

## ST KURIĀKŌSE CHĀVARA: A TEACHER OF FAMILY THEOLOGY A Reading in the Light of Ben Sira

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**Abstract:** George Kaniarakath, reading Ben Sira in the light of the literary contributions of St Kuriākōse Chāvara, especially his *Chavarul*, considers him a teacher of family theology. The author considers his family background and holds that the inspiration for life came from his own family. Later, as a result of the meditations of Chavara on the biblical picture of family, a picture of a modern ideal family unfolds before his eyes. This picture is further enhanced by his personal devotion to the Holy Family. It is from these three different sources that a comprehensive picture of an ideal Christian family is evolved by Chavara as it is enshrined in the *Chavarul*. The main features of the little document are a theocentric life lived in the family, which has to be a life characterized by the fear of God, relationships maintained only with the God-fearing, keeping only God-fearing servants, timely worship of God, life according to the will of God backed by a healthy reading habit daily and timely prayer and modesty in personal appearance. An ideal Christian life also calls for a philanthropic family life, in which Christians refrain from lawsuits and unchristian talks. They have ideal friends and they respect their privacy, give just wages to the labourers in time. It also calls for the wise management of family property, and not wasting days in an idle manner. Chavara teaches his people the true doctrine of Christian family.

**Keywords:** Chāvarā, *Chāvarul*, testament, family, parents, Ben Sira, code, exhortation, letter, *Ātmanutāpam*, covenant, Commandments, marriage, Holy Family, authority, Trinity, incarnation, Nazareth, Congregation, guidelines, Jerusalem, God, sinfulness, righteousness, Peter, Psalm, discipline, Holy Spirit, God-fearing, servants, neighbours, worship, Vatican II, sacrament, Eucharist, Sabbath, endurance, parish, scriptures, prayer, modesty, dignity, philanthropy, lawsuits, privacy, friends, wages, labourer, property.

## 1. Introduction

St Chāvarā's theological understanding and teaching on family is succinctly articulated in his introduction to his *Chāvarul* or 'Farewell Words', which is presented in the form of a testament that he wrote to his people in Kainakary.<sup>1</sup> It begins with a precise and meaningful description: "A good Christian family is the image of heaven. Its *raison d'être* is that those related by bonds of blood and love, live together respecting and obeying parents, peacefully before God and people, seeking eternal salvation according to their state of life." A similar picture is given by the book of Ben Sira in his typical way: "I take pleasure in three things, and they are beautiful in the sight of God: agreement among brothers and sisters, friendship among neighbours, and a wife and husband who live in harmony" (25:1). Both Chavara and Ben Sira speak about the involvement of God and the mutual love that keep people together.

The letter written by St Chāvara in 1868 is the first explicit and rather complete treatise on the topic in the Church. The year 2018 marks the 150<sup>th</sup> year of its publication. It is described by the author as a *chattam* or code, which concern 24 aspects of family life in general, continued by 16 points on the upbringing of children; together reaching the biblically significant number 40.<sup>2</sup> The instructions given in the testament are biblical, theological, and above all highly pastoral.<sup>3</sup> The style of writing is simple with memory devices like similes, stories and anecdotes. The biblical thinking behind the text is discernible, though there are no direct references.

In his introduction to the *Testament*, Chavara gives a beautiful definition of the family that is followed by theoretical and practical

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<sup>1</sup>In the Bible we have the final and touching words of Jacob (Gen 49:1-27); Moses (Deut 33:1-29), Paul to the Elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:18-25), and Jesus (Jn 13:31-16:33).

<sup>2</sup>The number 40 is symbolic and significant in many biblical passages referring to a journey of probation or difficulties. To be noted is that the Israelites were in the desert for 40 years before reaching the promised land (Num 4:34; 32:13; Acts 7:30); Prophet Elijah, fleeing from Jezebel, had to journey 40 days to reach Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8); and Jesus fasted 40 days in the desert. Life is often compared to a journey of trials; 40 is also the period of a generation (Num 32:13). Hence what Chavara gives is the *torāh*, an instruction for family life, which is a journey beset with trials.

<sup>3</sup>Our preferred text is *Chāvara Kuriākōse Ēliyāsachante Sampooranarthikal*, Vol. 4: *Kathukal*, Second Edition (Malayālam), Lukas Vithuvattickal, ed., Männānam: CMI Prasādakha Committee, 1986.

instructions. The body of the letter ends with an exhortation to children to honour their parents and never cause them any pain. To illustrate the message, the author narrates a Japanese story in which one of the three brothers is declared a thief by the other two before the authorities. By doing so, they hoped to win the promised reward given to the informers in order to feed their mother who was in utter poverty. However, the authorities could not be fooled, but for their noble intention, the brother was spared and they were rewarded by the authorities.

After the main body of the letter, and the signing off at the end, there is an appendix in which the saint gives a few personal directives that are very touching, and which may be considered as a fitting conclusion to the *Testament*. Chavara feels sorry that he was not able to do anything special for his own people and so offers the letter written in his own hands as an immortal reassurance. He instructs them to receive it as his last testament and copies to be made and distributed, to be read on Saturdays. The people are ever to remember the goodness of their forefathers and mothers. He further instructs the people that on the day of his death, he only wishes that they remember it, no other commemoration is to be made, but pray, "May your servant be acceptable to you."

The letter has two parts. The first part presents the general principles that govern a Christian family and the second part deals with the important question of the upbringing of children. In this essay, our modest attempt is to make a biblical reading of the first part of the book. In our analysis, we refer to the contents of the letter with the serial numbers given in the original text.

## 2. Chāvarā's Inspiration

### 2.1. Family Background

Chavara must have been deeply impressed and inspired by his own family background, especially by the example of his beloved mother about whom he has written some very revealing facts in the first two chapters of his partially autobiographical poem titled *Ātmanutāpam – My Compunction*. In the poem, he recalls Mariyāmma Thōppil, his mother, who nourished him with the names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph with her own milk. In these chapters the saint narrates also how, though unworthy, God showered on him manifold graces and how he felt great compunction for being unworthy and even for failing to

cooperate with the Lord completely. The rest of the poem elaborates on the life of Jesus and Mary with some personal reflections.

## **2.2. The Biblical Picture of Family**

The concept of family is extremely important in the Bible, both in a physical sense and in a theological sense. The concept of family is introduced in the very beginning, as we see in Gen 1:28, "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" God's plan for creation was for men and women to marry and have children. A man and a woman would form a "one-flesh" union through marriage (Gen 2:24), and they with their children become a family, the essential building block of a human society. The teachings of Ben Sira, which are applicable to various conditions of life are relevant to parents and children, to husbands and wives, to the young, to masters, to friends, to the rich and to the poor. Many of them are rules of courtesy and politeness and a still greater number contain advice and instruction as to the duties of a person toward oneself and others, especially the poor, toward society and the state, and most of all toward God. Again, we have Psalm 45, which is a matrimonial hymn and the Song of Songs dramatizes the love between a prince and a princess.

The importance of family is evident also in the provisions of the Mosaic covenant. Two of the Ten Commandments<sup>4</sup> deal with maintaining the cohesiveness of the family. The fifth commandment regarding honouring parents is meant to preserve the authority of parents in family matters, and the seventh commandment prohibiting adultery protects the sanctity of marriage.

This is not solely a First Testament phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> The Second Testament also makes many of the same commands and prohibitions. Jesus speaks on the sanctity of marriage and against frivolous divorce in Matt 19. Paul talks about what Christian homes should look like when he gives the twin commands of "children, obey your parents" and "parents, do not provoke your children" (Eph 6:1-4 and Col 3:20-21). The 'great mystery' of marriage that demands total commitment in mutual love is compared to the love of Jesus for the Church (Eph 5:33).

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<sup>4</sup>In Hebrew 'Ten Words' (Ex 34:28; Deut 4:13, 10:4)

<sup>5</sup>Following the general trend today, I call the Old Testament, First Testament and the New Testament, Second Testament.

### 2.3. Devotion to the Holy Family

Chavara was deeply devoted to the Holy Family. There is no reference to the family of Nazareth in the Church as a group until around the beginning of the seventeenth century, mainly because the idea of family was much wider than the way we think of it today. The Bible spoke of family, which included all the people under the authority of the head of the house, including relatives and servants. St. Bernardine of Siena (1380-1444) seems to have for the first time used the term 'Holy Family' in reference to Jesus, Mary and Joseph as early as 1440.<sup>6</sup> The authors before the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth used the words 'Trinity,' 'earthly Trinity' or 'created Trinity' in reference to the Holy Family. Then the Holy Family came to be seen as an ideal, as it was a compelling witness to the greatness of the institution of the family. The incarnation of Jesus, which is a unique event, happened in this family chosen by God. Mary and Joseph fulfilled their vocation within the framework of a family in the holy relationship between themselves and with the Son of God. This family of Nazareth inspires Christian families to be communities of praise and love, and to live on the earth as pilgrims on their way towards God, their heavenly Father.

It is remarkable that Chavara kept and venerated a picture of the Holy Family in his room, and his very name in the religious congregation was Kuriākōse Ēliya of the Holy Family. Moreover, he entrusted the CMI Congregation whose co-founder he was, to the Holy Family on his death bed.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. General Guidelines for Families

The author also gives several general guidelines for families, in which the following three visions are seen evolving: 1) a theocentric, 2) a philanthropic and 3) a common vision of mastering and managing of material things wisely. These are envisioned by Chavara in his two dozen instructions in the first part of the letter. The central idea here is, as given in the definition of a Christian family, "walking peacefully before God and man," which means leading a wholesome life with God and neighbours. What is proposed is a theocentric life, which has

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<sup>6</sup>Annie Hayde, "The Holy Family: The Emerging of Devotion in the Church."

<sup>7</sup>Valerian, in his biography of the saint in Malayalam, "*Malankara Sabhamāthāvante Oru Veerasanthānam, Athava Va. Divyasree Kuriakōse Āliyasachan (Jeevacharithram)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Mannanam: SJ Press, 2013, 315. It makes reference to *Charamavathsaram*, 11-17.

God at the centre of one's existence and activity as the determining and overarching reality and ultimate motivation in life; one finds one's identity and purpose in God. The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy with him forever.

### **3.1. A Theocentric Life**

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, the famous saintly American radio-preacher, begins his book *Three to Get Married*<sup>8</sup> with the following thought-provoking statements:

It takes three to make Love in Heaven  
 Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
 It takes three for Heaven to make love to earth  
 God, man and Mary, through whom God became man.  
 It takes three to make love in the Holy Family  
 Mary, and Joseph, and the consummation of their love, Jesus.  
 It takes three to make love in hearts  
 The Lover, the Beloved, and Love.  
 That nations, hearts, and homes may learn  
 That love does not so much mean to give oneself to another  
 As for lovers to give themselves to that Passionless Passion,  
 Which is God.

Sheen continues: "It takes three to make love, for lover and beloved are bound together on earth by an ideal outside both. If we were absolutely perfect, we would have no need of loving anyone outside ourselves. Our self-sufficiency would prevent a hankering for what we have not. But love itself starts with the desire for something good. God is good. God is being, and therefore has no need of anything outside him." Sheen is referring to the role of God in family life.

The thought proceeds from the conviction that the finite and imperfect human beings can find most satisfaction and fulfilment when they focus on the infinite, unlimited God who is love, living a life with God in the centre, becoming merciful, peaceful, humble, selfless and friendly to all God's creation. This makes life more pleasant for oneself and others. God, the author of life and everything, deserves to be the focal point of our existence. And God assures us that happiness is found by keeping him at the centre. A man who delights in God's law and meditates on it is blessed "like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither" (Ps 1:3). Like branches on a vine loaded with grapes are

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<sup>8</sup>Fulton J. Sheen, *Three to Get Married*, New York: Appleton-Century, 1951.

those who "abide" in God bear much fruit (Jn 15:5). When we walk by God's Spirit, being led by him, we naturally exhibit the fruit of his Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). As long as God is an active partner, there is peace and harmony in the family. For Chavara, a God-centred life is simultaneously God-oriented and it leads to 'eternal life'.

### 3.1.1. A God-Fearing Life

In a theocentric life, the divine presence is ever active and people live with a sense of mystery that is tremendous and fascinating.<sup>9</sup> Moses had such an experience of it at Horeb, the mountain of God, when he found a bush blazing, yet it was not consumed (Ex 3:1-6). Another striking experience is narrated by prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem in his autobiographical note (6:1-13). In the year of the death of King Uzziah, the prophet had a vision in the temple of Jerusalem. Yahweh, the king was sitting on the throne being praised by the Seraphs (vv.1-4). The setting of the temple is clear in the antiphonal song, the altar with the red-hot stones, the smoke of the incense that fills the sanctuary, and the Holy of Holies. The prophet sees Yahweh himself seated upon the throne, clothed in majesty. The thrice-holy anthem resounds in the temple, and the 'glory' (*kavod*)<sup>10</sup> of the Lord fills the whole earth. God is all holy; the God of Isaiah is the "Holy One of Israel" (*qedosh yisrael* 1:4). We are given the idea of awe, dread, fascination and vitality. The trisagion in Ps 99 (vv. 3, 5, 9) is the supreme praise of the 'holy' God whose name is 'awesome,' and 'worshipful.'

During the vision, Isaiah becomes conscious of his impurity and unworthiness in the presence of God (v. 3, 5). This response is evoked by the sense of the holiness of God, who is God and not man (Hos

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<sup>9</sup>Rudolf Otto, in his book *Das Heilige: Übr das irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältniss zum Rationalen* (1917), writes about God who is the Numinous and the *Mysterium Tremendum* and *Fascinans*. According to him, the Numinous as holy is ineffable and wholly other and beyond human words. Humans feel creaturely and entirely dependent before the awfulness and feel overpowered. C. S. Lewis, in his *The Problem of Pain* (1940), opines that the fear of the Numinous is different from the fear we have for wild animals or ghosts, before the Numinous one feels a sense of inadequacy and is moved to prostration.

<sup>10</sup>The word means weight or heaviness which shows one's inner worth demanding respect from others. It has been defined as holiness (J. L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, London-Dublin, 1965, 313).

11:9). God is in the world but not comprehended by it; he is not one to be controlled and manipulated by humans. Isaiah's message of holiness means not only the sublimity of God as contrasted with man's creatureliness; it also means the contrast between God's purity and man's sinfulness. "The Holy One of Israel" is a favourite expression of the prophet (Is 5:19; 14:26; 28:29). Before God's holiness he confesses that he is unclean and is the member of a community in which there is no health (Is 1:4-9) and cries out: "Woe is me! For I am lost!" In the presence of the holy God, one is a miserable sinner. In Psalm 99:4, we read: "Mighty king, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob." "The Lord of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God is sanctified in righteousness." His holiness is contrasted with that of humans who are lying, stealing, oppressing and even murdering (Is 1:4, 21-23; 5:20; 9:17).

In the Second Testament also we have some episodes in which the awe is experienced by the disciples and others at the presence of Jesus, the Son of God become man. In Luke 5:1-11 and John 21:1-8, we have the description of a miraculous catch of fish. According to Luke, at the sight of the wonder, Simon Peter "fell down at Jesus' feet, saying: 'Go away from me, for I am a sinful man!' For, he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken" (vv. 8-9). Again, we have the story of Jesus having been transfigured (Mt 17:1-8; Mk 2:8; Lk 9:28-36) on a high mountain. There was "a transformation of the entire person (of Jesus), which even extends to his clothing. What is described is a metamorphosis (v. 2) in which is revealed his essential divine glory, no longer veiled by the trappings of human form and appearance."<sup>11</sup> We are told about the presence of Moses and Elijah representing *Torah* (Law) and the *Neviim* (Prophets) representing the First Testament. The whole scene was awe-inspiring for Peter, James and John.

The wisdom Psalm 128 gives a beautiful description of family which is enclosed within 'the fear of the Lord' (vv. 1, 4), which is key to the understanding of a fulfilled family life:

Happy are those who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways.  
 You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands;  
 and it shall be well with you.  
 Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within our house;  
 Your children will be like olive shoots around your table.  
 Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.

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<sup>11</sup> F. Wright Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew, a Commentary*, Oxford, 365.



The Lord bless from Zion.

May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of life.

May you see your children's children.

It is remarkable that the Psalm begins with a beatitude in which fear of the Lord is put parallel to 'walking in his ways,' implying that such people are on the right path" (Ben Sira 2:15-17; 19:20-24). The psalm assures that those who fear God will be happy and live long bringing prosperity to the family, town and the entire nation.

Ben Sira very positively sates:

The fear of the Lord is glory and exultation,

And gladness and a crown of rejoicing.

The fear of the Lord delights the heart,

And gives gladness and joy and long life.

Those who fear the Lord will have a happy end;

On the day of their death they will be blessed (1:11-13).<sup>12</sup>

Again, we are told that "the fear of the Lord is like a garden of blessing, and covers a person better than any glory" (40:27; 9:16). Accordingly, fear of the Lord, which is a filial sense of love, respect, piety, awe and submission to God, is the key to a peaceful, happy and fulfilled family life.

The first mention of the *fear of God* in the Bible occurs in Genesis 22:12, where we have the story of the test of Abraham by God. Abraham is prepared to sacrifice his son, as per the real divine demand. God forbid him and commended him for putting his trust in God saying: "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now, I know you fear God." Prophet Isaiah speaks about the shoot that shall sprout from the stump of Jesse and adds: "The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord" (Is 11:1-3). Here the 'fear of the Lord' is put with highly positive gifts. In the book of Proverbs, fear of the Lord is instruction or discipline (15:33); it is the beginning of wisdom (1:7; 9:10). There is no fear of God in the wicked (Ps 36:1; Rom 3:18) and it hates evil (Rom 8:13). In Catholic tradition fear of the Lord is counted among the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. For Chavara, family life was to be confirmed and consolidated by this healthy and ennobling gift of the Spirit.

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<sup>12</sup>Ben Sira continues his eulogy of the fear of the Lord in 1:14-20, 2730; 2:7-18b 17:410, etc.).

### **3.1.2. Relationship only with the God-Fearing**

Chavara writes: "Do not contract relationships with the disorderly and who have no fear of God. For, it is not the rich who bring blessing and joy to your family, but the orderly, God-fearing relatives' (no. 8). The wealth of a family is its fear of God and piety (no. 18). Chavara knew well and taught that the greatest wealth on earth was fear of the Lord and that alone could make people happy and content in life. People in general run after money and prestige, both of which have been risky and dangerous temptations for the human race. He even warns that not all are to be welcomed home; only those well-behaved and God-fearing shall be (no. 9). Our companions and friends can be a great source of consolation and support for us, while they can also dehumanize and lead us away from God. Birds of the same feather gather together and our company declares who we are.

It is not any pharisaic attitude or an attitude of superiority in knowledge or morality but a real sense of the fear of the Lord that should impel us to keep away from or be at least cautious about people who do not fear God or man. One has to be fearful of such people. Ben Sira counsels:

Do not invite everyone into your home,  
For many are the tricks of the crafty...  
For they lie in wait, turning good into evil,  
And to worthy actions they attach blame.  
From a spark many coals are kindled,  
And such a sinner lies in wait to shed blood.  
Beware of scoundrels, for they device evil,  
And they ruin your reputation forever.  
Receive strangers into your home  
And they will stir up trouble for you,  
And will make you a stranger to your own family (11:19-34).

Of course, we have to see to the actual situation and act wisely. Chavara knew well that all people were to be welcomed and loved; but one had to be ever prudent. Jesus was a friend of the sinners and the tax collectors and he even went in search of them not to revel with them, but precisely to win them to the reign of God.

### **3.1.3. Have God-Fearing Servants**

Chavara teaches that those who work for and serve us must be God-fearing people. We are duty bound to take care of their spiritual needs (no. 23). At the time of the saint, there must have been a healthy

familiar feeling, possibly that of an extended family, with and among the workers and servants and even neighbours.

### 3.1.4. Worship of God

In the First Testament, the seventh day is a day of 'rest', remembering God's rest after the creation (Gen 2:2-3; Ex 34:21); it was also to remind the people that they belonged to the Lord through the covenant (Ex 31:13; Ezek 20:12). In the Second Testament, Christians remember and celebrate on Sundays, the great paschal mystery of Jesus suffering, death and resurrection. Chavara insists that the days set apart for divine worship be strictly observed (no. 3); other festal celebrations like marriage or even commemoration of the dead are to be deferred. If someone died in the family, those needed may stay back (no. 22).

This instruction of Chavara anticipates Vatican II which teaches: "Hence the Lord's day is the original feast day, and it should be proposed to the piety of the faithful and taught to them in such a way that it may become in fact a day of joy and of freedom from work. Other celebrations, unless they be truly of overriding importance, must not have precedence over this day, which is the foundation and nucleus of the whole liturgical year."<sup>13</sup> Worship of God means accepting him as the supreme master and Lord of everything; there is no one or nothing equal to him and so he is to be preferred above all and worshiped. More than obeying a command, it should be a sense of creatureliness, loyalty and joyful thanksgiving that assemble the people before the Lord, singing praising and enjoying the company of our brothers and sisters.

A monthly reception of the sacrament of reconciliation is recommended and novenas in preparation of the feasts of Mother Mary and Joseph are to be recited at least at home. Chavara advises daily participation in the Divine Liturgy or on certain days in honour of Mother Mary or to pray for the diseased. If not all the members, some should try to do it (no. 18). He tells us that it is not enough to participate in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist on Sundays and days of obligation. They should be days on which you hear and reflect on the bible and to visit the sick, especially the poor (no. 22). In the book of Deuteronomy, Sabbath is 'holy' in the sense that it is set apart for God. In a way, it is a 'tithe' of time given to God. Man is not to be a slave of labour, and people have to remember how in Egypt they were subject to hard labour and so all the household, including children,

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<sup>13</sup>Constitution on *The Sacred Liturgy*, no. 106.

domestic workers, aliens and even the livestock were to be free from work (5:12-15). Prophet Isaiah gives the true spirit of Sabbath (58:13-14); if one is free from all selfishness and rejoices in the Lord doing well to others, Sabbath is meaningful.

The humane spirit of Sabbath is declared and accepted by Jesus when he healed a man with dropsy on the Sabbath (Lk 14:1-6). It is a day for honouring God, for helping others in need and being free to think of oneself. In Mark 2:27, we have a revolutionary statement of Jesus, "The Sabbath is made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath."<sup>14</sup>

### **3.1.5. Ever Resigned to the Divine Will**

One has to be happy and content in adversity as well as in prosperity. The one who is patient only when things go well, is not a man of strong character. To be able to live with composure and calmness in the midst of turbulences in life is something great; it is the result of a strong conviction that God loves us and that whatever happens to us ultimately is for our benefit and that nothing happens to us without his knowledge and consent. Luke tells us that one will save oneself through endurance (21:19). Similarly, the psalmist assures us: "Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved" (Ps 55:22). Job was ever resigned to the will of God; he could always say: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21); but the mystery of innocent suffering was puzzling for him.

At the announcement of the birth of Jesus and the choice of Mary as his mother, she responded to angel Gabriel: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). In Matthew we read the instruction of Jesus: "Do not worry, saying, 'What we will eat?' or 'What we will drink?' or 'What we will wear?' For, it is the gentiles who strive for all these things. And indeed, your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (6:31-33; Lk 12:31). Jesus, in his agony on the Mount of Olives prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). This is the highest expression of spirituality, which is ever seeking and living the

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<sup>14</sup>J. L. McKenzie, in his *Dictionary of the Bible*, 752, writes that it "sums up the teaching of Jesus in a single sentence better than any other."

will of God. At the time of his minor orders, St Chāvāra adopted the motto, "The Lord is my Portion forever" (Ps 16:5), which speaks about his life-long self-surrendering commitment to the Lord and his will.<sup>15</sup> For Ben Sira exhorts: "Accept whatever befalls you, and in times of humiliation be patient. For gold is tested in the fire, and those found acceptable in the furnace of humiliation" (Ben Sira 2:4-6).

Being resigned to the divine will no way means to be passive or lazy; as intelligent persons, we are to pray to God seeking his will, trying at the same time to change or improve the situation of poverty, sickness, natural disasters or any other misfortune or trouble. We pray that at least we may be given the strength and courage to withstand the problem. Jesus in Gethsemane also prayed to the Father to remove his pain, being absolutely submissive to the Father's will. With the psalmist we may pray:

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.

Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.

It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating

... he gives sleep to his beloved (Ps 129:1-2).

### 3.1.6. A Healthy Reading Habit

Chavara instructs his parishioners to feed their intellect and spirit with the habit of reading good books. Our reading can inform, encourage, entertain, console and even change our minds and hearts. The saint, however, cautions and reminds that keeping pagan (*kavyar*) scriptures and forbidden books of schismatics and those containing obscene songs is like hiding fire in the haystack. Books evoking devotion to God and right thinking are to be treasured for children, as far as possible.<sup>16</sup> A God/Christ-centred life requires that we grow in genuine knowledge and devotion (no. 21).

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<sup>15</sup>See G. Kaniarakath, "The Lord Is My Portion" (Ps 16:5; 119:57). A Key to the Spirituality of St Chāvāra," P. Kalluveetil and P. Kochappilly, eds., *The Lord of Heaven and Earth, Chāvāra Studies in Honour of Fr Lukas Vithuvattickal*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 49-59.

<sup>16</sup>We know today, as taught by Vatican II, that the books of other religions also contain truth and that we can learn from them (*Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, no. 2). Here we should remember that we are slaves of history and that we are limited by the times in which we live.

### **3.1.7. Open and Close the Day Praising God**

Chavara proposes a God-centred daily time-table for the family (no. 24). All are to get up by six o'clock in the morning and begin the day with the morning prayers. After this, if possible, all or at least some members of the family are asked to participate in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. In the evening, the proper prayers are to be recited and half an hour is to be spent in meditation. If needed, it is to be done with the help of a good book. After supper, an examination of conscience is to be made and the night prayers are to be recited. The family has to gather in prayer even if visitors or guests are present at home (no. 24). In this way, the saint envisions an orderly and regular life that is centred on God.

### **3.1.8. Modesty in One's Person and Appearance**

Our body is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:11; 12:1) and its dignity has to be maintained in our postures, dress, movements, play and communication. Chavara approaches modesty from the point of view of the virtue of chastity (no. 19). Of course, dress is something relative, but modesty is needed to safeguard human dignity and purity of heart.

## **3.2. A Philanthropic Family Life**

Chavara was deeply convinced that a true Christian family should be based on love of God and love of man. Where love of God and man is absent no true family life is possible. After having seen the theocentric aspect of the Christian family in Chavara, we now turn to its philanthropic character. According to Chavara, a good family is formed by bonds of blood and love. The members respect and obey the parents and live together peacefully before God and people, seeking eternal salvation according to each one's state of life. Here we are told about the love that should exist among the members of the family as well as other persons whom we encounter in our life. Paul exhorts the Roman believers: "Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves" (Rom 12:10). In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus has taught us that anybody in need is our neighbour and we should and help all (Lk 10:25-34). In his first instruction, Chavara requires of the family members to love each other and he adds the important aspect of mutual forgiveness, the result of which is peace on earth and eternal bliss in heaven. He laments a

situation in which brothers and their wives live in quarrel without love.

### **3.2.1. Lawsuits**

Going to the law courts to settle disputes even in genuine cases does not help much, only does harm (no. 2). "Whatever your eyes have seen do not hastily bring into court; for what will you do in the end, when your neighbour puts you to shame? Argue your case directly..." (Prov 25:9). Paul recommends the mediation of a believer who is just (1 Cor 6:1-6ff.).

### **3.2.2. Respecting Privacy**

One is not to poke one's nose unnecessarily into the affairs of others (no. 7). One should be interested in the wellbeing of one's neighbours, but that is not to be driven by mere curiosity; here is a gentlemanly behaviour is advocated. Let others have their free space and activity. "Do not meddle in matters that are beyond you..." (Ben Sira 3:23).

### **3.2.3. Unchristian Talks**

One is not to engage in disorderly and unchristian talks or in tale bearing and speaking ill of others (no. 10). Charitable and correct use of the tongue is very important in interpersonal relationships. Narrating the faults and shortcomings of others brings only harm. St. James writes: "Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with bridle" (3:2). Similarly, Ben Sira writes extensively about conversation: "A fool's chatter is like a burden on a journey, but delight is found in the speech of the intelligent. The utterance of a sensible person is sought in the assembly, and they ponder his word in their minds" (Ben Sira 21:16-17).<sup>17</sup>

### **3.2.4. Wasted Days**

Through an anecdote, Chavara instructs his people that a day on which we have not done any good to others will not be counted in the book of life (no. 13). God wants our daily life to be useful and helpful to others (no. 14). This is a highly spiritual thought concerning Christian life.

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<sup>17</sup>See also Ben Sira 9:15; 26-28; 22:12-15; 23:13, 14; 27:11-15; 28:13ff.

### 3.2.5. Ideal Friends

We need only selected friends and the criterion for selection of the friends is that they be people who fear and love God (no. 16). God-orientation of a person has its effect on every aspect of life and behaviour. The friendship between David and Jonathan was genuine and went on increasing even in the midst of dangers and sufferings, and it is to be emulated. The wise Ben Sira has a lot to say about human friendship:

Let those who are friendly with you be many,  
 But let your advisers be one in a thousand.  
 When you gain friends, gain them through testing,  
 And do not trust them hastily.  
 For there are friends who are such when it suits them,  
 But they will not stand by you in time of trouble.  
 And there are friends who change into enemies,  
 And tell of the quarrel to your disgrace.  
 And there are friends who sit at your table,  
 But they will not stand by you in the time of trouble.  
 When you are prosperous, they become your second self,  
 And lord it over your servants; but if they are brought low,  
 They turn against you, and hide themselves from you.

(Ben Sira 6:6-12; 6:14-17).

### 3.2.5. Just Wages in Time

An important and very humane teaching of Chavara is that the workers are to be paid just wages in time; both the time of payment and the amount are important. Our treatment of the workers and the poor is a matter of justice that cries out to God (no. 18). The divine instruction in Leviticus 19:13 is remarkable: "You shall not keep for yourself the wages of a labourer until morning." Similarly, Deuteronomy 24:15 elaborates the humane character of the deal: "You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt."

### 3.3. Wise Management of Family Property

St Kuriākōse is also concerned about the material wellbeing of the family and he has given some practical counsel in this regard.

1. One should not borrow money from others unless inevitable, if one has already done it, one has to return it at the earliest. Lend



only when required by charity. Attend to it immediately if there is any obligation with regard to the Eucharistic celebration or parents owing money to others (no. 4; Ex 22:25ff). Ben Sira 29:1-7 has a similar instruction.

2. Make not a show of one's wealth; such people easily loose (no. 5). Indeed, it is our experience that such people easily end up in misery. Ben Sira cautions us: "Do not rely on your wealth, or say: "I have enough" (5:1).
3. In celebrations one has to be aware of one's limitations; they should not make one a pauper (no. 6). The words of Ben Sira are strong and relevant: "Do not revel in great luxury, or you may become impoverished by its expense. Do not become a beggar by feasting with borrowed money, when you have nothing in your purse" (18:32-33).
4. Before searching for more and more, make the best use of the property one has; the wealth of a family is not the amount of possessions but their quality. When a small farmer was suspected of making wealth unjustly, he declared to his accusers that his small plot of land was a treasure and the sweat of his face gold on the land (no. 11).
5. Everybody should have the habit of hard work according to one's status (Ben Sira 7:15; 40:1); refusing to work does not make one respectable or acceptable. Laziness is the mother of all vices and it is the father of drinking which is disgraceful (no. 12).
6. Chavara sees taking alcohol despicable before man and evil before God (no. 12). However, Ben Sira (40:20) speaks about wine and music as gladdening the heart (Ps 104:15. Similarly, Qohelet 9:7 instructs: "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart" (Sira 31:23-31). Paul wrote to his disciple Timothy: "No longer drink only water, but take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." But, in his letter to the Galatians (5:20), Paul listed 'drunkenness' among the evil works of the flesh. Again, in Ben Sira we read: "Who has woe? Who as sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who linger late over wine, those who keep trying mixed wines. Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. At the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like an adder. Your eyes will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of the mast." (23:29-34). The Bible teaches that any

extreme is harmful, and that people have to control their appetites.

7. Business and trade are dangerous to both soul and wealth. If no other way is open for a living, there is no objection to pursuing it; it has to be done with care and a sense of justice. No unjust trader has ever maintained a steady progress. The riches amassed through deceit and fraud will soon melt away like snow (no. 13). In our modern economy business and trade are important services, but the principle of justice and equity are to be maintained. James is realistic in the matter: "Come now, you who say, 'Today tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.' Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes, instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wishes we will do this or that.'" (4:13-15).
8. One is not to be too stingy or too generous; the former forfeits it to the moth and the latter to the air (no. 15). Wealth and money bring wellbeing of man and have to be used prudently.
9. Nobody is to keep stolen things at home (no. 17). The idea is that one should not take what belongs to another and that one should not cooperate with such an action. When poor Tobit heard the bleating of a goat, he suspected that it might be stolen by her wife and said to her: "Return it to the owners; for we have no right to eat anything stolen" (2:13). Indeed, it was freely given to her with her wages. Through a story Chavara illustrates that through the act of stealing one is borrowing money from Satan.

#### **4. Conclusion**

St Kuriakose Chavara sees Christian family as built on three pillars, God-centeredness, philanthropy and wise economics. Such a family begins with a man and woman united by God who is love. In that family there is mutual love, faithfulness, forbearance and stability. The *kudumbakramam*, family code, given by Chavara, is original and unique on many counts. He indeed, teaches us the true doctrine of Christian family and is to be esteemed as a doctor and patron of Christian families.