

OpenTheo

Q&A#3 A Biblical Theology of the Household

May 16, 2018



Alastair Roberts

Today's Question: Is there a biblical theology of the household you could outline for us in a YouTube video?

Leave your own questions in the comments, on my blog, or on my Curious Cat account.

<http://alastairadversaria.com/>

<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>

Transcript

Welcome back. I'm continuing my series of answers to questions that have been left by listeners. And today, the question comes from someone on Curious Cat.

The question is, is there a biblical theology of the household you could outline for us in a YouTube video? Not a small question at all. This will have to be off the top of my head, so I'm sure that I'll miss many of the bases that I'd want to cover if I were doing a longer piece on the subject. But here goes.

I think the first thing to say about the household is that it's not just the family. It's not just the house or the home or even the domestic sphere. It's far broader than, it's broader than all of those things.

It includes the people within the family. It includes the house and includes the domestic sphere and things like that. But it's broader than that, including everything that belongs to the family.

It includes the people that are within the realm of the family, people who have been welcomed into that realm. It includes animals. It includes possessions.

It includes a realm of activity and dominion within the world. And so the household, in many respects, can be seen as a realm of dominion, the realm of dominion that is the proper possession of a particular body of people bound together as a family. It's a

solidarity of life.

It's a living society. It's not just an institution as a system. A system can survive indefinitely.

It's not a living thing. Whereas the household is bound up with the family and is something that develops over time. It's a living organism and it develops through stages.

So a couple get together and they form a life together. They build a world around themselves. They bear children that they welcome into that world and they accumulate possessions and influence within the world.

In all of these ways, that's the household growing. The household is the realm of, that is created around the family. The orbit that it creates around itself through the gravity that it exerts upon its surroundings.

It's a realm of hospitality. It's a realm of belonging and communion. You belong to a household.

It's somewhere where life is experienced together, not just in solitude. It's an orienting realm. It presents people with an interior, an exterior, an anterior and a posterior.

There's a before represented by the family. It's something that passes on through generations. There's a continuation there.

There is inheritance that's bound up with the household. The household is not just something accumulated by people in one generation. It's something that is built up over time.

You build up your household. It's something that moves into the future. Parents have children and they will bequeath their household to their children.

They instruct their children and direct them into the future. They recall the past. It's a realm of the interface and interaction between the generations of the movement indeed from one generation to the next.

In these respects, it's an elaboration of the natural reality of male and female and the family. Those dynamics by which we are formed as larger communities are ones that find their root primarily within the household and within the life of the family. Male and female moving from one generation to the next, the relationship between children and their parents, all these sorts of things are preserved by the household but not just those things.

It's also a realm that is opened up to the wider world. The interior is a realm that belongs to those within the household. But it's also a political reality.

It engages with the wider world. It has weight within societies as a whole. We tend to think of the household within our society as just the domestic sphere, this privatised realm that you retreat to after you've done your work for the day.

Whereas within scripture, the household and the family are public realities with public and social and civil weight. And so the household is an entity that has political ramifications. The household acts as a political entity.

It is the building block of society, not just the detached individual that can be placed into these abstracted systems and these dead systems. The household is something that arises out of an organic reality and grows into something that's elaborating upon that natural institution. It's a realm of succession, as I mentioned.

It's also a particular and a particularising realm. Everyone's family, everyone's household is different. And every household is not just a system or a technique.

It's a rooted reality. It's a reality rooted in a particular place, in a particular time. It comprises of particular individual persons.

It's not just an abstract system into which you can slot anything. It's a very particular reality that is sustained through time. And as a particular reality, it's something that trains us in what it means to love, to be people who are bound to a particular place and reality.

Love is not just a general benevolence to all things. Love is something that particularises its objects and is something that is elicited by our bonds with particular objects and with particular persons. The affection that you develop for a particular place, for a particular set of objects, objects that maybe belong to your grandparents or something like that.

All of these things are bound up with what it means for the household to be the household. The household is a rooted, embedded reality, engaged with a particular world, with a world that it has been formed around the life of a man and a woman, their children, the people within their wider scope that they've invited in. It's because the family in scripture is always a realm of hospitality.

It's a realm that can include many people beyond the immediate family members. It's not just biological descendants. It can include servants, it can include strangers who are given hospitality.

All these sorts of people can come within the orbit of the household, even if only temporarily. It's a realm of provision and mutual support. It's a realm where we don't labour alone, but it's a realm of common labour, a common labour for a common good.

And the common good is the accumulated wealth of the household that's passed on. It's the shared life of the household in the joy and the fellowship and the health that are

shared together. And it's also a realm of sharing and teaching and preserving that knowledge that passes on from generation to generation.

Now, this household is an expression of the ordering of marriage and the family out into the world. And so if we're looking for a biblical foundation of the household, the best place to start is somewhere like Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis 1, God's creation of the world, and then God creates man and woman within his world for the sake of his world. And he creates the man first.

He creates the man with the task of... He creates the man for the sake of tilling the earth and taming the wider earth, forming it, and places him within a garden, a realm that is given to the trust of the man. The man has to take care of this. He has to guard it and he has to serve it.

And he has to maintain God's boundaries within it, the command not to eat of the tree, of the knowledge of good and evil, but also the privilege of eating of all the other trees. This is a realm that is given to the man for his rule and his control and for his service. And then the woman is created to assist him in that.

And this realm that is created around the man and the woman is a differentiated realm. It's a realm where the man and the woman play different parts within that larger world, and their relationship is ordered to and around that realm. So, we tend to think of marriage in abstraction from the world into which it serves.

So, we think about a man and a woman looking at each other face to face and relating to each other like that. Whereas God created man and woman and the family and marriage within a world and for the sake of a world, for the sake of its service. The place of the garden in relationship to the man and the woman in Genesis 2 is important to recognise because that is constitutive in part of their relationship.

It's a realm of dominion that they share in common, a realm that they're supposed to form and fill and they're supposed to go out into the wider world and bring God's order to bear upon that realm. And so, understanding it that way, I think it can help us to see why the life of a man and a woman in a marriage is not just a private relationship, but it's this larger reality that goes out into the world. It's a realm of common creation, of common ownership and of common rule.

It's a domain that they share and as I mentioned yesterday, the vision in somewhere like the end of Proverbs, the woman there, she's someone who has built and created, formed a great household around her. The vision that you have there is not just of the economically active woman. That is not seen as a glorious vision in scripture per se.

The glorious vision is that this is her house that she has formed. This is her world that orbits around the life that she has at the heart of it. And the man and the woman

together have created this kingdom that they share.

And that is the vision that you see in embryo in Genesis 2 that builds out elsewhere in scripture. We can see the fullness of a good household is when that relationship between a man and a woman lies at the heart of a rich and full realm of hospitality, of ownership, of dominion, of engagement with the world and with society. It's a realm where there is a place where their life expands into something far, far greater.

Where their union is just a seed of a great realm of rule within the world and of hospitality for others. And so, as we abstract marriage and the family from this wider fabric of reality, we lose sight of the household. Because the household is what happens when that relationship is embedded in reality, engaged fully in reality.

And it's fab, it forms this fabric of reality, this world around itself. And the household is, as it were, the full expression of what it means for a man and woman to be brought together and become one flesh. The one flesh is not just a private union between them.

It's a world that they form around them into which many people can be drawn into its orbit. Now, in our society, it's difficult for us to understand this. It's difficult for us to understand it in part because we have experienced multiple forms of alienation.

Alienation from the household, which is an organic human form of life that is elaborated into a form of engagement with the world. And it's, first of all, that form of life is placed within the world for the sake of engagement. And then it develops out from that.

But we've alienated labour from the household. The household is not a realm of labour for us. And so what it means to exercise dominion as the household and in the household makes less sense for us.

We've alienated labour from its fruits. So we earn money, but there's less of a sense of the household being a realm of production itself. And that the actions that we do and the fruit of those actions are things that we own and they are expressions of our dominion.

Whereas the household preserves that connection and it preserves the connection between character and labour. It has also resulted in alienation from man from woman. Within the household, the man and the woman are working together to create this world.

And so the man and the woman labour together as husband and wife. They're not usually working together side by side in everything that they do, but they're working towards a common good, towards a common end. Whereas now we think very much of individuals interchangeably engaged within the marketplace.

And the modern workplace is a unisex environment where most people who work within that environment spend far more time working with their colleagues of the other sex than they do with their partner and their spouse. And so there has been a deep

alienation there. This is a radically unusual form of life.

This is not something that exists in most societies. The household is an organic form of life which has been developed in various different forms within different societies. But in each case it's rooted within this union of man and woman.

It's rooted within the relationships between the generations. It's rooted in the particularity of place and the way that that union is elaborated into that form of engagement and interface with that particular place. Then there's an alienation of children from parents and generations from each other.

Children are increasingly outsourced to other carers, to other teachers. And so the family as a realm of pedagogy and training and orienting children into the world is no longer so active. And one example of this is the family as a realm or the household as a realm of labour.

It would be passed on from generation to generation. It wouldn't just be a single generation individual working to support his family in his own trade. Rather it would be a trade that the rest of the family supported and got involved in.

And a father would train his son to take over the family business afterwards and there would be succession there. Now there are good and bad things within that situation but the sense of ownership and succession and continuity are very important. Likewise the alienation of individuals from communities.

The household is somewhere where there's a deep rooted belonging and an identity that is given to you with all these different relationships that I mentioned. It situates you in an internal realm, a realm that is deeply shared between a group of people, their family and the other people within that or the orbit of the household. And that is expressed in many different ways.

It's expressed with the interior language that a family can build around itself. It can be expressed in the joy of song. And then there's also a relationship with the wider world as the family and the household are realms with authority and weight politically.

It's not just the individual acting as a political agent but the family acts and certain people act on behalf of the family as representatives of the family. And this is a significant change within our society that we think of just individuals, detached individuals, acting in abstraction from the family without any reference to the family. And society is dealing with individuals within the family again without reference to the family structure itself.

And so the abstraction of individuals from community is another thing that needs to be borne in mind. And in scripture the ideal is the bringing together of all these different things. The idea of man and woman being joined together in a common realm of rule

within the world.

The idea of this realm of shared life being also a realm of dominion. That the life that is shared is not just this realm of retreat and domestic reservation but it's a realm that is deeply engaged and powerfully active and involved and productive and creative within the world. And that's the ideal.

It's something that brings together our engagement within the particular realm, within a particular bond but also develops that into a realm of productivity and engagement. It's also something that creates a very tight bond between the generations as a realm of succession, of inheritance, of teaching and training, of passing on skills and all these things that preserve that human bond between the generations. Now we have systems that take the place of the household in many respects.

The modern business is a system that largely takes the place of the household as do certain things like schools and other things like that. To a certain extent, certain weight that used to exist upon the household has now been shifted to them. And that is significant as the outsourcing of all these things to other agencies gradually weakens the family and the household.

And so when the families within our society are breaking up that's in part because there's not much weight placed upon them. If we really need the family to survive, to do well, then we put weight on the family and it becomes strong. The family is something that's strengthened through pressure and through the weight that is placed upon it.

When there's little weight placed upon it and it's just a matter of private affiliation it becomes a lot easier to break down. And then within scripture, salvation is addressed to households. Households are not just collections of individuals.

They're realms of a common life, a common engagement with reality, common dominion. It's a realm of teaching and it's a realm which has an ordered structure to it. It's not just individuals brought together within this one container as it were.

Rather there's a head to the household. There's also one who stands at its heart with the wife and the mother is someone who stands at the heart of the household. She's as it were the tree of life, the human tree of life in the middle of the human garden.

The garden of the household grows out of the life of the mother primarily and she's the centre of gravity at its midst. Whereas the father is the head of the household. He's the one who represents primarily the household into the wider world.

He's the one who acts on behalf of the household into that wider world. And again when we abstract the household from the world and we start to have just detached families and realms of sentimental retreat, we lose a sense of what that headship can mean. Because the headship of Christ for instance is a headship that is not primarily a rule over

the church.

It's not a rule over the church primarily but a rule over the world for the sake of the church. And so his powerful action out into the world is something that empowers us as his people. We're blessed in the fact that he is powerful within the world, that he acts on our behalf, that he represents us, that he is our head.

And as we've detached the family and the household from the wider society that relationship has become confused. It's become a sort of ingrown relationship where the headship of the man is very much a headship that can be expressed through just a petty patriarchalism where he's trying to rule and create these micromanaging structures for the other people within the household. That's not the biblical vision at all.

Rather the household is a realm of powerful engagement. It's a realm that's supposed to grow out into the world, a realm that is supposed to be the centre of gravity for the whole of life. This is not just something that we would go back to at the end of the day at the office.

This is something that should be at the very heart of all that we do. It's not just because this is an idealised vision. In some ways this is a vision that would be very hard to realise within our time.

And so we can put certain things back together. We can't restore it all. But what we should seek to do is to recognise the importance of building society around the human structures, the human bonds that are most important, around the bond between our labour and our life, around the bond between man and woman, around the bond between one generation and the generation that follows, around the bond between children and parents, around the bond between our character and our labour, around the bond between labour and ownership.

And in all these respects our society falls far short. We have a great deal of power within the world but this power tends to be abstracted from a particular relationship of love with a realm of life and a commitment to that realm of life, to preserving that realm, to blessing the people and providing for the people within that realm and a realm of common ownership. In all these respects I think many of the economic issues that we face within our society around justice and economics, a lot of these relate to the breakdown of the household structure and we need to think about that.

Within the New Testament in places like Acts we see the baptism of households, the whole groups of people are baptised and this is because they share a common life, they share a common orientation and when the head of the household is converted that has a ripple effect for everyone within and it is almost presumed that everyone else is implicated within that and there will of course be some people perhaps within the family, these sorts of families and households that will not want to follow and will not want to

convert but the presumption is that once the head of the household has converted everyone else is implicated within that. Likewise in the Old Testament salvation occurs in household form so Abraham and his household are brought out of Ur of the Chaldees, not just him and his wife but all the people around him, all his servants, all his wider relations as well are brought and you see this idea of an orbit around people that all these people are included and we are saved not just as detached individuals but as bodies of people. Likewise with Noah and elsewhere in scripture we see this household principle very clearly expressed so for instance as Paul talks to the Philippian jailer, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved and the verse continues both you and your household.

Now many people would like to say that that's just if you're converted you will be saved and your household if they are converted they will be saved too but yet there's the assumption that in this shared body of life and the shared communion of life and common belonging that as the Philippian jailer converts his household will as a natural in natural course they will convert too. That doesn't mean that faith isn't important for them, quite the opposite, it means that their faith is not just this detached individual faith but it can be a shared faith of a community that they are participating in and the presumption is if they are truly participating in that community and if the head of that community has converted they will follow suit and so this vision within scripture is not such that the family is automatically saved or the household is automatically saved just because the head of the household converts but rather it's the assumption that the rest of the household is included within the life that is represented by the head and as they convert then the rest of the family will follow them in that course. Now this has implications for infant baptism and other subjects like that, I won't get into that here and this has been a very rough and rambling treatment of the subject.

It's hard to pull together all the threads of a subject as big as that of the household but I hope this is a helpful start for thinking through some of these issues. These issues have great significance not just for thinking about issues like baptism but they have significance for thinking about the relationship between man and woman, the relationship between humanity and the world, the way that we approach our economies, the way that we relate the family to business, all these sorts of things and I hope that many of you will look into this subject more because there's a lot there to be explored and it's very important within our current situation in society. I'll see you again tomorrow, hope that you find this helpful.