

The Church: Understanding the Dynamics of Being the Family of God

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Introduction

The Bible has several metaphors for describing believers, including “the people of God” (Jud. 20:2; 2 Sam. 14:13), the “bride of Christ” (implied in Eph. 5:22-23), “the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 4:12), and “a holy priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:10). Although the phrase “family of God” is not mentioned in Scripture, the family metaphor is seen throughout the Bible. Of the various ways believers are described in the Bible, the family metaphor captures the essence of the eternal relationship believers have with God and the special bond they share with each other.

Joseph Hellerman has noted, “No image for the church occurs more often in the New Testament than the metaphor of family, and no image offers as much promise as ‘family’ for recapturing the relational integrity of first-century Christianity for our churches today.”¹ This article will highlight various Scripture passages associated with families, discuss some important aspects of family life in the ancient Mediterranean world, emphasize essential features of the family of God and its priority even above one’s natural family, and relate how the faith family should function in today’s culture.

Biblical Truths Regarding Families

The formation of families has its origin in the heart of God (Gen. 1:27-28). The divine blessing of monogamous marriage between a man and woman is clearly seen in Genesis 2:18, 21-24. In both accounts of creation as recorded in Genesis 1 and 2, marriage is initiated by God for the purposes of a divine union between a man and a woman, as well as for companionship and procreation. Two of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:12, 14; Deut. 5:16, 18) specifically address family life, as God’s people were instructed to dignify their parents and maintain monogamous relationships within marriage. The psalmist declared that unity among siblings was

“good and pleasant” (Ps. 133:1). Moreover, God’s blessing of children is referred to as a reward from God (Ps. 127:3-5).

Some New Testament passages seem to lend strong support to the significance of one’s family and caring for those to whom one is related. Ephesians 6:1-3 is one such passage, with verses 2-3 containing a direct quote from Exodus 20:12, as Paul emphasizes the Old Testament commandment to honor one’s parents. Jesus also quoted from the Exodus passage in Matthew 15:4 in a scathing rebuke of the Pharisees, whom He accused of breaking God’s commandments by adherence to their traditions. The Pharisees and scribes developed their own laws around the Ten Commandments, but by rigidly following these oral laws, they neglected the spirit of God’s laws. In this case, their commitment to their traditions threatened to dishonor parents. They took resources that should have been used to care for the parents and, instead, dedicated the money to the Jewish temple.

Closely linked to the idea of honoring one’s parents is the mandate to provide for one’s family. In 1 Timothy 5:8, Paul declared that failure to take care of one’s family evidences an invalid faith that is worse than apostasy. Apparently, some believers in Ephesus were guilty of neglecting the needs of certain widows in the church. Paul instructed Timothy about how to handle this problem. A believer is responsible for caring for all needy relatives, but especially those living with them.

While Jesus did not marry or have biological children, several New Testament passages stress the value Jesus had for children, such as Matthew 18:2-6, 10 and Mark 9:36-37. Charles Moore writes, “Jesus loved little children. According to the Gospel writers, He would place them front and center as an example of how to receive the good news, and he was indignant when his friends spoke sternly to them.”²

Certainly the New Testament is pro-family, but some teachings of Jesus appear to contest the prominence of the natural family. Rodney Clapp states, “One of the many shocking things Jesus did was challenge the ultimacy of the family.”³ Despite recognizing family as good, affirming the worth of children, and speaking vigorously against divorce, Jesus acknowledged that His ministry would divide family loyalties.

One example of this reference is found in Matthew 10:34-37. Jesus declared He did not come to bring peace but a sword, and following Him would cause conflict in families. Such a radical statement must have sounded harsh to the original hearers who prided themselves on generational loyalty to their families, especially their siblings. Jesus’ statement relegated the family to a place of secondary importance regarding kingdom matters. Craig Blomberg claims, “Devotion to family is a cardinal Christian duty but must never become absolute to the extent that devotion to God is compromised.”⁴

In a compatible passage in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus challenged His hearers even more sternly by saying that whoever wants to follow Him without hating his own family members could not be His disciple. Historically, evangelical scholars have interpreted the term *hate* as a Semitic idiom meaning to “love less,” which seems to

soften Jesus' words somewhat. More recent scholarship, however, identifies *hate* as meaning "to leave aside, abandon,"⁵ "to sever one's relationship with the family,"⁶ or renunciation or rejection. Robert Stein notes, "Being Jesus' disciple entails primary allegiance to Jesus. No one and no thing can usurp His supreme position."⁷

Space does not permit a detailed discussion of other New Testament teachings that pit Christian discipleship against family loyalty. Passages include Luke 9:59-60, Matt. 8:21-22, Matthew 5:21-24, and Mark 1:14-20. No New Testament passage places family devotion above Christian discipleship. Jesus' teachings reveal He intended all believers to prize being part of a new family: the family of God.

The Basis of the Family of God: The Father

The Bible reveals God as Father, but the use of this term in the Old Testament is surprisingly limited. In only fifteen instances does the Old Testament refer to God as Father of the nation of Israel or Father of certain individuals, although the father imagery is used in several other passages to refer to God. Stein writes, "This metaphor for God may have been avoided in the Old Testament due to its frequent use in the ancient Near East where it was used in various fertility religions and carried heavy sexual overtones."⁸ Evidence from biblical archaeology suggests that intertestamental literature, including the Apocrypha and the Dead Sea Scrolls, also tended to have few references to God as Father.⁹

Contrasted with the Old Testament and other Jewish literature from the same period, Jesus' teachings regarding God as Father were revolutionary. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught believers to acknowledge God as Father in their prayers (Matt. 6:9). The Aramaic word Jesus used for Father, *Abba*, indicated an intimate relationship. Any Pharisee and Scribe within earshot of Jesus likely would not have embraced the notion of relating to God so personally. No evidence appears in pre-Christian Jewish literature indicating God was referred to as *Abba*.¹⁰

The term *Father* was Jesus' most often-used term for addressing God. Throughout the four Gospels Jesus refers to God as Father at least 165 times.¹¹ Moreover, because Jesus used the term so frequently and taught His followers to do the same (Matt. 6:9), the early church adopted the term in reference to God.

The remainder of the New Testament, especially the writings of Paul, makes numerous references to God as Father. In Pauline theology, God's fatherhood is demonstrated in the redemption He has made available in Christ. Through Christ's reconciliation of believers to Himself, God adopts believers as His children. As one scholar observed, "As a name of God, it stresses God's loving care, provision, discipline, and the way we are to address God in prayer."¹²

The Bible affirms God as Father in three distinct ways. First, God is the Father of Jesus Christ in a unique sense through incarnation (Matt. 11:25-27; Gal. 4:6; 2 Pet. 1:17). Second, He is the Father of believers by adoption and redemption (Matt. 5:43-48; Luke 11:2; Gal. 3:26). Third, He is Father of all persons by creation (Ps.

68:5; Isa. 64:8; 1 Pet. 1:17).¹³ The Christian doctrines of redemption and adoption are foundational to a right understanding of being a part of the family of God.

Being Born into the Family of God: Redemption and Adoption

In a practical sense, many people can identify with the idea of redemption, as it relates to paying the required price to secure something. People redeem gift cards, credit card rewards, and frequent flier miles as requirements for obtaining merchandise or awards. From a historical perspective, early uses of the word *redemption* related to legal and commercial transactions, such as securing the release of a convicted criminal by paying the price demanded. These historical understandings served as the framework for various biblical writers who addressed the idea of redemption.

Ray Summers argues, “The doctrine of redemption in the Old Testament is not derived from abstract philosophical thought but from Hebrew concrete thinking. Religious redemption language grows out of the custom of buying back something which formerly belonged to the purchaser but for some reason had passed into the ownership of another.”¹⁴ A compatible idea relates to the acquisition of freedom for someone bound in slavery. In the Old Testament, God is depicted as redeeming His people from Egyptian bondage and creating the nation of Israel. Other Old Testament passages also address God’s redemptive activity in various facets of Israel’s history, including freedom from the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century BC.

The New Testament reveals Jesus as God’s Redeemer Who liberated humans from the bondage of sin by giving His life on the cross. Summers adds, “The purpose of Jesus in the world was to make a deliberate sacrifice of Himself for human sin.”¹⁵ God accepted the substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross as payment for the sins of mankind, justifying people freely by His grace (Rom. 3:24) so that all who place their faith in Christ can experience eternal life and become part of God’s eternal family.

Old Testament references to adoption are rare, but some examples include Moses and Esther. One might even infer that the Old Testament affirms that Israel’s relationship to God was like an adopted child to a parent. While the New Testament identifies Jesus as God’s “only begotten Son” (John 3:16), believers share in a unique relationship with God as adopted children through faith in Jesus. The only New Testament writer to use the word *adoption* was Paul, who did so to describe the status people had with God upon being redeemed by Jesus (Gal. 4:3-7).¹⁶

Robert Mounce notes, “The metaphor of adoption comes primarily, but not exclusively, from the Greco-Roman world. The Greek word for ‘adoption’ (*huiiothesia*) is not found in the LXX, and the five occurrences in the New Testament are all in Paul’s writings.”¹⁷ In Ephesians 1:4-6, Paul declared that believers were chosen in Christ and predestined to adoption by the working of God’s grace. Moreover, in Romans 8:14-17, Paul testified that people who are led by God’s Spirit are “sons of

God” (8:14). Believers have received the “Spirit of sonship” (8:15), indicative of an intimate relationship with God.

In Romans 8:16-17, Paul identified believers as God’s children and heirs. Mounce adds, “How rich in significance is the fact that we are full members of an eternal family in which God is our Father and Jesus Christ is our elder brother (cf. Heb. 2:11-12).”¹⁸ Believers can be certain of their standing in God’s family because of the testifying work of God’s Spirit (Rom. 8:16).

Although he did not directly use the word *adoption* in his writings, John the Evangelist did acknowledge that God gave believers “the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). He even distinguishes believers as “children of God” and “dear children” multiple times in his first epistle. Being redeemed by the atoning work of Christ and being adopted by God, believers have an eternal place in God’s family, denoting a new relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Faith Family: Being Brothers and Sisters in Christ

In his informative book, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community*, Joseph Hellerman discusses the importance of the family metaphor as representative of the people of God. Early in the book, he describes what family life was like in the Mediterranean world in which the church originated. He refers to family life in the ancient Near East as having a “collectivist” mindset in which the group came first. It was also known as a “strong-group society,” or a descent group family system.¹⁹

Such an outlook regarding family life is in sharp contrast to the contemporary Western world, which is very individualistic and “weak-group” by comparison. As such, an individual’s happiness and concerns are more important than that of the group. Throughout the rest of the book, Hellerman helps the reader understand the implications of the strong-group model and how it applies to the New Testament’s description of believers as the family of God.

A thorough analysis of descent family groups reveals that primary loyalty to the family was an essential value to be sought and preserved by all family members. Hanson and Oakman write, “In ancient Mediterranean societies during the first century, kinship was still the primary social domain. That is to say, virtually no social relationship, institution or value was untouched by the family and its concerns.”²⁰

Put into practical terms, members of a strong-group society believe they are responsible to the group for their decisions, actions, and lifestyles. Individuals are part of a larger group and relate to others in terms of the groups to which they belong.²¹ Family of origin determined one’s political views, religious affiliation, social standing, and future life choices. In short, family was highly important.

Strong group societies typically display a high degree of accountability toward one another. The closest bond in strong group societies is not between husband and wives, as is the case in the Western world, but between siblings. Jesus had firsthand

knowledge of the strong-group model for family life and “unequivocally affirmed such an approach to interpersonal relationships when He chose ‘family’ as the defining metaphor to describe His followers.”²²

In Mark 3, Jesus distinguished His followers with a special kind of relationship. When told that His mother and brothers were outside looking for Him, Jesus asked, “Who are My mother and My brothers?” Then He looked at the disciples seated in a circle around Him and said, “Here are My mother and My brothers! Whoever does God’s will is My brother and sister and mother” (Mk 3:33-35).

Jesus emphasized that natural relationships are subordinate to being rightly related to God through obedience to His commands. James Brooks notes, “It is difficult to conceive of a more meaningful symbol than being a part of the family of God and His Son. Of course Jesus did not teach that physical relationships have no value, only that they must be subordinate to spiritual relationships.”²³ Hellerman adds,

[W]e may assume that one of Jesus’ purposes in appropriating the family model was to insure that His followers would exercise primary loyalty to one another as brothers and sisters in the faith.... Jesus radically challenged His disciples to disavow primary loyalty to their natural families in order to join the new surrogate family of siblings He was establishing—the family of God. Relationships among God’s children were to take priority over blood family ties.²⁴

This passage depicts how Jesus elevated the Mediterranean concept of family to the highest realm—the family of God—while simultaneously affirming the prominence of the faith family above Jesus’ natural family.²⁵

An informative dialogue between Jesus and Peter occurs in Mark 10:28-30. Peter proclaimed that he and the other disciples had abandoned everything to become Christ’s disciples. In response, Jesus replied that anyone who had forsaken everything to follow Him would be richly rewarded as characteristic of the new community of believers. From where do such resources come? Clearly, they are a part of the faith community sharing life together in the context of being the family of God, in which surrogate relationships supersede the natural family.

A close study of Paul’s New Testament writings reveals that he applied the family metaphor to believers’ relationships with God and one another. Over one hundred times Paul uses the terms *brothers* or *sisters* to refer to believers. Abera Mengestu states, “These kinship images band together to form the image of the family of God.”²⁶ Not once did Paul use such language to denote unbelievers, but reserved it for believers. Reider Aasgaard claims, “This is by far the most frequent designation Paul uses for Christians, and thus presumably one of the most important.”²⁷

While the contemporary reader may not fully comprehend the significance of Paul's frequent use of kinship terminology, one should not dismiss such language as being trivial. Hellerman observes, "Paul views the church family metaphor as an invaluable constellation of symbols for illustrating in a most practical way what it means to live in community together."²⁸ He postulates that Paul's use of the family metaphor is descriptive of the emotional bonding, interpersonal harmony, sharing of resources, and commitment to loyalty among believers.²⁹

Paul had a close connection to several groups of believers. For example, in Acts 20, Luke records the tearful farewell between Paul and the elders of the Ephesian church. Paul identified the Philippians as his partners in the gospel (Phil. 1:5; 4:15) with whom he rejoiced (Phil. 1:18, 19; 2:2, 17, 18, 28, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10). Paul had a strong bond with the Corinthians and Thessalonians. He also shared a special relationship with individual believers, such as Barnabas, Timothy, Titus, Epaphroditus, Mark, and Philemon. Paul appealed for unity in Christ (1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:4-6; Phil. 4:2). He encouraged the sharing of resources to meet needs (2 Cor. 8:1-15; Phil. 4:15-19), and taught believers to be devoted to one another as surrogate family members in Christ (1 Cor. 16:15; Gal. 3:26-28; Eph. 4:3; Col. 3:11).

Jesus and Paul reinterpreted the Mediterranean family value of loyalty among blood relatives, applying it to believers' loyalty to each other. Hellerman argues, "For both Jesus and Paul, commitment to God was commitment to God's group. Such an outlook... generates a... list of priorities... that more accurately reflects the strong-group perspective of the early Christians: (1st) God's Family—(2nd) My Family—(3rd) Others."³⁰

How the Faith Family Functions: Engaging in Life Together

Luke testified how seriously the early church applied the family metaphor to their relationships with one another. Describing believers, Luke wrote, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Luke further taught believers to share their possessions, sell property to meet each other's needs, and worship God together. He reminded them about how such acts made a visible impact on outside observers. According to Luke, people were in awe, and God increased the numbers of believers each day (Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-37).

Continuing these practices, believers in the ancient Roman world were known for their compassionate treatment of each other. Numerous examples could be cited. One noteworthy example of believers' love for one another comes from Alexandria, Egypt, in 165 AD, during an intense epidemic that occurred during the rule of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Historians estimate that from one-quarter to one-third of the population died during this fifteen-year epidemic.³¹ Another plague almost 100 years later claimed the lives of nearly two-thirds of Alexandria's population.³²

The Roman government was ill-prepared to deal with death on a large scale. Known medical practices were largely ineffective. People fled populated areas in droves. The early Christians made a tremendous difference by “risk[ing] their lives for one another by simple deeds of washing the sick, offering water and food, and consoling the dying.”³³ The love displayed by these believers reached beyond the faith family. Even unbelievers were affected in amazing ways. Moore observed, “In Rome, the Christians buried not just their own, but pagans who had died without funds for a proper burial. They also supplied food for 1,500 poor on a daily basis... Church funds were used in special cases to buy the emancipation of Christian slaves.”³⁴ The impression these believers left on the Roman world was undeniable: while hopelessness was prevalent, these believers changed the world through their selfless acts of love.

During the first four centuries after Christ, the church experienced unprecedented growth. Hellerman notes that while the early Christians had a compelling message to share—that Jesus is Lord and has no rivals—it was their love that drew people into their fellowship: “People did not convert to Christianity solely because of what the early Christians believed. They converted because of the way in which the early Christians behaved.”³⁵

In today’s postmodern climate, people have become increasingly skeptical about the relevance of the church. Among non-Christians and many professing young adult Christians, the church is not as highly regarded in society as it once was. Various factors include ministerial misconduct, perceived hypocrisy among church members, authoritarian viewpoints that are considered archaic, and judgmentalism. Forms of institutionalized religion are being rejected *en masse*, which sounds an alarm for the Christian community of faith. Still, such a phenomenon presents an incredible opportunity for the body of Christ to re-identify with the world through expressions of Christian community as the family of God.

During a dark time in Germany, theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer transformed typical church thinking by teaching and practicing the value of living as a community of faith. In his classic work, *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer asserted, “... Christians are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians.”³⁶ Bonhoeffer correctly surmised that Christian fellowship on earth was but a glimpse of the kind of eternal fellowship believers will have with God and each other in heaven. For Bonhoeffer, the ability to gather together with other believers to worship God and share life together was a heavenly blessing or act of grace not to be taken for granted. He wrote:

It is true, of course, that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden under foot by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed.

Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.³⁷

Bonhoeffer believed that sentiment in its purest form, Christianity was distinguished by "community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ."³⁸ At least three implications borne out of this declaration include the following: (1) believers need each other because of Jesus Christ; (2) believers relate to one another only through Jesus Christ; and (3) in Jesus Christ believers have been chosen from eternity, are accepted in time, and united for eternity. Moreover, these principles are not lofty ideals, but divine realities.³⁹

Compatible with Bonhoeffer's perspective, contemporary author and pastor Mark Dever stresses the importance of believers connecting to Christ and one another through a local church. In his book, *What Is a Healthy Church*, Dever declares that a believer is to unite with a local church because of what Christ has created him to be—a member of the body of Christ. He says, "Being united to Christ means being united to every Christian. But that universal union must be given a living, breathing existence in a local church."⁴⁰

Church is important because the New Testament identifies believers as belonging to Christ and to one another. The church is the expression of Christ's love in action. It is where believers love, serve, forgive, and encourage one another. Dever adds, "Except for the rarest of circumstances, a true Christian builds his life into the lives of other believers through the concrete fellowship of a local church."⁴¹ The practical demonstration of expressing love for Jesus Christ through tangible Christian relationships through the church should encourage all believers to share God's love with unbelievers so that they, too, may be impacted for time and eternity by the gospel of Christ.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, families are important to God. The idea of families was born in God's heart before ever becoming a reality that mankind could enjoy. God gave specific instructions regarding family life in the Bible (Gen. 2:24; Eph. 5:22-64; Col. 3:18-21). For these reasons, family life is to be valued by humanity. Unfortunately, some people prioritize their biological families above the family of God, amounting to an "either-or" phenomenon that often leads to the church becoming relegated to a place of lesser prominence.

While not being anti-family, Jesus' example during his earthly ministry was to give precedence to the faith family above His biological family so He could focus on God's priorities. Whenever loyalty to His earthly family competed with loyalty to God the Father, Jesus always aligned himself with the Father. Contemporary Christians

should be willing to do the same. Such a stance is not expressed in “going to church,” but rather by *being* the church. It involves identifying with fellow believers as the family of God, worshiping God together, learning from and loving one another, and sharing life together.

In his book, *UnChristian*, Barna Research Group president David Kinnaman identifies several broad themes as to why unbelievers tend to reject Christianity and the church. Two significant themes were hypocrisy and judgmentalism. Unbelievers see Christians as pretending to be unreal. They doubt Christians love people as they claim.⁴² Instead of causing believers to retreat further from the world, such perceptions should cause Christians to consider their incredible opportunity for impacting the world by living harmoniously as the family of God (John 13:35). Through the empowerment of Christ’s Spirit and genuine Christian fellowship, believers can love, serve, and understand non-Christians. The result should leave them with a more favorable impression of the gospel and potentially enlarge the family of God.

NOTES

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