

# Biblical Patriarchy and the Doctrine of Federal Representation

*by Brian M. Abshire, July 15, 2005*

From a biblical perspective, all human culture, in one way or the other, represents the effects of the underlying rebellion of sinful men against the rule of a sovereign God. Pagan cultures seek to de-throne God by worshipping and serving false gods (Rms 1:20ff) incurring His righteous wrath on all their institutions (Rms 1:26ff). Cultures given grace to repent of their ethical rebellion enjoy His blessings; i.e., personal peace, economic prosperity, healthy families, and stable social systems (Deut 28:1ff).

For those cultures in transition, remnants of the older worldview often struggle with the implications of the newer worldview. Hence, in ancient Rome, the perversion, moral decay and political tyranny of the Imperial system persecuted the upstart Christian covenant community that offered its members' families justice, freedom and moral restraint. Yet even as the Roman patrician class died out due to sodomy, abortion and infanticide, the Christian community gained both economic and social power as God blessed the labor of their hands, and the fruit of their wombs.

We now live at the other end of the spectrum; after fifteen hundred years of Christian civilization, Christendom largely abandoned the Dominion Mandate in the 19th century and Western civilization returned to the ancient, pagan ideals of autonomous Man, rejecting the yoke of God's Law. At first, this transformation promised freedom from the "tyranny" of Christian morality; but a hundred years later, we can now see that, the promise was a lie; our political governments have become new tyrannies, our economy ravaged by oppressive taxation, our popular culture sunk into a moral cesspit.

The Christian family, especially the role of the father, has been under relentless attack by the forces of secular humanism. Egalitarianism, though arising originally in a legitimate desire to allow all men, regardless of race, to enjoy the benefits of Christian civilization, eventually came to enthrone the will of the individual and to decry ANY differences-including biological ones. In the past fifty years women were "liberated" from the home and promised that they could "have it all" including family, career and autonomy if they adopted humanist values. However, humanism has largely destroyed the American family; birth rates plummeted to sub-zero replacement levels, divorce rates skyrocketed, and millions of children, the victims of broken homes, are now at risk of multigenerational poverty, crime, and drug addiction; in effect becoming cultural parasites.

The solution begins of course with personal regeneration and a lifetime process of sanctification. Yet, despite all the books, radio programs, seminars and special events that "focus on the family" unless Christians return to fundamental biblical presuppositions we will only see the family and the broader culture continue to decline. Let there be no mistake; ultimately, the kind of culture we build (or the kind that our children inherit) will be dependant upon whether we understand and apply a consistent, comprehensive biblical worldview. Christians conquered the pagan Roman Empire NOT through guerrilla movements, political action campaigns or sending our best and brightest young Christian minds to the prestigious philosophical academies specializing in Greek philosophy; no, the Christian church WON because we applied the Lordship of King Jesus FIRST in self-government, then in our homes and in our relationships with one another.

In the great battles of the 19-20th centuries, Christians lost all the institutions they had built to godless humanism as they saw their once world-conquering faith reduced to an empty, religious experience that had little effect on either their own lives, or the broader culture.

By 1973, the humanists declared victory by declaring the murder of unborn children a constitutional “right.” They now control the economy, the political system, most of the media and popular culture.

However, one encouraging sign of God’s providential care of His people is that since 1973 He has begun to reawaken tens of thousands of Christians to the need of developing a consistent, comprehensive biblical worldview. One application of that worldview has been an attempt to recapture the biblical concept of the family, especially the father’s role.

While one cannot really yet call it a “movement”, the term “patriarchy” has made a return describing an attempt to develop a counter-cultural model of the Christian family and by extension, a just Christian social order. Those who self-consciously identify themselves as supporting “patriarchy” are not yet united in just what this term entails but there are enough people affirming this view that many in the wider Christian community now believe them to a “serious threat” that needs to be addressed. Books, web sites, journal and magazine articles are appearing in various places critiquing the “patriarchs.” Since the contemporary cultural model of the Christian family is clearly dysfunctional (i.e., 75% of children growing up in the “average” evangelical home will leave the faith by the age of twenty-five and divorce rates for Christians are approaching secular norms), many Christians are looking for an alternative model. While examining the reasons why the Christian family has crumbled so quickly is beyond the scope of one brief essay, it is worth our time to examine “patriarchy” as a viable, biblical alternative.

First, the name itself often leads some Christians to have a negative disposition before they have even considered the position. The word “patriarchy” conjures up images of stern, Old Testament figure (perhaps with a long white beard), ruling his family with an iron hand, squelching individual initiative, oppressing women and micromanaging every aspect of his children’s lives. Since most will reject that image, we then also reject the concept, without actually evaluating what a “patriarchy” might be and whether or not it is something of which God might approve.

The word “patriarchy” simply means “rule by fathers” and stands in opposition to such alternative ideas as “oligarchy” (rule by elites), “monarchy” (rule by one-usually a king), “aristocracy” (rule by a privileged class), or “democracy” (rule by the “people”) etc. In all the above “systems,” rule by SOMEONE is inevitable; somebody must have the final authority for making decisions. Modern humanist culture has indoctrinated most people, including Christians, to assume that “democracy” is somehow the “best” form of government with the idea that everyone is “equal” and should have an “equal” say in everything. This idea of “democracy” has even infiltrated the Christian home with a widespread elimination of distinct roles between men and women and a subsequent devaluation of the authority of the parents. However, it might be interesting for the average Christians to learn that the men who gave us our “democratic” institutions, ushering in the most productive, freest and socially responsible cultures in the world’s history ALL rejected “democracy.”

The Reformers saw “Democracy” as an ancient Greek heresy contrary to biblical social and political theory. Instead, the greatest theologians of the Reformation affirmed the doctrine of “federalism” or “representation” based upon the model found in Genesis. In this view, one man stands for the group. Theologically it referred to Adam representing the entire human race (yet unborn) and therefore when he sinned, we all sinned in him. The corollary to this was Jesus being the Second Adam, standing in for His Elect; if we all died in Adam; we are all saved in Christ. Through federal representation, His death could atone for all His people’s sins (Rms 5:12-19).

The Reformers applied the doctrine of representation to the social and political realm when battling against the “divine right of kings.” They saw the biblical office of king as simply one of representation; the king as the supreme executive of a nation has a responsibility to those he represents. Hence, the king was not above the law, but under the law as God’s magistrate. Therefore, ungodly kings could be deposed and the people could choose a new representative. The Reformers found biblical warrant in the way that the Hebrews governed their republic in Scripture; the “elders” of the twelve tribes ELECTED the king; which was how Saul and David received their kingships (1 Sam 11:15, 2 Sam 2:4, 3:17, 5:3, etc.). Each tribe elected “elders” to rule over them and these elders then chose the king. Granted God first anointed the king; but the elders had to CONFIRM their “calling.” Solomon’s son Rheoboam LOST the Ten Northern Tribes because he insisted on being a tyrant so they refused to acknowledge him as king and Israel became a divided nation (1 Kings 12:16).

Hence, our modern concept of representative government, wherein the people choose leaders for themselves, is a direct application of the Reformation theology of Federal Representation and biblical precedent. Americans in particular are the direct heirs to this theology; the Declaration of Independence is a legal document listing the abuses of the English king and justifying removing him as our Federal

“head.” The Constitution of the United States is an attempt to work out this same Federal theology in determining the proper balance between individual, God given liberties with the necessity for sound political government.

Thus, theoretically, the people elect as their representatives members of congress, the president, governors, mayors, city council members, sheriffs, judges, etc., to rule IN THEIR PLACE. Please note that this is NOT technically “democracy;” the President of the United States does not have to conduct a referendum before making an executive decision; nor do the members of congress have to conduct an opinion poll before making a law. Each sphere of our government has legitimate, lawful authority to act in their given areas in the name of the people. If we, the people, disapprove of their actions on our behalf, then we recall them from office by electing someone else. We even derive our term “federal government” from the theology of representation.

Granted, in our modern political system we daily see horrible abuses of power from all three branches of our government; but these men derive their lawful authority to act (when they act lawfully) because they are the representatives of the “people.” They stand for us and act in our name. Hence, the older word to describe our form of government was “Republic” not “Democracy.”

Now what has all this to do with reforming the Christian family and evaluating “Patriarchy?” In effect, Western civilization WAS a “patriarchy” up until recent times and assumed as the normal means of governing not only households, but also entire nations. The English proverb “every man’s home is his castle” represents the cultural assumption, handed down from antiquity, that the father, as head of his household, WAS the federal representative of his own family to the broader community. In some sense, both monarchies and aristocracies were both developments of this same principle of patriarchy.

Until the twentieth century, Americans almost universally held to this doctrine of representation in some form or the other. The reason why women were not allowed to vote had nothing to do with women being considered “inferior” or “too emotional” (these values arose during the Victorian era and were themselves theologically and socially deviant) but rather because the husband and father was ASSUMED to represent the family to the broader community. By definition, there could only be ONE representative of the family just as there could only be ONE representative of the Human Race to God!

However, by the end of the 19th century, American Christians had largely stopped thinking in theological terms. Instead, an emotive, subjective religious “experience” (called Pietism”) emphasizing individual conversion replaced the comprehensive Christian worldview of the Reformation. As Christians failed to think biblically about all of life, they were unable to withstand either the new philosophies gaining ground in the universities or deal effectively with the changing social conditions of the Industrial Revolution. By the 20th century, American Christians saw the “height” of Christian activism as banning alcohol while at the same time affirming a woman’s right to vote. Both ideas were unmitigated disasters; God has not allowed the civil magistrate to outlaw wine and God does not allow women to vote (cf. 1 Tim 2:11ff). But by ignoring God’s law, American Christians both destroyed their own credibility (the Prohibition era is STILL a matter of public ridicule and repealing prohibition set the legal precedence for pornography, sodomy and the acceptance of other moral failures) and the integrity of own families.

In regards to a woman’s right to vote; if husband and wife are truly “one flesh” and the husband is doing his duty to represent the family to the wider community, then what PRACTICAL benefit does allowing women to vote provide? If husband and wife agree on an issue, then one has simply doubled the number of votes; but the result is the same. Women’s voting only makes a difference when the husband and wife disagree; a wife, who does not trust the judgment of her husband, can nullify his vote. Thus, the immediate consequence is to enshrine the will of the individual OVER the good of the family thus creating divisions WITHIN the family.

Granted, many wicked men can (and have) abused their lawful authority, treating their wives with contempt, condescension and not always governing their homes according to God’s law. Yet do irresponsible or even sinful fathers justify undermining the divinely authorized family structure? One might argue that this was the actual intention; as men rejected God in the 19th century, they sought to build socialist utopias in the 20th. One of the bulwarks against socialism was and is the Christian family; self-governed men and women working diligently at their calling and given freedom from interference from the State will prosper economically and socially while raising sober, responsible children. Socialism however, must control EVERY aspect of society and therefore the independence of the Christian family is a direct threat. Hence, socialism must destroy the family and their interdependence, to remove it as an impediment to humanist control. No matter that, in doing so, the State destroys the wealth of that society, or that their interference in the family creates

asocial deviants who clog the court systems and require building ever larger prisons; when men suppress the truth of God they become fools (Rms 1:20ff).

Rediscovering the biblical concept of “patriarchy” is a first attempt in countering modern, dysfunctional humanist cultural values. The godly family IS the foundation of the social order; God created the family FIRST, and then out of the family came the state AND the church. Furthermore, there can be no legitimate doubt that the father, in the home, has genuine authority from God to govern the family; and both the wife and the children are required to submit to his lawful governance (cf. 1 Cor 11: 8ff, 1 Tim 2:11ff, Eph 5:22, 33). Not even the church is to take precedence over the father in lawfully governing his home (cf 1 Cor 14: 34).

However, biblical patriarchy cannot simply mean elevating the role of the father or it risks creating domestic tyranny in place of political tyranny. There are of course pagan concepts of patriarchy that are just as destructive to a divinely guided social order as the biblical one that reinforces and encourages it. Swinging to an ungodly extreme of the social pendulum will not bring about genuine revival.

The doctrine of representation provides a necessary theological presupposition that encourages genuine reformation in the family, and the establishment of a stable social order. The model for the Christian family is NOT the post-war “Father Knows Best” or “Leave it to Beaver” where an “all-wise” father governs a “ditzie” wife who vacuums in a cocktail dress. Instead, we must rediscover the father’s role in governing the family wisely and justly according to Divine Law as he represents the family to the outside world. We must also understand and accept that with authority comes responsibility; the family belongs to God, not the father. The father cannot govern any way he pleases but only as a wise steward of God’s people; and like unjust, tyrannical kings, God CAN and WILL depose us if we do not fulfill our responsibilities according to His law.

For example, biblical patriarchy never excuses, justifies or motivates godly men to devalue, denigrate or relegate godly women to “second-class” status in the home. Women are NOT inferior to men even if they are subordinate in their roles. Husband and wife are to be “one flesh;” which is more than a quaint euphemism for marital intimacy but rather a spiritual union of two individuals (1 Cor 6:16-17). Granted the wife is to respect her husband and submit to him (1 Ptr 3:1) but the husband is also required to treat her with grace, kindness and respect granting her honor as a joint-heir of the Kingdom, lest God refuse to hear his prayers (1 Ptr 3:7). In pagan patriarchy, the wife was often little more than a domestic servant and child-bearer (as in ancient Greece, the “cradle” of “democracy”) but in the biblical view, God praises the godly woman for her industriousness, creativity, aesthetics and business acumen (Pvbs 31:10ff). A wise man, understanding his duty as representative, will therefore lawfully utilize all the assets of the family, including his wife’s wisdom, gifts and concerns, for the common good of the family.

Furthermore, the biblical patriarch will understand that as the federal head of his family, he has a divine obligation to work, self-sacrificially for the sanctification of his wife just as Christ works for the sanctification of His church (Eph 5:23ff). While he has responsibility to provide for the physical welfare of his wife and children, fundamentally his most important task is to present his wife “perfect” in Christ and bring his children up in the “discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:1ff). In both these tasks, he must not “vex” those under his care by being arbitrary, capricious, or self-serving. God gives the biblical patriarch his position of authority FOR the benefit of those under his authority.

The biblical patriarch thus assumes personal responsibility for teaching his wife and children; out of his “secret” worship, meditating on the Divine Word, (Josh 1:8) God equips him to minister to his entire household through family worship (Deut 6:4ff). Furthermore, as the federal “head” of his family, he adjudicates disputes, resolves problems and maintains justice in the home. Having argued in other places that the primary function of headship is judging rather than legislating, we will not duplicate that material here. However, our basic assumption is that the Moral Law of God is sufficient legislation; the task of any person in authority is to APPLY that law wisely and justly; i.e., the king to the political realm, the elders to the ecclesiastical realm and fathers to the family realm. Thus, the primary task of the biblical patriarch is to study the Law of God, meditate on it, immerse himself in it and then APPLY it to every area of his life and the lives of those under his care.

Furthermore, biblical patriarchy understands that as sons and daughters mature and get married, they form NEW covenant relationships that supersede their previous households (Gen 2:24). Godly marriage requires a transition of authority from the father, to the son. There is still a family relationship; albeit a transformed one. In pre-industrial cultures wherein most economic activity was family based, the setting up of these new households did not negate the broader family relationships; often sons continued working with

and for their fathers. This meant that the “grandfather” retained SOME authority (as the head of the family business) while recognizing the legitimate family authority of his sons over their own households. Since the Industrial Revolution, most men no longer work for their fathers and often move far away from them in search of better economic opportunities. While this sociological process has brought individual prosperity, it has been at the expense of the wider family; in earlier eras, families lived in close proximity, and the extended family provided work, welfare, and education for ALL of its members. With the fragmentation of the family due to industrialism and urbanism, the “nuclear” family is often unable to survive on its own. The State then steps in at taxpayer expense, to provide the social necessities that once the family provided.

Our point here of course is that in a biblical patriarchy, there are limits to lawful authority. While direct authority as a father ends when the children form new households, yet, there are also legitimate OTHER spheres of authority (such as a family business) that the biblical patriarch can lawfully employ. For example, a godly patriarch might well disinherit a rebellious, prodigal son, reducing the son’s status to that of a “servant” as a way of encouraging repentance (cf. Luke 15:19 with verse 31).

Only as a man demonstrates “domestic competence” in his own home is he then authorized by God to minister to the broader community (I Tim 3:1ff, Titus 3:5ff). Men, who have not demonstrated that their own wives and children are growing in godliness, grace and sanctification must never be entrusted with the souls of those outside their own homes (as in the church).

Different men will of course work out these basic principles in different ways; for example, finding an alternative to post-industrial economics, some men might establish a family business that employs his wife and children in profitable enterprises; others may have to work outside the home to provide for their households. Some men may decide that certain activities are counter-productive to the spiritual welfare of his family while other men decide differently; e.g., whether a wife may work outside the home or not until God blesses them with children. The basic principle is that God’s law is sufficient and we must not make rules where God Himself has granted liberty.

Since we are now three generations into the modern humanist interpretation of the family, rediscovering biblical patriarchy is fraught with danger. Since so many modern Christian men are too lax in leading their families, failing to teach and protect them, they risk losing them to humanist culture. In response, other men will be too strict with their families and hence risk “vexing” their children. There is also the danger that some men will over-react against the common emasculated concept of the modern “father” and will overcompensate by denying any authority other than their own; including lawful authority in the church and State. The simple fact is that ALL Men will sin; they will sin against God and they will sin against their families. However, the divinely required methodology of dealing with that sin is by meditating and applying the unchanging standards of God’s law, being humble before Him, recognizing and confessing that sin, and then through repentance, taking the appropriate course of action.

Thus, we ought to expect that in the process of trying to rediscover biblical patriarchy, some men will struggle with finding the proper balance. Some will confuse their own personal values with Scriptural ones-attempting to bind other’s consciences without lawful warrant. Some men will no doubt err by being too protective of their children. Yet the solution is NOT to undermine the concept that the father is the federal representative of his family, both to God and to the world, but rather instruct him in his duties before God and encourage him in fulfilling his divine mandate.

Some of the ridicule, animosity and sheer contempt hurled at the “patriarchy” movement is inexcusable and often made by those who seem to have accepted current cultural values as universal norms. Even the worst examples of modern “patriarchy” show more biblical warrant than the unconscious adoption of secular humanism commonly held by many “Christian” families. For example, some “critics” are aghast the some fathers want their sons to work in the family business rather than allow them to “explore” other “alternatives.” Granted, a godly father as representative of the entire family will understand the doctrine of “calling;” that God has uniquely gifted each of his children and one of the parent’s most vital roles is to assist the children in discovering and preparing for that calling. Some men might be tempted to value their personal pride over the calling of their sons - just as some former athletes insist that their sons must play sports, even if the sons do not have the gifts or the desire. However, the abuse of power does not negate the legitimate authority God delegates to any institutions; even David refused to assassinate the murderous Saul because he was “God’s anointed.” In the end, who is best qualified to help a young man find his calling- some stranger with unbiblical values, or his own father who loves and wants his son to be a success?

Others criticize the “patriarchs” for “idolatry” in elevating the family as the “center of life.” However, what IS the center of “life?” Granted, the sovereign Lord has ultimate claim to all our love, worship and service, but this God established the family as the basic element of community; it was not good for the man to be alone, so God created the family. In the family, we find both unity and diversity; many members but still one-just as there is one God in three persons. Many Christian critics appear to have unconsciously enshrined the post-industrial, segmented “family” with its emphasis on individualism as the ideal without questioning the underlying presuppositions.

Some have criticized the “patriarchs” for having the view that “the mother’s role is to bear children, cook food and keep her mouth shut.” If this accusation were true, then it would be a serious blow against “patriarchy;” however, one searches in vain for those “patriarchs” who espouse such a view. The godly “patriarch” lives with his wife in an understanding manner (cf 1 Ptr 3:7ff) and represents HER views to the world as a part of his greater duty as her federal head. Yes, undoubtedly, many ungodly men tyrannize their wives; but the problem is their own personal sin- NOT the theology of “patriarchy.”

Finally, some criticize the “patriarchs” for not wanting to invest in an expensive college education for their daughters because we “we need more young ladies in law, school, medicine, the arts and so on.” Again, this criticism assumes a modern cultural value and established it as the norm despite the fact that it has no biblical warrant and constitutes social suicide. Even the radical feminists today admit that women cannot adequately function as both a “career” woman and mother. A simple examination of the birth rates for professional women shows that the more highly educated a woman becomes, the LESS likely she is to get married and the LESS likely to have children. Thus, this writer is actually encouraging brilliant Christian women to take a course of action that will mean cutting off their genetic inheritance for future generations! We do not need MORE female Christian lawyers, doctors or artists, but MORE godly women raising MORE godly children who will fill the earth and subdue it to the glory of God. And does it really make economic sense to invest tens of thousands of dollars for a woman to get an advanced education (often having to go into debt to finance that education) that she will NOT use if she accepts that her highest calling is to be a wife and mother? Thus, this “reformer” is actually encouraging a sociological system that impoverishes the family and reduces its ability to exercise godly dominion.

God requires fathers to govern their own households as a part of the Dominion Mandate and with the vast changes to social structure since the Industrial Revolution, many Christians have erred in trying to fulfill this duty. However, “teachers” in the church are supposed to assist godly fathers in their dominion duties, not berate them because sometimes not every father gets it completely right. Yes, there are individual men who are insecure, intolerant and imperious; but the problem is not “patriarchy” but personal sin. The modern dysfunctional American family structure that so many “Christians” want to defend is a dinosaur, about to become extinct. Right now, cultures with strong, patriarchal views, rejecting the modern fragmented understanding of the family, have dramatically increased birthrates over the humanist West; and they are about to conquer Europe, Japan and the United States in the coming century through immigration. While Western “families,” exalting in the quest for self-fulfillment and individual actualization, decline, those who retain the older concept of the family, even pagan perversions of patriarchy, are increasing and multiplying.

Therefore, let those who earnestly seek a return to the biblical family carefully search the Scriptures to develop a consistent and comprehensive Christian view of the “patriarch’s” role. Let them meditate on the doctrine of “representation” and understand both the legitimate authority of the father, as well as the limitations of his role. Let fathers govern their homes wisely and justly for the benefit of the entire family not giving in to pride or arrogance. Let the “patriarchs” raise strong, self-governed sons who have discovered their calling and who will work diligently at fulfilling it. Let the “patriarchs” raise godly, modest and temperate daughters who rejoice in their duties as wives and mothers, teaching their children and managing the households. And as for the critics; let us not worry about them- they and the children they never bore, raised nor disciplined, will soon be a thing of the past.