

## Families in the Bible

Within the Bible, there are accounts of a wide variety of family structures or kinship, and which function in many different ways. The call of Jesus to James and John pulls sons away from their obligations to their families. In Jesus' own family life, Joseph is portrayed as an adoptive or social parent, rather than Jesus' biological parent.

Beyond families, the Bible points to a more profound range of relationships, grounded in God's love. There is a kinship with all people, given particular expression in the church. Everyone should be welcomed and valued, just as they are, and congregations should aim to be a real family to each other, with all the love, the joy and the challenge that brings. With a little imagination there is much that can be done to welcome families of all shapes and sizes into the church community.

This common rebirth of the new Christians as children of God enables them to experience a new and very real family with a new parent in God and brothers and sisters. A Christian understanding of kinship can be far stronger than any biological, social or cultural ties.

This understanding of Christian kinship, however, is often not experienced in many churches. The love that we should express towards others within the church community, a love that comes from God, should never be considered inferior to the love shown to their biological family.

## Conclusion

As assisted reproduction techniques develop, biological factors can connect children to a number of different people, who may or may not be involved in their upbringing. The Christian church should be able to offer the good news of welcome and kinship to all people, grounded in the love of God, shown to us in Jesus.

As adoption has evolved over the generations, the church and its members need to be aware of the changing expectations on adoptive parents, and the pressures on and experiences of those involved in adoption - parents and children. The church as a whole, and congregations and members locally, should offer practical support and encouragement to those who answer the call to foster or adopt.

The Bible points to a kinship we all share as God's children. Created by God in God's image, unconditionally loved by God, reborn and made new in Christ, all people are welcomed into the family of God and the body of Christ, the Church. As such, our love and concern should reach beyond any biological kinship, to embrace all people - no matter their origins, upbringing, family contexts or relationships.

## Questions for discussion

1. Think about some of the family structures which are identified in the Bible, and how they differ from what we think of as normal in our culture.
2. A group of churches in Southampton committed themselves to identifying 40 foster carers from within their community. Could your church/presbytery consider committing to similarly identifying a number of carers? See home for good website.

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## Families and the church in the 21st century: the meaning of kinship bonds



 Discussion Points



## Families and the church in the 21st century: the meaning of kinship bonds

The changing influence of both adoption and fertility medicine on ideas of family, parenthood and kinship mean that the ways and contexts in which children are conceived and raised are evolving in new directions. The church needs to be sensitive and respond to these new developments.

Family relationships within Scottish society have changed profoundly over the past few decades. The availability of assisted conception means that children may have parents responsible for their care who are not their biological parents. Meanwhile, children offered for adoption are no longer typically healthy infants given up at birth, but may be older children from homes affected by alcohol, drugs or other social problems.

The Christian faith offers a view of kinship and identity which can speak to and transcend family structures. A deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding kinship bonds and parents' desire for 'a child of their own' can enable us, as a church, to better support families and individuals in our congregations and communities.

### Traditional forms of Kinship and relatedness

In some societies, only biologically related individuals are considered part of a family, while in other cultures all adults in a village are seen as being some kind of parent to all children. In Scottish society, ideas about kinship have developed and changed over time. While the vast majority of human reproduction still takes place by natural means, in a small but growing number, technological assistance is sought. Although

many reproductive technologies tend to focus on the fusing of sperm and egg, procreation is not just about that act, but encompasses the wider issue of creating a whole human person, loved and cherished by God.

### Changing Technologies, Changing Society?

New developments in reproductive technologies – including artificial insemination, *in vitro* fertilisation and surrogacy – provide an almost bewildering variety of new possibilities of bringing children into existence. Changing technologies evolving concepts of family structure mean an increasing number of children have several different kinds of parents.

The question of who are a child's 'real' parents may be complex. For example, when a couple use donated sperm, the non-genetic parent may feel less involved because they are "only" the social parent. In gestational surrogacy a woman carries and delivers a genetically unrelated child for another couple or person. The child shares most biological nutrients and other fluids with the surrogate mother – but no genes. On the other hand, in traditional surrogacy the surrogate provides the egg and carries the child, so shares genes with the child. Her biological relatedness with the child may be played down in favour of a more social aspect of parenthood.

Kinship can arise from relationships which are formed with others – including adoptive parents, or members of a community. Within the Church, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a profound expression of our being 'one body in Christ'. The sharing of bread and wine expresses that all share kinship as sisters and brothers in Christ. Our kinship includes aspects beyond the physical. This is what should be experienced in the Christian church whereby all members are kin in the fullest sense.

### Adoption

Adopted children are now generally considered in every way as the children of the adoptive parents. The emphasis on adoptive parents being the parents, in the fullest sense, of the child is reflected in the Bible in the manner in which all people are God's, as described in Galatians 4: 4-8.

At its peak (1965-70), there were just over 2000 per year in Scotland. A decline in the number of adoptions was undoubtedly influenced by the 1967 Abortion Act. In 2002 there were just 381 adoptions, with a slight rise in 2010 to 466.

Until the 1950s the majority of children placed for adoption were "relinquished babies", born to single women. By the late 1970s the focus had moved to children who were "in care" having been removed from their parents.

Not only were children in need of adoption generally older; but some had siblings who needed to be placed with them; many had experienced neglect and abuse. From the 1990s there was a rise in the number of children whose parents misused drugs and/or alcohol.

People considering adoption as a way of forming a family today find that they are being asked to consider giving a home to a toddler, or young child, to a sibling group or to children affected by drugs and/or alcohol. Some adopters find it hard to understand the level of difficulties that the children may have, or to anticipate or deal with the effect the children's difficulties may have upon them.

There is now a recognition of the patience, skill and compassion required to help children and their new families.