



“What are we here to teach
you, Mum?”:
Mutuality and the Holy Spirit from
a Feminist Maternal Perspective

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Living in Perth, Western Australia, for five years has introduced me to some fine literature. One novel, Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet*, tells the story of the Lamb family, who left their country town after the drowning of a child for a new life in the city. Not only did the family struggle with social displacement and wartime hardship, but they had their own personal growing pains as well. One night, Oriel Lamb and her eldest son, Quick, were out netting prawns (shrimp). It had been years since they spent time together by the sea. The conversation turned to family matters, and Oriel wanted to know what kind of mother she had been. Quick didn’t like dredging up all this personal talk, but his mum needed to hear him admit that she was “flamin bossy”:

She laughed. I’m glad you see things my way.

Quick pulled with her to the beach, and helped empty the net of its cargo of jellyfish and gobbleguts and other useless small fish. He had a boyish impulse to kick her in the shins and run, just to have her after him, awful and reliable with it.

The strong are here to look after the weak, son, and the weak are here to teach the strong.

Recent newer models of family life, from a feminist perspective, influence our models of life in God’s Spirit. The Holy Spirit cultivates mutuality in relationships, rather than conformity and submission.

What are we here to teach you, Mum?
Too early to say.¹

In the story, Oriel took a risk by inviting Quick to a new place of mutuality in their relationship. She didn't argue or force him to say what she wanted to hear. She recognized him; in fact, for a moment, there was *mutual recognition* between mother and son. We catch a glimpse of transformation in their relationship, still mother and son, but at a new, unfamiliar place. Later, Oriel learned that she had weaknesses, too, while her children learned that they were people of strength. In fact, it was only through the strength of her children that Oriel embraced reconciliation with her own painful past. In the end, her children taught her a lot!

MUTUALITY AND FEMINIST PRACTICE

In recent years, mutuality has become one of the strongest knots in the net of feminist imagination and practice. Feminist "postmodern families" have rejected models of male headship and one-sided authority in family life.² Instead, they seek new models of relationship between women and men, parents and children, including gay and lesbian parents and family members. While changes in society and family life have not been without growing pains, a "common ground" of concern for families—across their shapes and sizes—has emerged, based on new family values of mutuality, equal regard, and shared authority.³ This democratization of family life acknowledges that all family members have rights, interests, responsibilities, and dependencies that need to be negotiated in order to extend justice and care to all. For many families, the emerging model may feel like unfamiliar ground, but the aim of mutuality offers hope for the present and future health of families.

Theologians have also taken mutuality to heart. Trinitarian theologians have shifted their models of personhood and community in the direction of mutuality. Reviving images of the generous and inclusive "economy" (*oikonomia*) of God's "household" (*oikos*), trinitarian theologians portray the life of divine persons as a mutual indwelling (John 10:38) in the "household of God" (Eph 2:19).⁴ Another image of divine life is a rhythmic, encircling dance (*perichoresis*) of diverse and equal persons.⁵ This shift has implications for human persons as well. We too dwell in and through each other, ultimately fulfilled in sharing the dance or living in God's "house of love," as Henri Nouwen characterizes the famous Rublev icon of

¹Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1998) 269.

²See Kristine M. Baber and Katherine R. Allen, *Women and Families: Feminist Reconstructions* (New York: Guildford, 1992).

³See Don Browning, et al., *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

⁴For example, see M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 2-13, and Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 208-213.

⁵See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 220-221, and Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) 270-278.

the Trinity.⁶ Right relation with God and with one another entails mutuality, as Elizabeth Johnson explains: “This signifies a relation marked by equivalence between persons, a concomitant valuing of each other, a common regard marked by trust, respect, and affection in contrast to competition, domination or assertions of superiority. It is a relationship on the analogy of friendship.”⁷ In John’s Gospel, Jesus took a risk and invited disciples into relations of mutuality, “I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends” (John 15:15). So, in an unfamiliar place of friendly mutuality, we are invited to dwell and dance with God.

The visions of mutuality in feminist postmodern families and trinitarian theology are beautiful and inspiring, but how do we get there? How do we work towards mutuality from our existing forms of family, congregational life, and society? If *perichoresis* begins at home, how can we cultivate growth in all persons—young and old—from unequal relations of authority and value to mutual respect and shared power?⁸ What growing pains might be involved? Bonnie Miller-McLemore claims that mutuality in relationships entails “more than a revision of household roles and the construction of a family-friendly work environment....Complex psychological, moral and theological shifts are necessary.”⁹ Perhaps children can teach us a few things, especially in the area of theology. Perhaps children can teach us about personhood—both human and divine. As Miller-McLemore admits, “Theologians in general...have a great deal more to learn about the nature of children, and as feminist theologians imply, the very survival of the world may depend on it.”¹⁰

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This article explores the connection between models of family life and models of life in God’s Spirit.¹¹ I believe that the Holy Spirit cultivates mutuality in relations, and toward this end, conflict must be risked. This is because life in God’s Spirit is not about becoming a family, congregation, or community where all per-

⁶Henri Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1987) 20-21.

⁷Johnson, *She Who Is*, 68.

⁸Catherine Keller, “The Theology of Moltmann, Feminism and the Future,” in *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Moltmann*, ed. Miroslav Volf, Carmen Krieg, and Thomas Kucharz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 147.

⁹Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “Family and Work: Can Anyone ‘Have it All?’” in *Religion, Feminism & the Family*, ed. Anne Carr and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 282.

¹⁰Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “‘Let the Children Come’ Revisited,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 465.

¹¹For greater detail and exploration, see my book, *The Raging Hearth: Spirit in the Household of God* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000).

sons are the same, but where persons make a difference—in fact, are a difference—one to another, in love and justice and dignity. On the way, we can be open to the Spirit’s cultivation of new fruit in our spiritual gardens to energize us toward Christian mutuality. But first we need to learn from the experiences of children and mothers in feminist postmodern families.

A FEMINIST MATERNAL PERSPECTIVE

Families shape us, for better and for worse. In families we learn about love and laughter, abuse and power, trust and betrayal. We learn what it means to be a son or daughter, to be identified racially and culturally, and to identify others beyond the familial bonds of blood and bone. Of all people, my own children have taught me lessons about cultivating mutuality in relationship.

When my eldest son was born, I held him in my arms. I was overwhelmed with feelings of wonder and happiness, but I felt fear and worry too. Nothing in my prenatal classes had prepared me (or my husband) for this discovery. Here I was, his mother, who would protect and care for him. Yet, suddenly, I realized that I also had great power over this vulnerable and tenacious baby. Up to this point, I had celebrated the creative potential of our relationship—Don’t most parents dream dreams and share hopes for their children? My own identity as a feminist meant I wanted to raise my son beyond gender stereotypes and values of male superiority. But what if I became the first person to betray his trust and abuse this power? What if I caused him emotional or physical pain, cruelty, shame, or humiliation? What if he learned violence from my hands? Becoming a mother made me acutely aware of the immense formative power—physical, psychological, social—that parents hold over the lives of children. I was his mother! What was he here to teach me?

Becoming a mother has taught me that the feminist vision of mutuality must reach beyond the relations of men and women to include the relations of parents and children. Feminism’s concern with transforming the dynamics of power must include the whole network of power and authority in families. While men have power over women and children in patriarchal families, mothers and those who care most closely for children also exist in positions of power over children. This complexity of position means that feminist perspectives on family, society, and theology need to take the work further by identifying feminist *maternal* perspectives. Rita Nakashima Brock explains the need for incorporating “maternal thinking” into feminist analysis:

Maternal thinking opens doors for examining the multiple voices that allow us both to identify with those who are vulnerable and to accept responsibility for our own power because mothers sit on the fulcrum of power and powerlessness, of hope and despair, and of abuse and empowerment.¹²

¹²Rita Nakashima Brock, “Poisonous Pedagogy, Ethical Terror, and Maternal Thinking” (paper presented at the American Academy of Religion, San Francisco, November 24, 1992) 20.

Brock's insight into male-headed family models—that mothers *sit on the fulcrum of power and powerlessness*—means that our theologies and practices of mutuality in families must consider the ways that women and men embody power in relation to children. While parents do decide and act for the good of children as vulnerable dependents who rightfully claim our care and responsibility, this one-sided model of power need not be the only one or the most formative model for family life. Children can share in decision making and be encouraged to develop their own ethical and theological perspectives on life. Is it really so strange or unnatural for parents and children to long for that day when friendship is also a dimension of this complex relation? As one of the mothers in Gloria Naylor's novel *The Women of Brewster Place* tells her daughter, "The one lesson I wanted you to learn is not to be afraid to face anyone, not even a crafty old lady like me who can out talk you."¹³ From my own feminist maternal perspective, I honor what my children have taught me about the emerging edges of mutuality, equal regard, and shared authority in family life.

CONFORMING OR CULTIVATING?

A feminist maternal perspective looks at the way power is structured in families. Psychoanalyst Alice Miller uses the term "poisonous pedagogy" to describe the ways children are taught by adults to conform to the desires, wills, and feelings of adults, to the extent of repressing or extinguishing their own desires, wills, and feelings.¹⁴ In her study of German child-rearing texts from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, Miller found that healthy boundaries between adults and children were not recognized, and children learned to refer everything to an external source of authority. The values reinforced as the highest expressions of love were self-sacrifice, obedience to authority, and serving others, which undergirded the texts' recommendations to break children's wills or spirits for their own good and even eternal salvation.¹⁵ According to Miller, poisonous pedagogy was a philosophy and theology of coercive power demanding "blind" trust from children. Strong feelings such as spontaneity, self-concern, obstinacy, pleasure, wilfulness, anger, or rage were weeded out from children as soon as they appeared. God had willed earthly fathers (and mothers) to severely punish these early signs of sin and wickedness.

But while the texts are dated, Miller believes these attitudes and practices are still a problem for families today. For example, we can hear the pain of unlearning poisonous pedagogy in the following child abuse survivor's prayer:

¹³Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place* (New York: Penguin, 1983) 87.

¹⁴Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Noonday, 1991) 3-91.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 58-63. Similarly, Brian W. Grant's historical study shows that in England, "Breaking the child's will was understood to be the early Puritan parent's duty." See *The Social Structure of Christian Families: A Historical Perspective* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000) 69. Grant also examines John Wesley's "single-minded emphasis on the management of early childhood, based on the belief that if you convinced a child that it was pointless to assert its own will, it would lose the dangerous habit of consulting its own wishes and only see what was required of it by others, especially parents" (85).

God, I'm learning to trust myself. What a surprise, that there is so much inside of me to learn to trust. I'm learning to listen to me inside, to pay attention, to really hear....

God, I'm learning to trust other people. There are people in this world who do what they say they will do. I'm learning to sort through people. I'm learning the difference between those who have hurt me and those who have not.¹⁶

In contrast to poisonous pedagogy, feminist postmodern families seek a family model based on the value of mutual recognition. Psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin claims that from birth, children seek recognition from others and learn to recognize others in ever-increasing circles of relationship.¹⁷ The paradox of recognition is that we come to know and recognize ourselves as subjects with dignity in and through our relations with others. Thus, the goal of maturation is not growing out of relations, but growing more deeply into *differentiated* relations with others. In other words, the self must make a difference. If the child learns to conform to the parent poisonously (or vice versa), the possibilities for proper trust, respect, and moral agency—mutual recognition—are minimized. Thus, Sara Ruddick encourages parents to “nurture a child’s developing spirit—whatever in a child is lively, purposive and responsive.”¹⁸ More easily said than done! But is conformity the goal of love?

*“we need to examine our assumptions about family life
and the values that form the core of our relations of love
and care”*

Perhaps these two models are drawn too extremely. But the family values of either breaking or cultivating children’s “spirits” are still with us today. The specters of love as submission and obedience haunt the intimate relations of adult spouses and partners as well. At least today, domestic violence and child abuse are more openly recognized as violations. But still, we need to examine our assumptions about family life and the values that form the core of our relations of love and care. How are our assumptions influenced by spiritual or theological values? Do the ways we think about life in the “household of God” (Eph 2:19) inform our behavior? Or is it possible that our contemporary experience in family life can help us see God’s household-life anew?

BIBLICAL FAMILY VALUES?

At this point, a concern might be raised that feminist theology risks import-

¹⁶Catherine J. Foote, “To Trust Again,” in *Survivor Prayers: Talking with God about Childhood Sexual Abuse* (Louisville: Westminster, 1994) 35.

¹⁷Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

¹⁸Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Peace Politics* (New York: Ballantine, 1989) 82.

ing secular family theory into its visions of family and church life. Some might argue that families and congregations are hierarchical by nature, with the biblical mandate for maintaining the proper headship and rule of men in both households. But in thinking about biblical family values, we cannot identify one family as the norm. We tell stories about Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah; Jacob with his two wives and two concubines; Tamar and her attempts at securing an heir; or Solomon with his myriad wives and children. Certainly, much wisdom is acquired along the way. Curiously, the disciples of Jesus known as the Twelve were called away from their families and businesses, which in their time represented the traditional, religious duties of obedient sons. I've always wondered what happened to the wives and children of the Twelve. I've also always wondered if disciples such as Prisca and Aquila or Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16: 3, 7) traveled on their apostolic journeys with children and a sitter!

“Jesus enacted an inclusive household of God around a new hearth through the power of the Holy Spirit”

We need to take seriously the broad exposure to family life in the Bible. In Jesus' time, the coming “reign of God” would transform heaven and earth and reorder God's household, so the ordinary means of honor and duty were called into question. A person seeking right relationship with God needed to “hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters” (Luke 14:26) and “leave the dead to bury the dead” (Matt 8:21-22). Around Jesus a new kinship emerged in which “whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:33-35).¹⁹ But Jesus also called into question the social and religious injustices of his time. By washing feet like a common slave, eating with people out of fellowship, touching unclean persons, and lifting up children, Jesus made God's healing, dignity, and forgiveness free and accessible to all. No wonder the entrepreneurs and authorities of his time found him threatening. Jesus enacted an inclusive household of God around a new hearth through the power of the Holy Spirit.

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

Feminist biblical scholarship shows that the early Jesus movement modeled itself as a “discipleship of equals,” where all persons, male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, were one in Christ (Gal 3:28).²⁰ This “household of freedom” included kin according to the Spirit of God, with baptism for women and men re-

¹⁹Rosemary Radford Ruether goes so far as to speak of the “anti-family” tradition in the gospels. See *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* (Boston: Beacon, 2000) 13-35.

²⁰Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1986) 118-130. Also, Val Webb, *Why We're Equal: Introducing Feminist Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999) 144.

placing male circumcision as the sign of belonging.²¹ Each new member received gifts of the Spirit, freely inspired for the sake of the household and not according to gender or social status. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza describes the new kinship as “*pneumatikoi*: Spirit-filled persons” who taught, led, preached, baptized, broke bread, served, healed, and prophesied in present hope of God’s banquet.²² The Spirit brought down the dividing walls of social status, wealth, and religious purity to renovate and enlarge God’s household for an extended family who would speak all languages under one roof (Acts 2:1-4).

Yet, over the years, a male-headed order returned. Pastoral leaders adapted Aristotle’s three-part household code to clarify the need for order: husband over wife, father over children, and master over slave (Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:22-6:9). While adaptation was made in a benevolent direction (“Husbands, love your wives....Fathers, don’t provoke your children....Masters, treat your slaves justly...”), kinship mutuality in the Spirit gave way to a model of headship. This may have been a strategic move for survival and mission, but today the household codes do not have to be seen as the definitive order.²³

As the model of mutuality receded and male headship regained ascendancy, a different characterization of the work of God’s Spirit became apparent. For example, in his sermons on marriage and family life (based on Ephesians), John of Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople, affirmed Paul’s marital model of the husband as head and wife as the body. In order to maintain order, obedience was the most loving contribution a wife could make. As in military ranks, harmony in the family (and church, since Christ is the head of the church) dissolved through insubordination and conflict with the proper authority. While wives shared an equality of dignity, they could not share an equality of leadership. Within the whole body—family or church—there was one organizing and ordering principle, the Spirit of Christ:

Paul places the head in authority and the body in obedience for the sake of peace. Where there is equal authority, there never is peace. A household cannot be a democracy, ruled by everyone, but the authority must necessarily rest in one person. The same is true for the Church: where men are led by the Spirit of Christ, then there is peace.²⁴

In Chrysostom’s theology, the Spirit kept the peace and worked to bring order to the ranks through proper rule and submission to authority. As men submitted to the headship of Christ, they extended the authority of the Father through their own households and churches where they functioned as heads. Throughout

²¹Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 61.

²²Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 296-297.

²³See Halvor Moxnes, ed., *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (London: Routledge, 1997).

²⁴St. John of Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, trans. Catherine P. Roth and David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986) 53.

the entire economy of salvation, the Spirit worked to conform the many members to the will of the one head. While not advocating abuse, Chrysostom's body politic equated love with submission, peace with an absence of conflict, and personal differentiation with disloyalty. Mutuality was only acceptable for men of the same rank, certainly not a goal for those in different ranks.

This model of life in the Spirit may work for armies, but is it the best model for families and churches? We might want to begin talking about *poisonous pneumatology* and confess that this theology is dangerous to the health of children, mothers, and other dependents. It is not healthy for the "heads" either.

NEW FRUIT FOR THE HOUSEHOLD

So how do we live in the Spirit of mutual recognition? How do we transform systems of broken recognition into households of mutuality, equal regard, and shared authority? Jessica Benjamin gives us a hint: cultivate in persons of all ages the possibility of making a difference. Yet in this move of self-assertion, people large and small risk conflict. They risk upsetting the peace that is not peace. But could these steps toward mutual recognition be the inspiration of the Spirit? We often sing songs about being "one in the Spirit," but could conflict also be a work of the Spirit?

"conflict and resolution transformed the community, without conformity or subordination, thus expressing more deeply the diversity-in-unity of life in God's creative Spirit"

The story of the Gentile Pentecost (Acts 10:1-11:18) helps us glimpse the emerging edges of mutual recognition in early Christian communities.²⁵ Recall that Peter baptized Cornelius (a Gentile!) and his household after they experienced the gift of transformation in God's Spirit. But then Peter had to go and face the Jerusalem household. How would they respond to this challenge to the mission? At first they were angry and critical. But inspired by the Spirit, Peter spoke of a new household where both Jew and Gentile were recognized. Through the conflict, Jerusalem leaders reconsidered their bonds of kinship. In the Spirit, the community embraced a new sense of belonging, and the mission moved to a new common ground. Conflict and resolution transformed the community, without conformity or subordination, thus expressing more deeply the diversity-in-unity of life in God's creative Spirit.²⁶

²⁵See Robert P. Menzies, *The Development of Early Church Pneumatology with Special Reference to Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991) 264-267.

²⁶To expand our horizons of transformation from families and churches to the global (even cosmic) household, see Lee E. Snook, *What in the World Is God Doing? Re-Imagining Spirit and Power* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), and Paul R. Sponheim, *The Pulse of Creation: God and the Transformation of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

If conflict can be understood as a part of life in the Spirit, then we need some new fruit growing in our spiritual gardens. We can revalue what poisonous pneumatology names as threats to the male-headed household order. Care of self, willfulness, boldness, courage, spontaneity, self-assertion, resistance, passion, and even anger can serve to energize persons and communities on the way to mutuality. The familiar fruit found in the garden of Gal 5:22-23 (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) continue to need cultivation, but these additional fruits can enrich the health and spiritual life of families and congregations. Mutual recognition fosters proper trust, calls for accountability and confession, negotiates new identities, heals abuse with dignity and respect, and transforms alienation to reconciliation. This model of life in God's Spirit brings growing pains as we move into unfamiliar places, but the emerging edges of mutuality are worth the risk. ⊕

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