf. Mark 12:25 & Luke 20:34-35). Neither of these two statements of Jesus can possibly be interpreted as revealing that he held a higher view of singleness over marriage in the present age. Similarly, citing his own single lifestyle would not be sufficient to provide evidence that Jesus esteemed singleness

over marriage as a way of life for his followers. Therefore, to affirm that he preferred one over the other is a stretch of the truth at best.

On pages 95-97, Clapp rightly asserts that the ancient Israelites highly valued marriage as a blessing as well as a necessary institution for bearing children and continuing the family lineage, ultimately contributing to the strength of the people or nation as a whole. He is also right to admit that most, if not all, of them did not have a clear view of the afterlife but viewed death as a dark occurrence in which the soul vanishes away. However, the lack of a developed theology of an afterlife in no way constitutes ignorance of the existence of one. Consider King Saul's contacting of the witch of Endor in order to consult the late prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 28:11), and even Clapp himself mentions that the Hebrews acknowledged the existence of a "place of the dead" (96). So Clapp's following conclusion in which he claims that the Israelites thought of the continuing of the family name through its offspring as the only means of attaining eternal life, being rooted in the previous assertion, stands on faulty ground. There is no doubt that a great deal of importance was placed on the survival of the family name, but for Israel to view this important cultural value as the true and only meaning of eternal life would be a purely atheistic rational and not befitting of God's chosen people.

In distinguishing between "contractual" and "covenantal fidelity" in relationships such as marriage and childrearing, Clapp effectively illustrates the selfish nature of "contractual" relationships. He shows that the reason for entering into relationships on a contractual basis is largely, if not solely, for ensuring that the individual's felt needs and purposes are attained. A person enters into a relationship contractually in order to better serve and get to know him or herself, rather than being confident and comfortable enough to give of self in order to experience others. Christian relationships are different in that they are covenantal in nature, sacrificial rather than selfishly ambitious, and commissioned with the call of living for a higher purpose, the kingdom of God.

In rounding out his main argument concerning the superiority of the church and its mission over the biological family, Clapp calls all Christian families to espouse a transcendent cause, to be "missionary bases" from which both the love and the gospel of Jesus Christ proceed. He demonstrates that the family must serve a purpose higher than its own self interests, and that is exactly what Christians are called to do. Clapp effectively refuted the notion of the private, strictly personal walk with God and placed Christ's commission within the context of families serving and glorifying God together as united parts of God's larger people. His conclusion, which is an entirely valid one, is that this is the only way to affect the larger postmodern world for the better with the love and knowledge of Jesus Christ which it so desperately needs.

#### V. Notable quotations

1. "Funny things *are* everywhere. No culture is as 'natural' as it pretends." (47)
2. "Such a realization [that funny things are everywhere]... is the need of the church and its family in every place and time." (47)

3. “Consider the church itself. We are counseled, through books such as *Marketing Your Ministry*, to reconceive the church’s mission in terms of the professional marketers.” (57)
4. “The panel members were asked to explain what is good about friendship, but were stymied because they could attempt to understand friendship only in terms of the manager who keeps a constant eye on the market’s bottom line.” (59)
5. The entire middle paragraph on page 60.
6. “In the postmodern world, heaven is a vast supermarket; hell is a corner drug store stocking only one brand of aspirin or toilet paper—or more significantly, only one brand of religion or morality or marriage.” (61)
7. “A child will limit my mobility, dictate the spending of much of my money and create ‘agendas’ I would otherwise never have imagined for myself.” (63)
8. “The home once served major economic and social functions. Now it is a ‘haven’ from the ‘real world.’ It is a retreat for the wage-earner and a nest for children who await true personhood in the form of maturity and independence.” (64)
9. “I shop, therefore I am.” (64)
10. “Sharply privatizing the family is the first step toward killing it.” (65)
11. “The married must think not only of themselves and God’s call for them, but also of what that call will mean for spouse and children. Family does complicate things.” (100)
12. “The New Testament does not imagine such a thing as an autonomous person. Everyone is under the influence of and belongs to one god or another—even if it is a god no more glorious than one’s own belly (Phil 3:19).” (102)
13. “After all, we can be rescued from terrorists, delivered from the whip of the slave master in Egypt or on the Georgia plantation, freed from Auschwitz. But no commando, no Moses or Lincoln, no Allied soldier can rescue or free us from ourselves.” (103)
14. “Trying to stay married by focusing on all the possibly legitimate reasons for divorce is like trying to stay healthy by imagining all the ways you might fall sick, or trying to attain wealth by studying the innumerable ways people slide into poverty.” (119)
15. “So we must live lives of faithfulness to become the kind of people capable of recognizing the God who is faithful.” (121)
16. “In Christian marriage, I commit my entire life and all its possibilities (and liabilities) to my spouse.” (127)
17. “Covenantal fidelity expects my spouse and marriage to become an indispensable part of my identity, my very self.” (127)
18. “The ultimate aim of covenantal fidelity is intimacy with others through the individual self... Contractual fidelity does not have the same ultimate aim. In it the ultimate aim is intimacy with the individual self through others.” (129)



19. “But note: consumer morality only “works” only as long as everyone does not try to live by it (ff- entire paragraph).” (135)
20. “Each person, a child included, is a creation of God and ultimately belongs to God.” (146)
21. “We are most autonomous and efficient when messy human relationships, with all the imaginative and emotional involvement that comes with them, can be pushed aside.” (152)
22. “The biblical attestation is that Christ is Lord “of my heart” *because* he is first and foremost Lord of the cosmos.” (153)
23. “But we Christians should especially object to an arrangement that trivializes faith and reduced Yahweh to a household god, Jesus to a domestic mascot.” (154)
24. “The effects of secularization have shown us that if God is not God of all parts of our lives, God is not really God of any part of our lives.” (156)
25. “As Paul had it, we show—no, we *are*—*Christ* to the world by being his body, by worshipping together, helping one another materially and spiritually, using gifts of the Spirit for the common good (1 Cor 12).” (157)