

Our first family

If anything remains sacred in our culture, it's the family. Yet Jesus challenged the family's ultimacy.

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [May 2, 2012](#) issue



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A prevalent theme in popular culture fictions is the ultimacy of the family. In many television shows and movies, the goal of saving one's family justifies extreme and even criminal behavior. Think of Walter White, the chemist turned meth cooker in *Breaking Bad*. Struck with terminal cancer and teaching high school on a mediocre salary, White turns his skills in a criminal direction, with wicked results that include the crashing of jetliners, death by drug overdoses and murder. It's all, says Walt—as he earns millions of illicit dollars—for the good of his wife and two children.

Similar reasoning obtains for the ragtag group of zombie fighters in *The Walking Dead*. Their leader, Rick, not only slaughters zombies but even takes out a few humans. Desperately, he stabs his (admittedly unstable) best friend in the gut. It's all for the sake of his pregnant wife and young son.

In the series *Justified*, the Harlan County (Kentucky) Bennett clan undertakes drug dealing and violence for the supposed betterment of the family. The Bennett matriarch sells family land to strip-mining coal companies so that her grandchildren will be able to escape the impoverished "holler" and live comfortably in the northern suburbs.

The theme is also prominent in movies such as *Taken*, in which a government agent goes rogue and wreaks all sorts of mayhem in an effort to rescue his kidnapped daughter.

It seems that if anything remains sacred in our culture, it is the family. It has become the greatest good, outweighing any moral or legal strictures that stand in the way of its defense or advancement.

The family was also highly valued in the biblical world—in some ways even more valued than it is today. In a world with sketchy protection from criminal violence and without any government safety nets, the family was all that stood between the individual and destitution. To be barren and without children was to suffer one of the most bitter fates a woman could meet. Blessedness for a man was having a prospering and large extended family.

One of the many shocking things that Jesus did was challenge the ultimacy of the family. Although he recognized family as a good (he spoke strenuously against divorce and was partial to children, for example), he said that he came to bring a sword that would separate parent from child, brother from brother. In what seems an almost cavalier fashion, he challenges a young man who has just lost his father to leave and follow him, forgoing the funeral.

Jesus declared that his disciples were his first or primary family. In Mark 3, Jesus' mother and brothers appear at the scene of his very busy ministry. They stand outside a house where Jesus is secluded with followers and call for him. The crowd sitting around Jesus tells him his mother and brothers are here. His reply? "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Looking at those seated around him, he says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and

sister and mother.”

When he hangs on the cross he looks down upon his mother and “the disciple whom he loved” standing beside her. “Woman, here is your son,” he says to his mother. And to the disciple: “Here is your mother” (see John 19:26–27). A new family is constituted on the spot.

With such words and deeds, Jesus desacralizes and decenters the family, subordinating it and its good to the pursuit of the kingdom of God. The apostle Paul concurs, teaching that the followers of Jesus are brother and sister to one another. In his view, the old self dies in baptism and enters into the new and now primary sociality of the church, Christ’s body. Allegiance to the family is not eliminated but is rendered secondary. In baptism, water is thicker than blood. For these reasons, I taught my daughter that she is first of all my sister in Christ and second (though importantly) my daughter.

Popular fictions speak to a primal and widespread sentiment in our culture. Most of us will never, as did Walter White, manufacture methamphetamines in the name of our family. We will not, as did the Bennetts, poison and otherwise kill people who threaten our family’s advancement. But programs like *Justified* and movies like *Taken* resonate with us because we do regard family so highly.

Mother’s Day is a high holy day in many churches. Single people and those without children often feel out of place within churches because they are not part of the idealized nuclear family. We are truer to our faith when singles are every bit as welcome to our churches as family members. Singles, no less than the married, are kingdom kin. Blood family is not ultimate. The Christian’s first family is the church.