

SECOND EDITION



FAMILY THERAPIES

A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal

Mark A. Yarhouse
James N. Sells



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PREFACE

THIS IS THE SECOND EDITION of *Family Therapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal*. We never imagined that marriage and family, both in regard to research content and social context, would expand and change as much as it has in the past eight years. While the first edition of this book has made a significant contribution in the education of family clinicians—particularly within the Christian faith community—this edition provides us opportunity for an update, a chance to think again of our understanding of marriages and families and how the mental health professions and the church become trained to conduct intervention. It also provides us opportunity to address how the church and the community of Christian counselors might respond to the rapid shifts in social attitudes and behaviors pertaining to marriage and family structures and perspectives.

We have taken what was and remains needed for the training of family counselors, psychologists, and other mental health professionals and added more of the twenty-first century to the text. While updating every chapter with relevant research findings, we have added two chapters—one addressing cohabitation and the other focusing on LGBT+ marriage and family formation. The tone and tenor in which Christian mental health professionals address the complexity of family relationships have a significant impact on how faith is understood within the culture, and how individuals, couples, and families seeking to understand their experience and create narratives to direct their lives can do so with integrity is the clinician's challenge.

We know so many people in our field who have expressed that there was a need for a resource for Christians engaged in family therapy/counseling/ministry. Despite the many books on theories of family therapy, how to conduct family therapy, and so on, we could not find one that engaged the various models of family therapy from a Christian worldview. We came together to discuss this and both felt a desire to take on what is really a monumental task. We wrote this book in part to sort out how we think about family therapy as Christians and to provide a framework for Christians entering the field who might want some ideas for critical engagement and practical applications. Rather than creating a radically new model of family therapy, we draw attention to what theorists have gotten right and how their insights can be understood and acknowledged while relying more on a Christian view of the person and the family.

To do this, we took several steps. The first was to explore what we know about families from Scripture. Although we might think that families in the Bible would be exemplary in their functioning, we quickly learned that they are often a mess. What we found were not examples of ideal relationships but of ways in which God in his sovereignty uses all kinds of people and families to fulfill his purposes. We also learned that the Bible is not a family therapy sourcebook. Rather, we can find in Scripture broad principles that contribute to our understanding of family relationships. Our next step was to reflect on ways in which the church has historically approached family ministry and how this relates to the emergence of the profession of family therapy. An additional step involved reflecting on the most influential first-generation models of family therapy and engaging these models as Christians. We then wanted to look at the practical outworking of that engagement in key areas that affect families today.

The book is intended for a broad audience. We would like to see it help students and clinicians in the mental health fields (e.g., psychology, counseling, social work, marriage and family therapy), pastoral care staff and local pastors, and youth ministry leaders who work with families.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into four parts. In part one (chaps. 1–2) we set the stage for discussing the first-generation models of family therapy. Chapter one explores a distinctively Christian perspective on the family. Chapter two is a

discussion of the field of family therapy, how it developed, and some key terms that will help the reader better understand the field.

Part two of the book (chaps. 3–12) devotes one chapter apiece to the major models of family therapy developed in what is sometimes referred to as the first generation of family therapists (e.g., structural family therapy). If each approach to family therapy is a “map” for getting families from a place of some kind of dysfunction to a place of better functioning, then each chapter in this section contains an explanation of the map, followed by a discussion of the theoretical and philosophical assumptions and practical implications. We then focus on Christian critique and engagement of the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings and the practical issues involved in using specific techniques associated with that theory. We also provide brief reflections that tie back to the three foundational themes introduced in chapter one: family identity, family functioning, and family relationships. In the closing chapter of this section of the book (chap. 12) we introduce a framework for integrative Christian family therapy.

Part three (chaps. 13–20) extends the discussion by taking topics that are commonly addressed in family therapy and inviting Christians to interact with the relevant materials. We introduce the reader to the issues (e.g., crisis and trauma, marital conflicts) and then review the literature in that area, followed by Christian engagement in light of what we see as particularly valuable from the first-generation models of family therapy and in light of what we propose for an integrative Christian family therapy. In the second edition we added a chapter on cohabitation and significantly revised the chapter on LGBT+ couples and families. We see cohabitation as an increasingly popular entryway into marriage and as a relationship status in and of itself. We want to help the reader grapple with that reality. An additional reality is the success of the marriage equality movement and the likelihood that Christian clinicians will work with LGBT+ couples and families in the years to come. We also want the reader to be familiar with those cultural shifts and to think deeply and well about some of the concerns that arise.

Part four (chap. 21) reflects our desire to cast a vision for integrative Christian family therapy/counseling/ministry. In particular, we see the need for local family therapy to be influenced by a shrinking, global world in which therapists will need to expand their understanding of family structure and relationships. Societal and cultural changes will have an impact on our work and the ways in which we think about and engage the families in ministry and service.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We feel very fortunate to have worked together on this project and to have seen our friendship develop and strengthen over the past year. We have been blessed by stimulating conversations with a number of people—probably far too many to acknowledge. Mark would like to thank those who taught him about models of family therapy, especially Fran White, Professor Emeritus at Wheaton College. He would also like to thank Patrice Penny and Victor Argo, his supervisors and colleagues in family therapy at the Outreach Community Center in Carol Stream, Illinois. It was through Patrice and Victor that Mark was able to see some of the theories in practice and begin to gain a sense of competence in the applied or practical dimensions of family therapy. He would also like to thank the students in the School of Psychology and Counseling at Regent University who took courses from him in family therapy as well as advanced marriage and family therapy over the past many years—especially those students who took these courses in the last couple of years, as they were asked to read, engage, and critique chapters in their various stages. Mark's former research assistant, Dr. Stephanie Nowacki, and his graduate assistant, Dr. Katie Maslowe, located numerous articles and books for review and provided critiques of various chapters, as did Justin Sides, a more recent graduate assistant, and former students on his research team, including Dr. Christine Gow, Dr. Trista Carr, Dr. Ward Davis, Dr. Veronica Johnson, Dr. Jill Kays, and Dr. Brooke Merino, who also provided him with valuable feedback.

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We dedicate this book to our families.

Mark A. Yarhouse

James N. Sells



PART 1

FOUNDATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING FOR FAMILY THERAPY

*Happy families are all alike;
every unhappy family is unhappy in their own way.*

LEO TOLSTOY, *ANNA KARENINA*

LEO TOLSTOY'S FAMOUS QUOTE indeed reflects the debauchery within marriage and family occurring within his culture. Pain, injury, tragedy, injustice, and sin left a unique scar on families in that era, as they do today. As with most who seek family therapy, Tolstoy experienced the despair of life within family and anguish within his marriage. Both of his parents died before he was ten. He witnessed the birth of thirteen children and the death of five. He experienced and expressed through his writings the joy of marital intimacy with his wife, Sonia, and the depths of despair in marital conflict and separation. It is in his great work *Anna Karenina* that he gives his treatise on marriage and family. It was written in 1875, a time when European aristocracy was seeing marriage as passé and even silly. The culture of his day had rejected the idea of sexual fidelity and the role of parents in nurturing children to adulthood. An existential malaise dominated the Russian nobility, and the idea of marriage was seen by many as idealistic, naive, and digressive. Yet he presented a view of human life that is made meaningful through the experience of marriage and family relationships. To Tolstoy, the DNA of civil society was

a successful marriage that could provide illumination on life so as to prevent tragedy from creating despair, and bliss from creating naiveté.

Tolstoy lived and wrote during a time when a new idea was pervading Europe—that marital intimacy was based on “love” (where “love” meant a romantically idealized experience in which individuality is made whole by the attachment to the other). This concept had a profound effect on Western society, and it remains the dominating paradigm of marriage today. Aspects of this idea have a clear and definite Christian element. However, many components of love-based marriage refer to a different form of love. The romantic love of the nineteenth century was a sentimental love, and many hold that this idea of an emotionally-centered relationship is a primary reason for relatively high divorce rates in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. With a touch of humor, Stephanie Coontz writes that in the nineteenth century the United States led the world in romantic marriage as well as divorce, when idealized romance was lost: “Between 1880 and 1890 it experienced a 70 percent increase in divorce. In 1891 a Cornell University professor made the preposterous prediction that if trends in the second half of the 19th century continued, by 1980 more marriages would end by divorce than by death. As it turned out, he was off by only 10 years!” (Coontz, 2005, p. 181).

We, like Tolstoy, have a high view of marriage and family, but not the romantic view that has been carried into the twenty-first century. Indeed, we carry a perspective that the Christian faith has a unique significance in understanding the potential of relational life. Furthermore, we believe that the effectiveness of the counselor, psychologist, therapist, and pastor who seeks to bring aid to families or couples in crisis is better equipped when he or she can utilize the central themes of the Christian tradition with the best practices drawn from mental health theory, research, and technique. In this first chapter we seek to articulate how the great themes of biblical Christianity—creation, fall, redemption, and glorification—interact with the essential challenges of marital and family existence: *family function*, *family identity*, and *family relationship*.

FAMILY AS FIGURE AND GROUND: A METAPHOR TO UNDERSTAND FAMILY IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CULTURE

Marriage today is a topic that can raise sharp disagreements. An explanation as to how and why such divergent views exist can be understood through one

of the great discoveries from psychological science: figure-ground perception. Most people recognize this concept by two popular images—one is an image of either a white vase or two facial cameos; the other is either an 1890s Victorian woman or a withered, wrinkled older woman. When you see one, you don't see the other. Much can be said about the similarity between figure-ground and the state of the family in the twenty-first century. We tend to see family in a way that does not permit us to see it any other way. Consider the following issues (listed alphabetically):

Abortion rights	Infidelity
Cohabiting relationships	Pornography
Corporal punishment	Poverty
Divorce	Single-parent family structures
Family violence	Traditional family roles
Gay marriage	Transgender recognition

When considering the issues on this list, are you seeing social change, advancement toward justice, and positive resolution emerging? Or are you seeing decline, disarray, and social degradation? How you see the social/political issues related to family will influence your perception about the unfolding of events. If we see the family in a state of decline, we will not likely perceive good emerging from any change. If we see the recent changes as good, we are likely vulnerable to a lack of discernment to some of the factors that affect spouses, parents, and children. Consider the basic supposition of notable authors.

Köstenberger states as his opening argument in his book *God, Marriage and Family* that “marriage and the family are institutions under siege in our world today, and that with marriage and family, our very civilization is in crisis. The current cultural crisis, however, is merely symptomatic of a deep-seated *spiritual* crisis that continues to gnaw at the foundations of our once-shared societal values” (2010, p. 15). To Köstenberger, marriage and family are under siege and civilization is in crisis—powerful words that we don't seek to dispute. Rather, we seek to utilize a systemic mentality addressed throughout this book, which is, “If I see it this way, how will I not see it in other ways, even when those other ways might be accurate?”

Girgis, Anderson, and George wrote in the opening chapter of *What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense*, “In just a few years, the battle over

marriage has engaged every branch and level of American government and the whole of our civil society It is hard to think of a more salient cultural conflict” (2012, pp. 4-5). Again, this is portrayed as a “cultural conflict” depicting warring parties in which the most powerful wins.

Sociologist Andrew Cherlin wrote in *The Marriage-Go-Round*,

In the space of a half century, then, we have seen the widest pendulum swing in family life in American history. We have gone from a lockstep pattern of getting married young, then having children and for the most part staying married, to a bewildering set of alternatives which includes bearing children as a lone parent and perhaps marrying at some later point; living with someone and having children together without marrying; or following the conventional marriage-then-children script, perhaps later divorcing, then probably living with a new partner maybe remarrying. . . . Consequently we choose and choose again, starting and ending cohabiting relationships and marriage. (2009, p. 8)

Cherlin emphasizes a “bewildering set of alternatives,” with Western civilization itself as literally dazed, befuddled, or confused. The wording is powerful.

Balswick and Balswick carry a different tone in assessing the landscape of family. They wrote in *A Model for Marriage*: “Though many family social scientists are concerned about these modern trends, some hold to a post-modern optimism that embraces alternative forms of marriage.” According to them, the outdated, traditional, lifelong monogamous marriage needs to be revised. They advocate for alternative forms to better accommodate the diverse needs of a postmodern society, such as “same-sex marriage, cohabitation, remaining childless, serial marriage” (2006, p. 18). The nature of the cultural war emerges more clearly here; it becomes the battle between the “outdated” and the “updated.”

Stephanie Coontz wrote in *Marriage, a History*:

Many of the things people think are unprecedented in family life today are not actually new. Almost every marital and sexual arrangement we have seen in recent years, however startling it may appear, has been tried somewhere before. There have been societies and times when non-marital sex and out-of-wedlock births were more common and widely accepted than they are today. Step families were much more numerous in the past, the result of high death rates and frequent marriages. Even divorce rates have been higher in

some regions and periods than they are in Europe and North America today. And same-sex marriage, though rare, has been sanctioned in some cultures under certain conditions. (2005, p. 2)

This gives us reason to pause, to study—to think and then to act.

Finally, as Waite and Gallagher wrote in *The Case for Marriage*, the most basic becomes the most controversial:

In America over the last thirty years we've done something unprecedented. We have managed to transform marriage, the most basic and universal of human institutions, into something controversial. For perhaps the first time in human history, marriage as an ideal is under a sustained and surprisingly successful attack. Sometimes the attack is direct and ideological, made by "experts" who believe a lifelong vow of fidelity is unrealistic or oppressive, especially to women. (2000, p. 1)

Indeed, in regard to marriage, some see an impoverished old woman, some see an elegant youth in the prime of life. Figure-ground makes it impossible to see both at the same time. When addressing a contentious theme such as family, it is easy to see only what we want or only what is familiar and disregard everything else.

For us in writing this book, and for you in reading, great care must be exercised so that we don't end up confirming our bias in regards to marriage. How we see politics, theology, real experience, and desired experience emerge in how we think about marriage and family—both our own and those with whom we will sit, listen, understand, and provide care. The rules that govern what you will see and how you will act with families are influenced by starting points. In the statements above, Köstenberger begins as a theologian, but Coontz is a family studies historian, Waite is a sociologist, and the Balswicks are marriage and family professors. Some used a theological lens that explicitly influenced their thinking, some used worldviews that were less articulated. Each examined the content from a preconception and had postdestinations in mind. We all do.

Your freedom and restraint to advocate positions to the public classroom, the Christian college, the private counseling and consulting room, and the culture at large must be conducted with care. You may bear a license—extended to you by the state or country—with the expectation that you will exercise restraint in regard to your beliefs pertaining to a client's moral choices;

you also bear a conscience that renders you as a moral agent subject to God. This requires you to make decisions about how to act. Jesus acknowledged the moral tension that those in his day faced and that those in ours must still address: “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’ And they were amazed at him” (Mk 12:17 NIV).

The natural inclination is to read ideas from authors and interact with others who already think as you think and believe as you believe. People who see the figure prefer to hang out together; people who see the ground sit at the other table. So we “retweet” those whose ideas on abortion, race relations, LGBTQ rights, or support for single-parent families in poverty we resonate with, and we delete ideas that are challenging or threatening. Our views of family are reinforced by others who see the same thing we see. And so learning becomes limited to reinforcement of what we already believe. A family therapist must be skilled to enter a relational community to bring peace, justice, hope, mercy, forgiveness, insight, acceptance, and countless additional virtues amid both people who see the figure and people who see the ground. This is not just a therapeutic skill. It is also a life skill, maybe even a calling.

DEFINING THE RANGE AND REACH OF THE FAMILY RELATIONSHIP

There is much discussion today about the family—about what makes up a family, who counts as family, public policies to support the family, family values, and so on. It is humbling to think of writing about a Christian understanding of the family because there is so much discussion and debate associated with the topic. Any strong claims seem to leave some people today feeling like they do not belong or have any place, and yet not saying anything of substance about something as important as the family seems to be no viable alternative to us either.

We would like to begin by discussing a biblical view of the family. By this we mean to ask what we can know about the family based on a reading of Scripture. We must start with the essence of family that transcends culture, circumstances, and time. The examination of the family cannot be limited to North America, the twenty-first century, or upper-middle socioeconomic class. The initial examination and understanding of family must begin with a “transcendent family,” the basic biological and sociological relationship that endures over time and across cultures.

When we look to the Old Testament for an initial understanding of the family, we find that the word used in Hebrew is *mishpachah*, a word that “blurs the distinctions between family and tribe and between family and nation” (Moynagh, 1995, p. 372). It includes what contemporary Western culture thinks of as family, at least with respect to a nuclear family or family of origin, but also includes “servants, resident aliens (*gerim*) and stateless persons, widows and orphans, who [lived] under the protection of the head of the family” (Kingdon, 1988, p. 251).

In the New Testament the words for family include *patria*, a word suggesting a “group similar to subtribe in the Old Testament,” and *oikos*, or household (Williams, 1996, p. 245; see 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 1:16). According to Williams, men in the New Testament were generally presumed by Paul to be the head of the household, although there are notable exceptions, such as Lydia and Nympha. Further, in the New Testament understanding, the kingdom of God corresponds to a family with God as Father (Gal 1:3-4), followers of Christ as children of God (1 Jn 3:1-2), and the idea that Gentiles are adopted into God’s family (Rom 8:15) (Williams, 1996).

Family in the biblical narrative is a central organizing theme. The story line of the Old Testament develops around two types of family lineage. The first is through the lineage of Abraham in which Abraham and Sarah’s heirs are the key actors in the depiction of God’s sovereignty, God’s judgment, mercy, and ultimately, faithfulness to the family with whom he made a covenant or promise.

The second family lineage is that of David and the subsequent kings of Israel and Judah. This “family story” describes the history of Israel and Judah through the lives of their leaders. The significance of this history is its culmination of God’s promise to David that the Messiah would come through his descendants (2 Sam 7:10-13; 1 Chron 17:11-14; 2 Chron 6:16).

The story line of the New Testament does not follow a family lineage in the same manner as the Old Testament. First, marriage and family are frequent metaphors to describe God’s relationship with his people, Jewish and Gentile. Second, family is also the organizing metaphor to define the nature of relationships between members of the church community in which the followers of Jesus are described as members of one family. Finally, family is written in through the experience of Jewish, Roman, and Greek influences. The authors and audience who first received the gospels and the letters were aware of the