

Church = a Family

23.04.2006

Today we begin a series of sermons on thinking about church. The way I have chosen to do it, is to look at the concepts of church in the Bible according to the imagery used there.

We begin with talking about families and church. Not about creches, Sunday Schools, Youth groups, etc; but to see that the Bible describes the church as a family.

In the Old Testament, Genesis starts off by talking about people as being part of families, enjoying God in His world. But with mankind's fall from grace, family life suffered enormously. Husband and wife lost intimacy, were shamed, stopped communicating properly, blamed each other and hurt multiplied. Family life was tragically marred. and their jealous son killed his brother.

But God's purpose was that we should live in family life, caring as a large family, not just as nuclear families, and coming under his eternal fatherhood.

When he destroyed the world through flood, it was Noah's family who were saved. Even they went wrong. So God chose one man, Abram, and promised that the world would be blessed through his family, and that his family would be God's chosen people, his delight in the world. Others would be welcome to join them in relating to God.

Bible family trees stress the lineage from Abraham, to show their link in God's family. Only a person from Levi's tribe within the large family could ever be a priest or Judah's tribe to be a king.

So when it came to the New Testament, with Jesus being the true Israelite, the true son of Abraham, the Jewish Christians still had great pride in being part of the Jewish family. Their pride caused problems for Gentile Christians, who lacked the essential credentials of being circumcised, which was a sign of belonging to God's family and not being cut off from it.

The raging early church debates are reflected in Galatians and Acts. Yet the New Testament writers regularly refer to Christians being part of God's family, by calling Christians brothers and sisters in Christ, and speaking of God as **our** Father.

Both Jewish and gentile Christians are connected through to Abraham, as in Ephesians 2:19 which says *"You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people, and members of God's household."* 1 Timothy 3:15 says that the church of the Living God is God's household.

They are the OT terms for the children of Abraham. But we are also children of God. Ephesians 1:5 says *"In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ"*, and Romans 9:26 *"And it will happen that in the very place where it was said to them "You are not my people", they will be called 'children of the living God'."*

If we trust in Christ, then we are adopted in to God's family or household. We are not just the servants who come into the household to work in the kitchens, laundry, gardens or stables. We become members of his family, fellow citizens with all the others in his church, endowed with the same privileges that being a child of God gives.

In Christ we have a new family. But what is a family like?

What is your family like? Are there any hassles between family members? Is your family loosely connected or close knit? Do you share with each other including sharing your hopes, dreams and pains, or do you live much more independently?

In God's family, we each come with different ideas about what His family should be like. Those of us who are very comfortable with a close-knit, protective, highly dependant family will find it hard to accept the stand-offish, less dependant expectations of others.

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Having the differing expectations may lead to accusations of “busy-body, control freaks” or ‘aloof and uncommitted’.

Understanding what God means by his family, and how it is ideally supposed to function needs us to put aside our own experiences and expectations and look at the writings of the New Testament to see what He wants us to do.

It can be easy to point to passages such as the fantastic enthusiasm in the early church and see how people met with each other daily, and some even sold their spare property to provide for the needs of brothers and sisters in Christ. The close-knit family Christian may feel a swell of enthusiasm and say ‘aha! I was right!’ Church is meant to be close-knit family life!

But then again it is easy to point to the passages saying how Paul felt isolated and really appreciated the few who encouraged him to see that even from the start there was a looser network of more independent family relationships within the church.

Some Christians were concerned with staying and growing in the one place, while others saw the horizons and dreamt of what God could do with them over there. Some wanted to nurture Christians, others wanted to reach out. Some wanted the strict Jewish customs, others wanted the freedom to be more flexible and gentile.

The family life of the church in the New Testament showed that Christian living has not changed much. There are Christians who love and desire the warm, close-knit networks, and there are Christians who love more independent relationships.

Yet we must never forget that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. Simply because one person is gifted more with a motherly, caring type personality, doesn’t mean they are any more or any less part of the family than someone with the more independent adventurous types of gifts. God’s family needs all types, otherwise at the extremes we’ll have so much love for each other

that we reject or neglect newly adopted members of our family, or we’ll become so independent that our family fails to appreciate and love one another.

Under the Fatherhood of God, we are a family of believers. We look forward to the fullest expression of this family in heaven, when we will rejoice in our Father with our brothers and sisters forever. But in the mean time, we need to grow as a family, having God’s surname and character defining us and guiding us, as we have His Spirit in us.

Close knit members, care and love. More independent members stretch our vision to other areas where God’s love needs to flow.

Let us grow together as God’s family.