

The Church—the Family of God

Edited and posted by Bob Young

Introduction

Once upon a time a man named Fred decided he wanted a talking parrot to keep him company. So, he went to the local pet store and shelled out a small fortune for a parrot the owner guaranteed would talk-however, when he got the bird home, no matter how hard he tried, Fred could not get it to utter a single word. The next day he went back to the pet store and complained. But the owner said, "Don't worry about it. The parrot will talk. He just needs a ladder to climb on." So Fred bought a ladder but it had no effect and a second day passed without a word from the expensive bird. Fred went back to the pet shop to complain again. This time the owner advised him to buy a swing, saying that it was sure to loosen his new pet's tongue.

So, he bought one but it had no effect-His feathered friend still remained mute. Well, this pattern continued for several days-every time Fred would complain the owner would suggest he buy one more gadget for the silent bird and each time Fred complied by purchasing things like: a mirror, then a miniature plastic tree, then a shiny parrot toy...but nothing worked. The bird still refused to speak. Finally one week later the bird died and when Fred returned all the gadgets to the pet store the owner asked, "Did the bird ever say ANYTHING...I mean, did he ever utter even ONE WORD?" Fred replied, "As a matter of fact, he did. Right before he died, he looked at me and asked, 'Don't they sell FOOD at that pet store?'"

Application

There are several morals to this familiar story. I want to emphasize one: in life we must be sure to keep first things first! Otherwise there will not be second things! Parrots love toys but even talking birds have to eat! This principle of priorities applies to us. If we are foolish enough to neglect those foundational things that are of primary importance in life we will suffer. First things must indeed always come first. One priority at church is love. "Since God is love, the most important lesson He wants you to learn on earth is how to love...love is the foundation of every command He's given us...the best use of your life is love. It should be your top priority, your primary objective, your greatest ambition."

Our first priority is to love God. The most important thing we can know is that God loves us. And the most important thing we can do is love Him back. Loving God is a great definition for worship because that's what the essence of worship is. It is expressing our love for our Heavenly Father.

Loving God is a good way to describe another priority: healthy, mature discipleship. We are people who follow the teacher because of love.

A third priority is to love people. God wants us to love all people, but he is especially concerned about the love we have for fellow Christians—the people in his family. And, another word for this love of our spiritual brothers and sisters is fellowship. We seek to obey God's command in 1 Pet. 2:17, "Love your spiritual family!" And you know as Christians, that is exactly what we are--we are a family. The primary focus on this sermon is on this third priority.

We are related spiritually. If God is your Father and God is my Father that makes us brothers and sisters in Christ. The Bible teaches that God has always been "family-oriented." Heb. 2:10 says, "God is the One Who made all things, and all things are for His glory. He wanted to have many children to share His glory." Eph. 1:5 says, "God's unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into His own family by bringing us to Himself through Jesus Christ." This text tells us that God has always wanted a people, a community, a family. Now be sure and get this: fellowship means loving God's family. We are to love God and we are to love His family.

Why would God want us to learn to love the other people in our spiritual family? Three things....

Like any parent, God wants His children to get along

Moms and dads would agree that it hurts us when our children fight and argue; there is a special joy that we feel when our children love one another and take care of each other so that they enjoy each other's company. God is the same.

A second reason God wants us to learn to love one another is because doing so makes us more like God, because God is love

John wrote, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love....Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him...The person who loves God must also love other believers." (1 John, 4:8, 4:16, 4:21) God loves all people equally—even those who are hard to love and He wants us to learn this unconditional love as well. He wants us to be like Him—to love like Him.

A third reason we are to keep our fellowship strong is that our love for one another attracts the lost to God

This pleases God and helps grow His family. To the outside world, the way Christians relate to one another is a "litmus test" as to whether or not we actually know God. This is why Jesus commanded, "Love one another in the same way that I have loved you...by this will all men know that you are my disciples." (John 15:34-35) When we do not do this, when we don't embrace a loving fellowship, we repel people.

Experience teaches us that disunity among Christians drives non-believers away. This makes sense because who would want to be a part of a group of bickering Christian people? Paul Billheimer said, "The continuous and widespread fragmentation of the Church has been the scandal of the ages. The sin of disunity has caused more souls to be lost than all other sins combined." If we are to fulfill our Great Commission we cannot afford petty squabbles. We must preserve and nurture the "sweet, sweet, Spirit".

Christ-like fellowship may be the key to winning the world for Jesus. In his book *Saints and Snobs*, Marton Jacobsoen writes:

"If any group of Christians who claims to believe and practice all God has said in His Book will face up to their personal responsibility within the FAMILY of Christ, and to the real needs of Christians around them, their church will impress its community with the shining goodness of God's love-to them AND among them. Such a transformation probably would do more to attract others to Jesus than any house-to-house canvass, evangelistic campaign or new church facility. People are hungry for acceptance, love, and friends, and unless they find them in the church they may not stay there long enough to become personally related to Jesus Christ. People are not persuaded—they are attracted...far more by what we are than by what we say."

Fellowship is a word often misunderstood. If I were to go out and ask people on the street, "What do you think of when I say the word 'fellowship?'" well, some would say "a casual conversation," some would say "eating out together," some might say "going to church." Many Christians do not understand the word. The only kind of fellowship that most people have experienced at church revolves around fifteen or twenty minutes after the Sunday service is over as people stand around in the foyer and ask each other superficial questions. True fellowship is deeper than that; it has the power to revolutionize a life. True community is when, "...masks come off, conversations get deep, hearts get vulnerable, lives are shared, accountability is invited, tenderness flows and people really do become brothers and sisters."

How do we experience true fellowship in the family? How do we learn to truly love other believers? The Bible gives us clear instructions. For example Paul wrote Timothy and said, "I'm writing so that you'll know how to live in the family of God. That family is the church." (1 Tim. 3:14-15) If you have your Bibles, open them to this text and circle the words "family" and "church." Then draw a line that connects the two circles. Do this to remind yourself when you read this verse that the church is a family. It is not a building; it is not an institution; it is not an organization; it is not a club. It is a family. A church is not a place you go to. Church is a family that you belong to.

Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, builds on this idea of church as family, Eph. 3:15. Illus: are you part of my new family?

Search for belonging, importance, significance, identity. All of us want a peg to which we can tie ourselves, from which we cannot wander too far. Geographic, emotional, relational.

The church of the NT provided such a connection. For wealthy/poor, slaves/free, Jews/Gentiles, educated/uneducated...

1 Families have a common heritage/history, parentage, common father.

Illus: family reunion, I belong here. Like the little girl at the wedding.

Wonderful Biblical foundations: God the father, Christ the elder brother, we the inheritors.

No better place than this place to say that the church, the family of God, is an exclusive place for those who are saved by the grace of God. Not that others can't attend the family reunions—I have gone to Jan's, she has gone to mine, now we're okay with that, but wow—do I remember some of those first ones. I didn't know anyone, or she didn't at mine. Discomfort, only in the family by marriage.

Every Christian is part of the family of God by personal choice—not by proxy or marriage. This is Jer. 31.

2 Families have a common experience.

Joyce Landorf, Balcony People, "It's not my shift yet."

Illustration: What do you remember? Spanked the boys at the Painted Desert.

Sam loves Sweet Pea. Family, married, buried, births, tragedy, victory.

What are our shared experiences?

We in this church have common experience, heritage. We have remembrance. 100 years of history—people, events, places, challenges. These are who we are. We cannot deny these. We cannot refuse these.

3 Families have a common goal.

Trying for the same things, aim high, heaven, Christ-likeness. Really the goal is more than heaven.

We are seeking to center our lives on Christ, put him first, know him, reflect his glory, and go forth in his mission and purpose.

We have the same goals as our elder brother.

Conclusion

There are four different ways to describe one's relationship to the church.

- Membership—belonging, just an organization, not a living organism. That's the problem with the word member—not body member, but organization member.
- Friendship—sharing, getting into the connections of a Bible class, small group, developing friends, people with whom you share life.
- Partnership—caring
- Kinship—loving. Loving is a combination of belonging, sharing, and caring.

Where are you right now on these levels of fellowship? Are you at membership, seeking to belong? Have you followed God's will and become part of a church family? That is a significant commitment, submitting to him, depending on him. But that is the first, most basic level. If you have not done that, you should take that first step. But after you are a member, you must move to the second step and learn to share by becoming active in a small group or class and get to know well some other Christians. Third, you must not only share your heart, you must do your part. Find your niche....your place to give back, to contribute. Then you can move to the deepest level--committing to love other believers in the same way Jesus has loved you.

The most basic question: Are you a part of the family of God? Now you may think, "Well, isn't everybody a part of the family of God?" No. Everybody is created by God, but not everybody is a child of God. You see, you have to choose to be a part of God's family. As Gal. 3:26-27 says, "You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for when you were baptized into Christ, you put on Christ." Today, I invite you to put your faith in Jesus. Ask Him to forgive you of your sin and to come into heart and life as Savior and Lord. Accept his forgiveness, imitate him as you are buried for sin forgiveness. In so doing, you will become part of the family of God. Now, as we stand and sing, I invite you to make your decisions public. Won't you come now as God leads.