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THE FAMILY INSTITUTION—ITS SACREDNESS AND SIGNIFICANCE.

“At the same time, saith the Lord, will I be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people.”—JEREMIAH xxxi. 1.

YEARS, and even ages, were to intervene between the utterance of this promise by the lips of the prophet and its actual fulfillment in the times of the restoration of the Jews from their captivity. Meanwhile they were to pass through great and violent changes and commotions which threatened their existence as a people. Yet, upon their return, the arrangement of the nation into families would be found entirely unaffected. And this thought, suggested by the text, is exceedingly note-worthy, and is found, too, universal in its bearings—that, however society may be rent by sudden and long-extended revolutions, seeming to reach to its very foundations, and producing chaos which only the hand of God can reduce to order, the family institution remains permanent, the immovable basis upon which all others are built. In our own times we have an illustration the most remarkable in man's history, where in the French nation over the Church swept destroying storms, and all civil government lay prostrate, but against all the attempts of evil men, “the family”

remained as a munition of rocks, upon which the government and the church are reared again, essentially unchanged. In this promise, too, God not only recognizes the permanence and importance of the family, but presents Himself under an aspect peculiarly attractive. He had from the first been the *national* God of the Jews, enthroned in clouds and darkness, shining forth to the worshipers from between the cherubim, and displaying His wrath against His enemies. But they have been afflicted, and return stricken and feeble to their land, and now he is the *household* God, coming as an inhabitant under the lowly roof, and throwing the light of His glory around all that circle with whom He has condescended to associate. For we cannot believe the promise has reference only to the families of Israel collectively, or to those families in the large sense, that is, the *clans*, somewhat smaller than the tribes; the preceding clause would teach otherwise, for, "Behold, saith the Lord, I will bring again the captivity of Jacob's tent, and have mercy on his dwelling-places, and out of them shall proceed thanksgiving and the voice of them that make merry. I will also glorify them, and they shall not be small." Neither need we scruple to interpret this word in its fullest significance, as we remember that he who brought down to man the thoughts of the heart of God, and who sanctified human dwelling-places by His presence, said, "If any man will keep my word, my Father will love him, and we will come and take up our abode with him." This great promise belongs to the church, and to the church of all times, for God does not recede in his purposes of grace, and God is now an inhabitant of the Christian house, claiming to regulate its affairs, guarding its interests, providing daily bread for its members, comforting in sorrow, and when death dissolves the consecrated community gathering it again in fairer realms.

This is the true ideal of the human family—that God is in it, the Sovereign, the Guardian, the Friend, the common bond of union; that it confesses His presence and recognizes His claims; that to Him each day the hearts of all go up in thankfulness, and the *thank-offering* also be rendered. This is the promise, which shall be fulfilled in the approaching era of gladness and long-expected reign of Christ, when, in the countless habitations of cities and villages, altars of thank-offering shall be reared as in temples to God, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Believing that false estimates of this institution must be productive of lasting and fatal injury, and that such estimates most widely prevail, we shall ask your prayerful attention to some considerations which may serve to correct them. And to the end that each member of the family may discern his personal obligations in guarding and promoting household religion, we shall speak, in the first place, of the sacredness of the institution, and secondly, of its design under the divine government.

I. The sacredness of the family as a *divine institution*. It is the oldest of all earthly institutions, older than the church or the state, or even than the Sabbath, which "was made for man," and not man for it. The materials of creation finished, there in the formation of the first family in Eden, history, properly speaking, began. Imposing and significant was that first marriage ceremony, in which Adam must for a time return to unconsciousness, to the image of death from which he is raised to a new life, to new and strange relations, which, by a striking sign—even by a miracle wrought—are ordained to be permanent. The soul of the first man understood the meaning of God, when he said, "This is now bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh." It was the confession for all times, that separation would be as unnatural as it would be profane. And it also, you will recollect, allowed no cruelty, no misfortune, no external disgrace, not even insanity, to be a sufficient ground in the sight of God for divorce, signifying that it were better great calamities and wrongs should be suffered in single instances than that mankind should come to regard lightly the bonds of a divinely appointed institution. If we enter then the human household, and look upon it even in the light of nature, it is seen to be a kingdom ordained of God, with its own laws, interests, and responsibilities; in the earliest times, its patriarch, the eldest born, being its ruler and priest, to whom disobedience was a crime. But, in the light of revelation, is it seen a kingdom of such importance in the divine economy, that the King of heaven comes down to issue regulations for its administration. He leaves the state mainly to make its own laws, but He takes every member of the family under His own supervision, from the master of the house to the servant, and even the dumb animal that serves; the husband, the wife, the children, the man-servant, and maid-servant, and the cattle, whose treatment is also seen to have a mighty influence on the moral character of the whole household. In relation to all these, God as Governor of the world issues special edicts, and not only general principles of action but the minutest directions. And it was because He, who does nothing in vain, knew what the family was, and its indestructible influence for weal or woe upon every other relation of life, and would impress upon us that this institution was not an institution of man. Probably most of us could be astonished at the vast collection of laws for the family which would be made from the word of God, which is a statute for the household. And continually, as Christianity extends its influence, does the family become more sacred, and a grandeur is seen to invest it to which we are blind, only because sin has blinded us to all the real grandeur of life, and contracted our views to what is only paltry and sensual. Christianity will yet bring forth this holy institution, so long neglected, degraded, perverted, and debased, to its true position. Already the light is glimmering upon

some minds, and already is it seen, that with increase of knowledge and with moral elevation, the members of the household are bound in closer bonds, and that each member falling into his proper position is necessary to complete a symmetry of God's own devising. To every believer the family of the Christian ought to be sacred, because God has declared its members holy, and has ordered the sacred seal of baptism to be set upon them, even upon the infant, including all in one covenant of grace, and allowing the parent to exercise faith, and to plead promises for the child. And no Christian ought to forget that Jesus Christ was a member of the human family, and that His infant smile once answered to a mother's, as nature was weaving around Him the mysterious household ties, and that he knew filial reverence and brotherly affection. Neither when His soul expanded with the mighty thoughts of his mission, nor when the God-head shone out with power, nor when the earth was reeling under the great expiation for sin were those ties lessened. Looking down from the cross He sees His mother weeping, and near her the beloved disciple, and the affection of a son still speaks from amid the agonies of death, "Woman, behold thy son!" and to his disciple, "Behold thy mother!" and thus in the life of Jesus, which is the example for all generations, do we find proof that the family should be perpetual, and thus also forever in the eyes of the believer is the family consecrated.

There are also mysterious and unexplained bonds which unite the human family, and the oldest tragedies in the world are founded upon the dark woes of a household, scattered and suffering for the crime of one of its members. Everywhere the avenging power is upon their track. Ignorant of one another, even of their relationship, and flying from refuge to refuge, a relentless fate shuts them up to a common and terrible destiny. Even the darkened heathen mind in distant ages could see that families are bound by ties stronger than interest or affection, and with shuddering could see how a crime sent mysteriously its fatal influence through them all like the stroke of an axe through all the leaves and branches of the same tree, or, as a desecration polluted the whole temple, which from thenceforth was devoted to destruction. There was none to tell him the great lesson made known to us why death so relentlessly pursues us all, because we are the family of man. "By one *man* sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all *men* for that all have sinned;" neither for him was there any sanctuary from the destroying and invisible power.

The blindest can see that physical, intellectual and moral qualities come down in the family; the family resemblance reaching to the very soul, and the results of evil actions and of good ones descending to the third and fourth generations. God visits the iniquities of the fathers on the children, and when

Dathan and Abiram sinned, their wives and children, standing with them in the doors of their tents, are seen to descend alive with their fathers into the abyss. But we also behold Noah entering with his house into the ark: we can see that God meant the strange family bond for good.

These bonds of the family are more than imaginary; they are grounds of imputation. They belong to us as "fearfully and wonderfully made;" and as death visits the household, and a parent, a brother, a sister, or a child falls and is borne to the tomb, the souls of them that remain mourn in the depths of their nature as if a part of their very life were taken away. Human institutions, however carefully erected, though consecrated by oaths solemnly taken, and imposing ceremonies, yet reach no farther than interest or, at best, sentiment; but God's institutions reach to the very life of man, and take hold of his spiritual nature.

Thus has God set off every family from all other families, and given to it in all lands a seclusion, and a seclusion the more sacred as His word obtains a power the more sacred over the heart. The important reasons of this seclusion we shall see as we come to the second part of our discourse; but there is another thought connected with the sacredness of the institution which we cannot pass by. It is, that God has made the human family the *symbol of heaven* and of heavenly things. And so generally is this the case, that, were infidelity to succeed in its miserable attempt to break up the household, a vast portion of the word of God would become unintelligible, and all the best portions of our knowledge and highest conceptions of spiritual things would disappear. "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh," nature itself has our modern reformers in derision, as they attempt to stir, and upheave, and re-arrange the pillars of this mighty government of God, in which it is the wisdom and the blessedness of ignorant man to take refuge as a bird in its mountain. How without the family could we comprehend God as a Father? The Parable of the Prodigal Son would be forever lost to us, and the Spirit of Adoption and our Father's House would become to us sounds of unknown significance. The life of Jesus would be as worthless to us as a myth to be swept into the rubbish of the past, for we could no longer comprehend the beauty of its pervading spirit of love, nor imitate His acts of fraternal and child-like affection. It is by the family that we understand the relations of the church to Christ as the Bride of the Lamb, and the Church as the mother of us all, by whom we are nourished and nurtured for a higher life, or the relations the redeemed are to sustain unto each other as they dwell in the "many mansions" and eat bread with the Elder Brother. But what a sanctity does the employment of the family images for such a purpose throw around this institution on which we are prone to look so slight-

ingly. Taken for the service of the temple, "Holiness to the Lord" is written upon it. Having its origin in the dawns of time, it has through all ages been a shadow of spiritual and heavenly realities—a reflection in these turbid waters of the light of our distant home. Ah! Christian parent, it was not when the stranger died that you looked from the symbol to the reality. It was when your child left you, you saw the mute beckonings of the young spirit as it was ascending to a Father's bosom, and to dwell with its kindred; then only you found consolation in the thought that this is the shadow that passeth away, but the substance abideth forever.

From what we have said it is evident that the family can be no otherwise than an institution of vast influence and power in the world. However simple its organization or limited its resources, there are in it so much of the wisdom and authority of God, that we can only cease to regard it with awe when we have lost all reverence for Him, or respect for His purposes, or fear of His judgments.

II. But we must now proceed to inquire, "What is the *design* of the Family institution in the divine economy?"

Temporal though it be in its nature, yet the briefest observation will show us its most intimate connection with the eternal, its solemn bearing upon all that goes to make up our life in this world and the next—the divinely appointed habitation in which the young and ignorant spirit finds a temporal home. Unconscious as yet of its origin or destiny, of its capacities, of duty, of danger, coming an entire stranger into the universe it is never again to leave; it here derives its first impressions (which give a coloring to all others). It finds its ideas of what life is, or what is its end, where it meets the true or pretended guides which lead it onward or send it forth with instructions upon its endless journey. *The family is the nursery of all those affections*, the regulation and exercise of which is in all after-life to constitute the happiness or wretchedness of their possessor. Here it is, if ever, the basis is to be laid in parental authority for reverence and the spirit of submission; in parental truth for faith; in parental affection for filial love. We may best conceive how much we owe to the family in the development of the social affections by bringing before us a complete household, modelled and conducted according to the divine command. The father, remembering that he is the representative of God and therefore careful to mingle his commands with affection, to see that they are founded in perfect righteousness and that therefore they are always obeyed. The mother, ever conscious that God has made her the representative of the church, and taking for her guidance the law of her God. And both looking up to Him who "giveth wisdom," and consecrating their children to holi-

ness, would be sure of the return of reverential, affectionate, and trustful hearts. If affliction come, all their sons and daughters would rise up to comfort them; if disease—if poverty—enter as an “armed man,” filial love would protect them as the shield of the mighty. When old age comes on, no neglect from ungrateful children would dishonor their “crown of glory,” as leaning on the strong arm of manhood they would go down to rest in the grave. The moral effect of such a life no mind can estimate, or the value of such an education just when it is possible in the life of the soul, when it is to be decided what affections shall predominate, when the foundations are laid to which the building must conform. In such a family rise up the brotherly affections and their accompaniments, self-denial and mutual assistance, compassion for the sick, tenderness for the weak, sense of mutual rights, obedience to law among equals and for inferiors. In a word, all those characteristics which fit man for life in the world are here developed, and for this end the family is instituted. Qualities, which in individual men have awed or charmed the world, are traceable back to the family; and the greatest men the world has known, have confessed that to a father’s or a mother’s teaching they owed the impulse which sent them onward. The man’s life as a citizen of this world will be mainly shaped by the influences of home. The orderly citizen most generally has come from the orderly home; the law-breaker from the lawless household. Go into the state prison and you will find it so; and hundreds, with one voice, will tell you in effect, “I was never in my home inspired with one high or true conception of life. My father never seemed to think of my futurity, or to know any responsibility. My mother lived for show and dress and vanity, and never imparted to me one lofty guiding thought. Without an idea of government I was sent into the world, and only by the stern, harsh, soulless edicts and penalties of the civil State am I educated for time and eternity. I had no home, or my home was like a hell.” Thus does every family send out its representatives into the world to tell its secrets. But a truth of far greater importance is that in the design of God the *Family is the nursery of the Church*. Whether in the case of Abraham, the Family and the Church being one, God designed to lay down a great principle we need not now inquire; but that He afterwards taught the intimate connection of the two institutions is sufficiently evident, for He not only ordained the rite of circumcision and baptism to the household, but He solemnly enjoined upon His people to teach to their households, and especially to their children, the great truths held by the church, and to impress upon their minds its principles. “Thou shalt teach these things diligently to thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way; when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.” Train up

your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. The Christian family is holy. It is itself a miniature church, to which promises are made, yea, with which God enters into covenant, where praises are rendered, and the brotherly love, which afterward finds a field for exercise in the church at large, originates and is cultured. All the qualities which go to make one a useful or a useless member of the House of God, are developed in the family. On the one hand, benevolence, sympathy for suffering, gentleness, love for God's works of Nature, enlarged views of the world; or, on the other, covetousness, fear of poverty, ignorance of the wants of a great suffering world. It is of vast importance that Christian parents should understand that they are appointed by God to bring up, to educate their children as members of the Church of Christ; that in their own hearts they are to keep that thought uppermost in all their discipline, remembering that in this great work they have the promised aid of God. And until they act upon this thought, they have done nothing of real value for their child. And the question often recurring to every Christian parent should be, not what is this child to be, as a member of society, but what is he to be in the church of Jesus Christ. Am I shaping his views in accordance with a calling so high and glorious, in accordance with the movings of Providence, and the signs of the times? We do not mean to assert that the parent can *convert* the child, but that he should train him up in the *expectation* of his conversion; should seek to develop those traits of character which make the useful *Christian*; should chisel the marble into shape, although he cannot give life. Let him act in faith, and the law of the kingdom is that life shall come.

But there is another truth to which we have already alluded, but which rises transcendent in magnitude, and in whose shadows we may well sit trembling—the *family is the nursery for eternity*. There is indeed one redeeming power beyond it, and that is the Church, and blessed be God! it has reclaimed thousands who have gone forth from Godless homes. But what are these to the millions who, under the power of a mighty and perverted law, are hurried from the habitations of men to the habitations of the lost. You are educating forever, ye parents, those immortal spirits whose emotions are seen in smiles or tears. They are *spirits*, oh! my hearer, that look forth upon you from their earthly house—that have mysteriously come to your dwelling as a home—that have entwined themselves around your hearts—that cling to you to guide them into rest. If you are wise, you will make no impress there without prayer for heavenly wisdom. We look forward into the eternal world, and behold a human spirit, who for ages has stood before the throne of God; and yet, amid the glory that envelopes him, we see the likeness he bore on earth. The powers that have become vast, are those which began to

move in the human family ; reverence, trust, *all* found nutriment there ; and the poor teachings of the earthly home are deathless, because they were imparted to a living soul. Neither will the fires of hell eradicate the impress of the family influence ; but still the lost soul will carry the family likeness ; will trace back its emotions, its spirit of disobedience, its irreverence to that home of earth, where the prayerless parent baptized it for despair, and taught it to forsake the house of God, to live without prayer, to love gold, and to seek for rest in the honors of the fading world.

We can clearly see from this why God has secluded families and divided the earth into households. It is that we may definitely look upon the Family by itself as His institution, and that by countless instances He may show its power for good and for evil, and by terrible or encouraging examples and results of good or evil training. All over the earth and for thousands of years sending His mercy to the families that kept His commands, He has taught mankind, pouring out His fury on the families that called not on His name. Another reason equally important is seen for this separation of households, that each may for itself uncontrolled by others decide on obedience or disobedience. Thus God sets forth families, that wickedness may not be perpetual, that the curse may be cut off as the new household is formed after righteousness, but that continually the sources of influence may be new. That instinctive fear the Christian parent feels, lest the child should be contaminated with the world, is implanted by God, and accords with the divine design. It is that his family may be kept holy and become a centre of holy influence, that each like Abraham may with his household be separate from the godless and worldly, except to do them good ; that here the voice of instruction may be heard ; and here, and not among strangers, the training of the child for time and eternity may go on.

In this discourse, my friends, I have felt, and I think you have, that we have been wandering in an ideal world ; and as we look at the real conduct of most human families we are ready to ask, were not the instructions of the Bible upon the Family given for some other race ? Alas ! how has sin defaced all the beautiful things of God, and strewn the earth with broken fragments of the house of divine symmetry and proportion ! Here and there the fair household virtues shine forth in this night of sin but separate, save as the Gospel has united ~~them~~ from the heavenly. My brethren, if we saw the Family in ~~the~~ light of revelation, we should look with the same horror upon the prayerless house, as we now do on a desecrated temple of God. Upon it we should see resting the frown of an incensed Deity, and awaiting it and all its unhappy inmates a doom over which human tragedy may not presume to utter its wail. The prayerless house is a doomed

temple. It must fall in pieces, and fire will waste it, and desolating winds scatter its dust.

In the light of the truths we have considered, we see whence come the wide-spread and desolating evils under which the nations, and our own with others, is called to mourn, and where is to be applied the heaven-appointed remedy. The godly citizen must come from the godly household; and as well might we hope to build a goodly vessel from the rough unhewn timber of the forest, as an orderly, righteous nation from the families in which disorder reigns, that fear not God, and disregard His commandments. Vain are all civil laws—vain as for the farmer to sow his seed after the seed-time has gone by—vain all civil penalties—vain as the pruning axe to change the nature of the tree. For God's institutions there can be no substitute; for the disregard of them no remedy. For six thousands years the world has striven to prosper without them; but there has been no peace—there shall be none to the wicked. Kingdom after kingdom has striven to allay human disorders, and then gone down into darkness; codes of laws, in every line of which justice appeared, have appealed to the moral sense; but still the man-slayer in all lands has shed the blood of his victim; and the thief has stealthily crept through the darkness, and the prisons have been crowded with the shameless and the hardened. *There can be no peace* until God becomes the *household* Deity, and His name and truth enter into the earliest associations of the soul. Thank God, my hearer, if you awoke into life in such a home, where, from lips now perhaps silent in death, you heard, even as the light of life was dawning around you, messages from your infinite Father—a home in which the word of God was the central light and glory, where the morning and evening prayer was uttered; and voices sang the praises to be perfected in heaven. Happy the man who, from the vexations, turmoils and disappointments of this life, can look back upon such a home, and especially to that which such a home foreshadows. The great Napoleon, upon his desolate isle, stood firm as the rock under his feet against the storms that beat upon him, until he spake of his early home and thoughts of his mother came; then the wondrous movements of his history, and the magnificent empire he had gained and lost, and great thoughts that had borne him up, passed away from his memory. The voice that had commanded kings and armies was broken, as with head bowed down he cried, "Oh! for my home, my mother!" Ah! had he not learned that earthly and filial love pointed to a higher? and that earthly home, forever vanished, was designed by God to be a shadow of a heavenly? Is it necessary, my hearers, to add another word to impress upon all present their responsibilities? It is natural to desire power, and God has set you over a kingdom whose interests far outweigh those of any mere external empire on the face of the earth. For the misrule

of kings and the social disorders they have occasioned, He will hold them responsible. For the disorders and godlessness, the lax morality and failure of instruction and false instructions of the family, if such prevail, and the transmission of these to other generations, the King of kings will also summon you to a solemn reckoning. Look upon the household over which he has set you! Are you ready to answer to your Judge, to Him who hath said, "He that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much." And has your household no claims upon you? You have brought to it a heritage of sin and sorrow. Oh! ere you lie down in the dust, gather a treasure of many prayers and kind instructions, pious examples and hallowed memories, that you may leave to them a heritage when you go "the way you shall never return." May God bless His truth to your souls. Amen.

H Y M N .

Come at the morning hour,
Come, let us kneel and pray;
Prayer is the Christian pilgrim's staff
To walk with God all day.

At noon, beneath the Rock
Of Ages, rest and pray;
Sweet is that shelter from the sun
In the weary heat of day.

At evening, in thy home,
Around its altar, pray;
And finding there the house of God,
With heaven then close the day.

When midnight veils our eyes,
O, it is sweet to say,
I sleep, but my heart waketh, Lord!
With Thee to watch and pray.

—BRIGGS' COLL.