

Meditations on Church Family
Presented at the Gospel Fellowship Family Camp
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I'm so glad I am a part of the family of God.

So how do you describe this motley crew that keeps gathering at the Gospel Fellowship Church on a regular basis? I mean, what in the world keeps us together? We are so diverse as to make it unlikely that we would choose to stick together.

We have everything from the wild to the perfectionists among us. Did you notice the difference between Peter Sergers hair at breakfast and those of Peter Giesbrecht. The latter had every hair in place, but the former – well, you all saw it! Some of us are bald and others are hairy. Some loud-spoken while others speak softly. We have both the outgoing and the shy among us, male and female, educated and uneducated, healthy and sick. Some of us are short-sighted while others among us are visionaries. Some are young while others are old – and the rest somewhere in the middle.

Our crew reminds me somewhat of the disciple-band that followed Jesus around for three years. They too were a very diverse bunch. They too had their internal squabbles. Each one had his unique weaknesses and strengths. They were fishermen and tax-collectors and everything in between. The one thing they had in common was that they were following Jesus around. And I guess that is about the most common thing in our crew as well. We have deliberately chosen to follow Jesus – so here we are, stuck with each other as we gather around our Lord.

We often refer to ourselves as “The Family of God.” Actually the Bible never refers to that image directly when speaking about the followers of Jesus. There is plenty of reference to God being our “Father” and those around us being our “sisters and brothers.” So I guess that makes us family, doesn't it? I find it interesting, however that the term “family” is never used when referring to the church.

But the Bible often uses ordinary language to try to get at something that is *extraordinary*! The image of “family” is only one word-picture the Bible uses to describe this rag-tag group of Jesus' followers. In his book, *Biblical Images of the Church*, Paul Minear identifies 96 major and minor word-pictures the Bible uses to describe who we are. What are some of them?

We are a body in which every part is important (Eph. 4). We are a flock of sheep following a shepherd (John 10). We are branches on a vine bearing fruit (John 15). We are a spiritual house built of living stones (I Peter 2). We are a holy priesthood serving God together (I Peter 2). Every word-picture adds a new dimension to our understanding of what it means to be gathered around Jesus. At the heart of our identity is the fact that we are all leaning Godward.

Come to think of it, there are some similarities between normal human families and the family of God. For one, children don't choose their brothers and sisters – that is someone else's decision. Secondly, the potential for love, growth and healing exists alongside the potential for or anger, abuse and brokenness. And we normally are there for each other – through thick and thin – even when we are not perfect people. And of course, we get along better with some brothers or sisters than others, but we all usually come to family gatherings anyway.

It seems to me that it has become fashionable in some circles these days to suggest that as a church we don't know what we want. I always wince a little when this is said because I don't believe it for one minute. It might be that we are not certain about precisely how we want to organize ourselves, or what we expect from our leaders, or who should be doing what – and how they should be doing it. But I believe fundamentally we know what we want.

I have changed my mind about some things in recent years. I used to have the idea – more or less – that the only way we would ever get to really being a true family of God was to hammer that idea home, again and again, so that we would finally begin to pick up on it, at least a little bit here and there. After all, being a family doesn't come naturally to us, does it? The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. It is selfish, self-centered and anti-family! Only by laying it on the line, time and again, would we begin to think and act more positively with respect to family.

Can you imagine a human family gathering for breakfast and every day either dad or mom inflicting a lecture on the rest about what it means to be a family – and then the whole thing being repeated every evening. *This is what we should do or not do if we want to be a family at all. Now listen here, and start acting out what we are teaching you!* I suspect that such dynamics could in fact be a reason for the disintegration of the family.

Good families are born from something much deeper than lectures. They are born in our imaginations and in our hearts – and they begin to develop as we flesh out these visions of who we want to be and how we want to live.

I will be so bold as to say that in our heart-of-hearts, we **know** what we really want in terms of being the family of God. We have given our hearts to God and he indwells our hearts by his Spirit. And the Spirit has already enlivened our hearts to desire what is noble, and wonderful, and helpful in terms of being the family of God.

The problem does not lie in not knowing enough scripture verses that speak about the church as a family, or not hearing enough sermons about being God's people. I think the problem is that too often we are **not listening** to our hearts – to the voice of the Spirit coming from the depth of our being where our desires and affections reside. Our hearts are too often papered over with our busy lives, the cares of this world and the stresses that come with modern living.

But I would like to remind us all that, first of all, we are born in the image of God – which has not entirely vanished even in the Fall. This is evident even in the lives of people without faith. All of us have seen healthy and happy non-Christian families. From where do the impulses for such family dynamics come? I believe they come from the image of God written on the hearts of all men and women.

Secondly, we are enlivened by the Spirit within us. Those who have attached themselves more consciously to Christ claim a new sensitivity to the voice of the Holy Spirit within. And we have the biblical promise the Spirit will teach us all things. *How can we then say that our hearts are clueless when it comes to knowing what we “really” desire?*

If we take the time to ***listen to our hearts*** we will know what we want as a family. So please don't believe it when someone tells you we don't know what we want. It may only be that we can't articulate it well. But what we want is written on the walls of our hearts. What do you find written on the walls of your heart?

I'll tell you what I see in my heart. And because some of you have opened your hearts to me, I can see it in yours as well.

- We want a place to belong. A place where we will be accepted – warts and all.
- We want to feel the embrace of brothers and sisters when we are hurting. And we really want to reach out to the hurting ones around us.
- We want to observe grace at work on the ground – God's grace, but also the grace that flows within the family.
- We want to be amazed as we watch the gifts of the people of God coming out and finding expression.
- We want others to let us know when we are out of line.
- We want to be part of the throng that leans hard Godward, seeking his touch, his blessing, and his grace.
- We want a community in which we can talk about more than the weather and hockey scores, but rather the things of the heart.
- We want to be in a place where we feel safe even though we make ourselves vulnerable.
- We want a family that knows how to embrace outsiders.
- We want a family that values the extended family – one that realizes that our congregation is only on twig on one branch of a large tree that God is raising up.

So if you're not sure about what you are looking for in the family of God – check your heart. It's written there – all over – in large letters. Just read it and let it shape your contribution to our family life! Of course we can use the Bible as a prompter, but if we get used to reading what is written in our hearts we will be surprised how congruent that is to what is found in the pages of scripture.

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