



The Dual Role of God in Family Relationships

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AMERICAN FAMILIES OF FAITH

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How does a person's view of God affect family life? Seeing God as loving and authoritative fostered stronger unity.

All participant names are pseudonyms.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “God is the only comfort; He is also the supreme terror: the thing we most need and the thing we most want to hide from.” These seemingly opposing views of God being a comforting friend, as well as a supreme authority and eternal judge, can be challenging to reconcile.

We explored if and how different interpretations of God’s character reportedly influence family relationships. An exploration of the quote from Robert Ingersoll may bring some more insight: “It is difficult for a child to find a father in God unless the child first finds

something of God in his father.” Ultimately, how someone views God may influence the relationship quality an individual has with their other family members.

We will cover the different views that came to light after in-depth interviews with about 200 religiously diverse families from our *American Families of Faith* Research Project. We discovered three ways that people tended to identify categories of attributes of God. The first was a belief that God was relational and that He truly was someone they confided in. The second perspective involved seeing God as the ultimate authority figure, a being to whom they were accountable. Thirdly, many reflected a view that combined perspectives 1 and 2 and portrayed a God who possessed both love and authority. We will explain each perspective in detail.

Perspective 1: God is a Close Confidant

Many of the participants (88%) expressed a sense of relationship with God. For many, this relationship was a sacred, intimate friendship—a friendship that often included God serving as a close confidant.

Many participants seemed to convey the belief: **“God is personally interested in and blesses my family.”** Tucker, a Latter-day Saint father, said,

We believe that our Heavenly Father is willing, able, and desires to help us in every decision we have to make in life. ... We believe you can receive [help]. ... [W]e believe that our Heavenly Father is more than happy to ... put impressions in our heart [and] in our minds to give us direction.

Another theme from participants was that they believed **they could get help from God to help their families**. When Angela, a Catholic mother, was asked about how God played a role in her parenting, she said,

[I am] consoled by knowing the presence of God, God’s presence in my life. I’m not alone. I, as bad as I sometimes feel I am as a mother, or as a wife, [I still] feel like God’s presence is constant and steady, and God always loves me, and that’s consoling for me.

In conjunction with helping their family, participants not only believed God was there, but that God **was available to specifically help with their familial relationships**.

Emily, an Evangelical Christian wife and mother, shared how she turned to God when she felt at a loss as to how to help her children.

Many times, you just have to pray.... For me, it's a very personal thing. I can go to God and say, "I'm really concerned about this situation that this child is dealing with—help them." I can intervene on their behalf before God, and He would work with the situation in their lives and help them.

Participants' reports of trusting God varied, but many reported that they trusted God to help them navigate their family relationships. Many participants' accounts **alluded to God as a source of healing and support**. A Muslim wife and mother named Noor felt that God was a personal help to her. She said,

I think many times when one of my children was very ill, I did personal supplication to Allah and ... He ... calmed me down and helped me through the situation. I believe that God really has helped me personally, and ... that God has also helped the whole family.

These families believed that God was personally interested in and blessed their families and that He would help and strengthen family relationships, including being a support and a healing balm.

Perspective 2: God is an Authority Figure

Eighty-six percent of participants saw God as an authority figure. Not only was this perspective widely held, but it was also expressed at the frequency of about seven accounts per interview. Next, we explore participants' reflections and insights on God as an authority figure.

A common theme from the interviews was **how vital it was for these families to submit to God's will, even when challenging, in matters of marriage and family life**. This submission requires humility and was well illustrated by Jimmy, an Evangelical

Christian husband and father, who said, “The more I submit to God, the better husband I become.”

This submission to the Divine was reportedly a difficult and lifelong work. We again reference C.S. Lewis, who wrote, “I didn’t go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity.”

Participants also found that **believing that God had a plan for their family gave them purpose and hope amidst their rising challenges**. Hannah, a Jewish wife and mother, shared how a challenge with her husband seemed to be a part of “Hashem’s [G-d’s]¹ plan” even when it was during a painful time in her life:

But wasn’t this [hardship] actually, without our knowing it, all part of Hashem’s plan? ... We didn’t like it. We suffered because we were unhappy, because we weren’t on the same path, right? But obviously this was how it was intended to work itself out, so that instead of you and me going divergent roads over it, we had to work together and find a place where we could be comfortable with each other and build a Jewish home together.

From Hannah’s words, we can interpret that divine plans are sometimes clearer in retrospect than in the present. For many families we interviewed, these divine “plans” involved religious expectations, or commandments, which we will discuss next.

Many of the religious individuals and families we interviewed felt a **strong call, pull, or obligation to abide by the commandments or rules of God**. Jake, an Evangelical Christian husband, said, “Obeying his [God’s] laws, or his commands, or his teachings, is very important to have a successful life and a family.” Participants from various branches of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity offered harmonizing views—acknowledging the authority of God, of good that came when this authority was honored, and of damage that tended to occur when it was not.

These AFF participants truly felt that when they submitted to God’s will and chose to follow His plan by keeping the commandments, they would be blessed. These beliefs comprise the viewpoint with God as an authority figure. We will now discuss how participants saw God as a friend *and* as an authority figure simultaneously.

Perspective 3: God is an Authority Figure and a Close Confidant

In brief review, 88% of participants spoke of God in warm, friendly, relational terms while 86% emphasized the authority of God. These two views of God were not viewed as conflicting or mutually exclusive. Indeed, about three-quarters of the families reflected both perspectives on God at some point in their interviews. In addition to this, however, we identified 202 accounts (in about 40% of the interviews) where participants referenced God as an authority figure and a close confidant *within the same set of sentences*. We will now delve into some of these “dualistic” instances.

A recurring response from *American Families of Faith* participants that reflected both the “warm” role as God as friend and the “firm” role of God as the ultimate authority was a two-part belief that **(1) God knows where families needed to be and (2) what they needed to be doing in their lives**. Both aspects are illustrated by Yuusif, an Arab Muslim husband and father, who said,

When you hear bad news, there is a prayer for it. When something good has happened, there is a prayer of thanks. Again, like I said: *Decisions*. Should I take this charge, or should I not? Should I move here, or should I not? Should I do this? So there are [many ways of] actual[ly] seeking guidance from God.

Participants’ accounts regarding how they could *trust* God to help them in their relationships were different from seeing God as a close confidant, because rather than just having an interpersonal trust in God, they had trust in God’s authority. Benton, a Black Christian husband, spoke about what happened when he would do what God asked of him:

I’m blessed with being able to supply enough for my family ... but I think that [the] Lord gave me the talent that I have to be able to support my family with what I do in life, and then when He calls you to do something, like [volunteer] work that I do at the church, He’ll provide whatever you need, regardless of what it is.

Benton had the view that God was someone who had the authority to ask him to do things, and also that God would graciously “provide whatever you need” to make those divine requests work together for the good of him and his family. Therefore, these

“calls” from the Lord reportedly served as *both* authoritative demands *and* loving blessings.

Often, *American Families of Faith* participants spoke of having conversations with God through prayer about their family relationships. Many would address God as an authoritative, supreme being, but would also speak to Him as if He were a close confidant. Tara, a Christian wife and mother, explained:

I think we’re always asking for help and guidance in what we do with our kids and how we interact with them and what might be best for them. [It’s] just sort of a constant conversation with God.

Only 79 families had accounts of experiences of God as both an authority figure and a close confidant in the same passage, but 156 families reported experiences with God as an authority figure *and* as a close confidant at different points throughout the interviews. This led us to conclude that a majority of the religiously devoted families interviewed had a holistic view of God that involved both a sense of loving relationship *and* a sense of potent ultimate authority.

Takeaways

Dualistic perspectives of the Divine can affect parents’ own approaches with their children. For example, there are differences in “high authority figure” parenting versus “close-friend” parenting. A significant body of social science research indicates that optimal parenting often combines both relational warmth *and* relatively high expectations—in other words, both expecting the best from children and giving them the love “and” support to attain their best. Yet, authority and friendship occasionally combine in the need for chastening and correcting in loving ways.

C.S. Lewis stated, “Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. But presently, He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

As a heavenly parent, God has the power to alter our plans and replace them with divine plans. However, if we trust God as a friend, we can be confident that He will create lives for us that exceed our expectations, including guiding, challenging, and elevating us in our familial relationships.

Note:

(1) Orthodox Jews often use “G-d” rather than “God” to show respect for the name of God and, for the same reason, refer to God as “Hashem” (meaning “The Name”).

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