



A Family Set Apart

Group Study Guide

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How to Use This Material

In your hands is a unique group experience.

This material is designed to be used with a small group of people who meet together 8 times (once per chapter) to debrief what they learned and experienced during the study. The bulk of the “work” will be done individually, but the group processing time is invaluable. We recommend allowing a minimum of one week per chapter, though two weeks per chapter would also work well.

During the course of each week, there will be five separate activities. These activities are not assigned to specific days of the week, though they will not work well if they are crammed together at the last minute. The last activity of each week is the actual group meeting. Here is the flow of each week.

Activity 1: Explore. This is the day to explore a new concept or to think about a familiar concept in a new way. There is space to answer the journal questions at the end.

Activity 2: Meditate. This is the day to read and meditate on what God has to say about the concept in light of our own opinions and beliefs. Again, there are discovery questions at the end.

Activity 3: Pray and Worship. This is an opportunity for us to set our hearts to seek the Lord by spending time in prayer and worship.

Activity 4: Change. This is the “so what?” day. After exploring the concept, hearing God’s word, and worshipping him, it is time for us to adjust our lives. What do we need to do with what we have learned so far? It could involve changing a belief or trying out a new action.

Activity 5: Gather. This is the day we meet together in groups to hear from each other, discuss what we learned, and report back on how it went when we responded to God during the week. Expect God to show up!

You will get out of this what you put into it. Again, please do not try to cram all of the activities in at the last minute. There is no way you will have time to make critical discoveries about yourself and Jesus if you treat this study like a fill-in-the-blank curriculum. We encourage you to approach this with prayer, expectation, and openness to what Jesus has for you.

Introduction

I'll never forget the awkwardness of that prayer meeting.

Pastors and ministry leaders from my community had gathered into a back room to pray together as we had a couple of times in the previous months. Many of the faces were familiar to me, but Pastor Eric* was new to this prayer circle. Built like a linebacker and better dressed than the rest of us, he was impossible to ignore when he took his seat. But after brief introductions, he didn't say a word. Our prayer time started, and we began to ask God for help with this or that, to have mercy on this person and that person, to forgive us for our personal failings, and to help individuals see their need for Jesus. All in all, I thought it was a pretty good prayer meeting. But it bothered me that Pastor Eric sat so silently the whole time. I mean, couldn't he have at least "amened" something I prayed for? (We're talking about minimum prayer meeting protocols here, right?) When our hour of prayer was up, he shook hands and left. I wondered, "What's with this guy? Is something bothering him?"

A few days later, I met him in his office. After we exchanged pleasantries, I tentatively asked him about his experience at the prayer meeting. "Ahem, I noticed you were, uh, rather quiet. Did something bother you?" He said, "Well, I just listened to you and the others pray. Do you know what I heard you pray about? Do you know what I didn't hear you pray about?" (Mentally, I tried to remember what we prayed about. Was this guy going to grade my prayer life?) "You prayed for individuals. You prayed for the fatherless young man. You prayed for the single mom. You prayed for the pimp. You prayed for the drug abuser. But I never heard you pray about the systems or institutions that are the larger forces at work, destroying the lives of our people."

He went on to tell me, "Yes that bothered me. You obviously see Christianity as a personal transaction of one person repenting and choosing to follow Christ. But you leave off so much. You are so focused on individual responsibility that you don't see the bigger picture. You pray for and preach about individual salvation, individual justice, and individual redemption. Yet why is there no focus on how those issues play out in the whole neighborhood, in the schools, in our economic system, or government?"

I considered his rebuke. It became clear that we approached ministry from differing traditions and perspectives, and, quite frankly, I was tempted to politely finish the meeting and dismiss his comments. Because, come on, salvation *is* a personal, individual transaction between God and myself, right?

Right. It is. And yet, it is so very much grander than that. I think Pastor Eric agreed with me that individuals choose whether or not to follow Jesus. But what he silently protested was my one-dimensionalizing of salvation. Was salvation good news to the community at large? Did it affect the interweaving systems in which we lived? Or was it simply a message I used to get "decisions" from people I persuaded to come forward on Sunday morning?

I was focused on the "*he*" and "*she*."

Pastor Eric was focused on the "*we*" and "*them*."

In the end, maybe our differences were more in what we emphasized. If I'm honest, my ears are conditioned to hear an individualistic message in the Scripture. In overly-simplistic terms, I read that the earth used to be great, but Adam and Eve chose to sin. All their children, one by one, also chose to sin. I'm one of their children, and I chose to sin, too. God worked out a plan to save me through Jesus, but I have to believe in him. Once I do, Jesus becomes my personal Savior. Now I'm a child of God. When I die, Jesus is going to bring me to heaven. The End.

While that is true, and I believe it, it does read a bit like a glossed-over summary of a far more complex and dire reality. Our world-including myself and every system it contains-are far worse off than I generally concede. And yet God's plan of redemption is more grand and far-reaching than I generally give him credit for.

He saves me, yes. But he also puts me into his family. That family is a showcase to a depraved world what it looks like when God rules. Every single system in the world, be it government, criminal justice, education, business, family, whatever, is deeply affected by sin. Each, in some way, displays the corporate expression of individual sins and failures. On the other hand, God's family (the church) displays a new system made up of a collection of redeemed individuals. It, unlike any other system on earth, exists to explicitly display God's holiness because it is headed by none other than Jesus himself.

My bias has been to minimize the importance of God's family and maximize the importance of my individual relationship with God. Even now, the words to the children's song ring in my ears, "Jesus called them one by one, Peter, Andrew, James and John..." While not diminishing the personal call of Jesus on your life or mine, I hope we can dive into a fuller and more compelling picture of how that call was meant to be lived out.

For we were called to follow Jesus *together*.

1

A Family Set Apart

Called to Follow Together

1.1 Explore

It's not like we were sitting in a children's home, preparing to be interviewed by yet another interested couple who may or may not want to adopt us. If we had been, we might have combed our hair and brushed our teeth, or waited by the window. We might have scanned the parking area, trying to look for clues about who was coming by what car they drove or how they dressed.

But we weren't even aware.

Sure, maybe we all felt some expectancy or possibly a vague sense of unease that things weren't right with us. Some of us even prayed for relief or change or help. Others of us, on the other hand, were busy exploring the depths of our destructive choices. But none of us were aware, nor did we notice that we were being watched and evaluated and talked about from afar. We were on our own paths, seeking better days, happiness, and fulfillment, hoping it lay beyond the next bend in our self-made road. But we ever only saw shadows of those things. Since we couldn't see our true state, we never thought to ask for what we really needed: a new *family*.

So we were woefully unprepared to make a good impression on the one who came to visit. He looked so much like the rest of us, we didn't recognize him for who he was.

Yet he was the one God sent to enter our world and arrange for our adoption. God had been observing us through the one way glass of the nursery door, and had made his decision. He didn't choose Sally because she was kind to the other children and had a clean dress. He didn't dismiss James because he had a large booger in his nose and was yelling at the other boys. He chose Sally, James, you, and me simply because *he wanted us*. While this "wanting" was tender and fatherly, it was also fierce and resolute. Once he had decided, it would be done, even if he had to run through hell to make it happen. And he did have to.

Because we weren't up for adoption. We were held prisoner by Satan.

So we would have to be rescued first. Such is the thoroughness of God the Father's love: to choose us without us looking for him, to undo our captivity, and to adopt us into his family. For such a thing to be done, God would require a warrior, a payer, and a legal representative to execute the adoption. The only candidate with such qualities was his one and only son, Jesus.

Jesus enjoyed all that his Father had. He was the sole inheritor of heaven, God's equal, co-regent of the realm. He lacked nothing, wanting nothing other than what his Father wanted. And his Father wanted *us*. So Jesus came for us.

Our noses weren't exactly pressed against the window waiting for him. Dressed in the flesh and blood of a commoner, he did not appear to be the answer to anyone's prayers. Yet the high drama of his departure from heaven, his entrance into hostile territory, and his willingness to pay dearly to have brothers and sisters share his inheritance was playing out all around us.

In order for us to have a new home, Jesus left his. In order for us to be born into a new family, Jesus was born into ours. In order for us to have an inheritance, Jesus would have to share his. In order to pay the adoption fees, Jesus would have spill his blood. Our adoption price was high. There was no trial period to see whether the Father could handle these prospective adoptees, or whether they were a good “fit.” There was no tentative acceptance or conditional agreement. The Father desired us, and that was the end of the matter.

Jesus, the one and only son, was about to be the “firstborn of many.”

Jesus was going to become our older brother.

Called to Follow Together

1.2 Meditate

Take the time to thoughtfully read these passages below. Look specifically for themes of adoption, and of Jesus relating to us as our older brother.

John 1:1-18

Think about Jesus' mission to secure your adoption to the Father. Why was it so critically important that you "believe on his name" (Jn. 1:12) in order to be adopted?

In what sense do you have the "right" to become a child of God?

The term "born again" gets used a lot. But think about it anew in terms of your adoption to the Father. What new significance do you see?

Romans 8:1-39

What is it that allows us to call out to God as our Daddy? How do you feel about this level of familiarity with God?

What does adoption have to do with hope?

Jesus was the only son and sole inheritor of all that the Father had. But because Jesus paid and arranged for our adoption, we are now “fellow heirs” with him, and he is the “firstborn among many.” Think specifically about your relationship to Jesus as your older brother. How does it feel to think about Jesus in this way? What new thoughts or insights are coming to your mind?

Colossians 1:9-23

Why was your adoption so expensive?

Called to Follow Together

1.3 Pray and Worship

It is widely believed that in the culture and laws of the Roman world in the time of the New Testament, it was legally allowable for a man to disown and disinherit his son. However, if a man chose to adopt a son, he was never ever allowed to un-adopt or disown that son. Think of how the idea of being adopted by the Heavenly Father must have sounded to the ears of the original hearers!

- Listen to the song “Good Good Father” by Zealand Worship and think about the words:
<https://youtu.be/RdRRN2vym> !
- Spend some time thanking God for your adoption, and specifically use the term “daddy” when talking to him.
- Spend some time talking with Jesus about his role in your adoption, and specifically use the term “brother” when talking to him.
- Meditate on the words of John 14:1-6. Think of what Jesus, your older brother, is busy doing for you right now.

Called to Follow Together

1.4 Change

We often think of salvation and adoption only as transactions in which God deals with us one-on-one. This is true; he does deal with us individually. We are called to personally respond to God's call on our lives and personally put our faith in Jesus. But in a wider and more beautiful context, Jesus is calling us to follow him...*together*. Like the first disciples he called to follow him, we are being called to follow (personal transaction) while at the same time we are being called into a new family (community transaction). Our being "born again" doesn't just save us, it is the means through which we gain a completely new family.

Unfortunately, many of us think about the wrong kind of transaction when we think of salvation. We think that we put in faith (or the sinner's prayer, baptism, or something else) to the "God Vending Machine" and out pops a ticket to heaven. The real transaction is that God, through Jesus, extends to us the offer to leave Satan's enslavement and ownership by receiving his name and family identity. Since Satan has no right, legal authority, or power to hold God or anyone of God's family, our new name frees us from Satan's clutches. This is why, as it says in John 1:12-13: "But to all who did receive him [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

Our response is to take hold of his offer and believe in his name.

In reality, it's much less a transaction, and much more a transformation. Like being born, except into a new family. *Born again*.

Being born again immediately puts you into a family. As much as God earnestly wanted you, he also earnestly wanted your brothers and sisters. Because of this, your salvation has immediate and profound relational and communal implications. To see it only as a personal transaction between you and God misses the larger context of how our heavenly Father is adopting a group of children who will all live in the same house, under the same roof, with the same older brother. Your salvation is for God's glory. And God is glorified in a large adopted family that shares his name.

Jesus spent three years with twelve disciples. For those of us who have a strong individualistic bent, it is jarring to think how "communal" Jesus' discipleship really was. Of course, each disciple made his own decisions and likely put his faith in Jesus at different moments. But they were called to follow *together*. Write down some of the theological and relational truths Jesus was likely modeling for them and letting them experience by discipling them the way he did:



Action Step

Using Colossians 1:9-14 as a guide, personalize the prayer with the name of each person in your group/house church/Bible study, one by one. Think of all of the amazing spiritual benefits of your adoption applied equally to them. Ask God to help you see each one as you would a sister or brother.

Called to Follow Together

1.5 Gather

Questions to process as a group:

1. When you think about salvation, adoption, and following Jesus, do you mostly think of these as personal, one-on-one transactions between you and Jesus? How has your thinking been challenged about this during the study?
2. Where else in the New Testament do you find a story that prominently features an older brother? What comparisons or contrasts do you see between that older brother and Jesus?
3. The term “Christian community” gets used a lot. In a church context, what does this term mean to you?
4. Talk through your observations to the last question in section 1.4: What were some of the theological and relational truths Jesus was letting his disciples experience by discipling them in such a communal way?
5. Share about an experience you’ve had where you thought: Now *that* was real community! I just experienced it!
6. Talk about your experience of praying for each member of your group by name. Did that change how you thought or felt about any of them?
7. What do you sense your heavenly Father asking you to adjust in your own life as a result of what you’re learning?

“A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner.”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer

2

A Family Set Apart

All in...Kinda

2.1 Explore

“I’ll know it when I see it.”

Have you ever found yourself saying those words about something you are looking for, but cannot quite describe? Or have you ever tried to describe something, only to find that you could only describe what it’s *not*?

These are the kind of responses we often hear whenever we ask about Christian community. What is Christian community? Sure, it is much sought after, touted, and idealized, but does anyone know what it actually is? (To be fair, community is not always viewed in a positive light, either.)

True, it’s hard to describe a dynamic of interrelated people who identify with Jesus in definite terms or in concrete attributes. There’s likely good reason for that: maybe we are trying to describe something we haven’t experienced yet, or have only experienced momentarily. Or, if we’re honest, we may be struggling to describe something inherently relational because *we are not very good at relationships*.

Keep in mind, many of our churches have emphasized the personal nature of salvation and sanctification (rightly so), but have spoken little about how Jesus’ call for us in salvation was simultaneously a call to follow him *with, alongside, and in relationship* with other people. If those things are taught, they’re usually taught in the context of how we should live as good Christians now that we’re saved. But the inherent *design* of relational community that is *integral* to following Jesus from the very moment of salvation hasn’t been so strongly emphasized or understood.

Putting a premium on organic

For many of us, there is a natural tendency to want relationship when relationship “just happens.”

Like, wow, I just bumped into these people, we are similar in age, have the same interests, and boom! We started texting, hanging out, walking our dogs, going rock climbing, and having deep conversations. Now we’re planning a vacation to Disneyland together.

For some reason, these kind of spontaneous, organic relationships are held up to be the best, most authentic relationships. *The way relationships are supposed to be, right?*

Most of us have witnessed the collapse of institutions, churches, and authority figures. Whether that collapse has been brought about by moral failure, abusive control, dishonesty, or something else, we begin drawing conclusions about how easily we can be taken advantaged of. Unfortunately, since some of those institutions and churches were the very places where we were supposed to find community, we are a lot more wary of being “organized” into something that at best might feel forced, and at worst might leave us damaged. Thus, we think that the best relationships are the ones that “just happen.” And since relationships that “just happen” have so much affinity to draw from, there is not the level of commitment required to maintain them. In short, they feel safer and more fulfilling at least in the short term.

Ironically, in our quest for ideal relationships we sometimes sabotage our chances to have the kind of relationships that form substantive community.

Holding out *for* community or holding out *on* community?

It is not uncommon for people to “try out” a church for some time, waiting to see if the community they want will form around them. During this time, they may attend church regularly, get involved in some activities, volunteer, affirm the idea of community, and generally look like good church members. But either for the reasons listed above or for other reasons, they hold back a bit. Possibly without knowing it, they hold out for community to form among a bunch of other people, some of whom also may be holding back. Consciously or not, they build relationships with one foot (or maybe just a toe) out the door.

In the meantime, social media and the human tendency to compare remind them that excellent community and fulfilling relationships are happening to others. Exciting movements are being launched in other churches, and whatever is *#trending* is drawing a lot of people who might be potential matches for great community. Eventually, the choice to stay where they are seems like a choice to settle and miss out on what might be a good chance at community elsewhere.

Just Jesus and me

While some bounce around from church to church, others conclude that real, authentic, helpful relationships are not to be had at all, or at least not in an organized church. Spending time in groups or services seems pointless. So, in an effort to miss what they know cannot be helpful, they turn to podcasts to get the spiritual input they need without having to put up with dysfunctional church people. It’s no wonder we’re seeing a rise in the phenomenon that some are calling “church sabbaticals.”

I’m supposed to find community from *this* crowd?

But let’s face it: sometimes the church scene looks pretty bleak in terms of relationships, doesn’t it? Sure there are nice people, but some wouldn’t recognize a relationship if it were sitting next to them in the pew. For many, church was never a place to build strong connection and common mission; it was a classroom. And while making friends in class is great, really all you need to do to be a good student is to show up, be quiet, and pay attention to the speaker. (Well to be polite, you could occasionally invite someone over for lunch.)

Yet others become part of a church in order to “do the right thing” or pay a private penance. They may wish to hide themselves out of a sense of shame or fear of being known and found out as the less-than people they perceive themselves to be.

*“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
- Jesus*

The point is not to describe every kind of relational style and reason why people either do or do not become part of a church. The point is that people bring their relational baggage, relational skills (or lack thereof), their expectations, and their self-protective tendencies into the church. Some don’t even want relationships. Others desperately do, but inadvertently hijack their own attempts at meaningful relationship. Like it or not, the American church is not known for doing relationships well.

So when we talk about Christian community, it is no wonder that we have a hard time describing it, and an even harder time building it. But maybe we'll know it when we see it.

All in...*Kinda*

2.2 Meditate

Acts 2:40-47

- To what were the earliest believers devoted?
- If you were to honestly rate your level of devotion in these 4 areas, where would you see yourself? Place an "X" where you see yourself at this time.

Apostle's doctrine (biblical teaching)

Lacking devotion

Very devoted



Fellowship

Lacking devotion

Very devoted



Breaking Bread (likely communion and the sharing of meals)

Lacking devotion

Very devoted



Prayer (personal and corporate)

Lacking devotion

Very devoted



- How would you rate your church in general?
- If a fellow brother or sister in the church came to you and confessed a lack of devotion in these areas, how would you counsel them to develop it?

Romans 12:9-21

This passage gives a litany of items the church was to be doing. Carefully read through them, and answer the following question:

- Which of these commands can be fulfilled outside of *purposeful, devoted* relationship?

Think back on Jesus' mission to adopt a family of people for his Father. If we assume that Jesus was purposeful, wise, and strategic about *how* he went about teaching those first disciples to live a life devoted to the Father, what can we learn from him? In what ways do you see him using relationship and community as a context for preparing the future leaders of the Christian church?

If you're honest, how would you describe some of your own relational hang-ups and dysfunction that you bring with you into the church?

All in...*Kinda*

2.3 Pray and Worship

The point of this study isn't to guilt anyone into adding social events to their calendar. Rather, this study asks us to take a serious examination of our beliefs and behaviors around Christian community, and make adjustments where we see our Heavenly Father calling us to his ideal.

It is vital that we take time to reset our hearts and focus solely on him so that we may hear his voice and worship him. If the church is to have a rallying point or unifying force, it cannot be the idea of community or the desire for relationship. It must first be worship of our Father, through whom community, relationships, and unity will be built as a practical outworking of that worship.

- Please listen to this song and take time to turn your heart to the Father.

<https://youtu.be/6smGew7dGto>

Ask God to talk to you about how you are doing in terms of your devotion to him and the people he has placed you around in the church. What's he saying to you? Are there things you need to confess? Is he affirming areas in which you are doing well?

Watch this video clip about a secret church in Vietnam, and consider what you are seeing in light of the Scriptures you read. Let this video inspire you to think afresh about your devotion to your fellow brothers and sisters.

Vietnam secret church

<https://youtu.be/-6KIS8USScQ>

All in...Kinda

2.4 Change

There is no dispute that we live in a fallen world, and we've all had experiences where relationships went sideways. Chances are that if you've been part of a church for any length of time, you have accumulated some "church hurt." It's quite natural to approach relationships with a certain learned self-protectiveness or cynicism. Rest assured: this study isn't meant to get us to gloss over those experiences or idealize relationships unrealistically.

But even if we are faithful church goers, we can miss our Father's design for community. Possibly without even knowing it, we can withhold parts of ourselves from relationships. We can create mental score sheets that allow us to leave relationships if this or that person irritates us one more time. Make no mistake: it is possible to look *faithful* Christians without truly being *devoted* to one another. This devotion is a function of our hearts. So a list of relationship tips, while helpful, will not address what must first and foremost be a heart-level decision. We will keep coming back to this. In short, we will need to train our hearts to honor God the Father by being devoted to his family.

Nevertheless, there are practical implications to be considered. Good hearted, willing people decide to "try" community, only to be stymied by the *how* of it.

For example, when we read about the first church meeting day by day, house to house, sharing meals, etc., have you ever wondered: *Did these people have day jobs?*

For many Americans, individualism has not only been acceptable, but valued and nurtured. They might feel like they need to "invent" reasons to be around others. For them, it may actually be an ingrained value to live by the belief "I'm not going to need you bad enough that I can't get along without you."

Let's be honest: inventing bogus reasons to be around others doesn't create good community. Walking six blocks out of your way to a Christian's house to borrow butter when you could ask your pagan neighbor next door just doesn't make a lot of sense. Or what purpose does it serve to call Ryan to help you change a flat tire on the side of the road just to be "relational" if you already have AAA towing service? Valuing Christian community does not necessitate that you create awkward, forced interactions just so you can say you had them.

On the other end of the spectrum, living a life of constant chaos and irresponsibility and then relying on others to bail you out isn't good community, either.

So what *are* some really practical examples of good community, both from the Bible and from everyday life? (Review 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12.) Below, make a list of what good community *could* mean, and what it probably *couldn't* mean:

Good community could mean:

Example: Offering to take the Jones' son to football practice while their car is getting fixed

Good community probably couldn't mean:

Example: Quitting my job so I can rely on others



Action Step

Prayerfully and honestly, identify something you do or a way of thinking that you hold on to that gets in the way of good community. Ask the Father and another trusted person to shed some light on this with you.

What would need to happen between you and the Father for this to change?

All in...Kinda

2.5 Gather

Questions to process as a group:

1. How have your ideas about Christian community changed or shifted as a result of this study?
2. In what ways do you tend to hold out or hold back in church relationships? Why do you think that tendency is there?
3. When you think of building a stronger relationship and community with the people God has put in your life, what feelings does that bring up in you?
4. How does worship prepare you for community?
5. Please share how you rated both yourself and your church in the area of devotion.
6. Share and compare your lists of good community and not good community.
7. Please share your responses to the Action Step this week.
8. End with a short time of prayer and worship. Feel free to use a song to help you focus on Jesus.

“People go wrong in their fellowships before they go wrong in their doctrine.”

-John R. Rice

“Some Christians try to go to heaven alone, in solitude. But believers are not compared to bears or lions or other animals that wander alone. Those who belong to Christ are sheep in this respect: that they love to get together. Sheep go in flocks, and so do God’s people.”

-Charles Spurgeon

3

A Family Set Apart

God Wants Better Stuff for Us Than We Want

3.1 Explore

Let's assume for a minute that you are one of those people who really desires Christian community. For what reasons do you want it? Take a moment to think about what it is you really hope for from Christian community. Here's some space to write your thoughts:

Now let's assume for a minute that you are one of those people who is sort of repelled by the idea of Christian community. For what reasons do you *not* want it? Take a moment to think about what it is you really hope to avoid from Christian community. Here's some space to write your thoughts:

When we talk about community, people have a lot of different ideas about what it is and how to build it, right? Some want a support group to shoulder their burdens with. Others want a place to kick it and have fun with like-minded people (Monday Night Football, anyone?). Others want a structured Bible study. Others just want something that will *maybe-finally*-make them feel connected. Some simply want a regularly-scheduled "thing" that they can count on to be there when they want it. Others want a group that serves and engages in social or missional activism. And others want a serious group of friends who will hold them accountable to live a godly life. Church leaders want a defined structure where people are accounted for and can be mobilized for ministry.

So, which of these "felt needs" is most godly? Which one(s) really get to the heart of genuine Christian community? Which one(s) would you scratch off the list?

An honest discussion of what each of us individuals need or want from community is valuable. It helps to answer not only what each perceives as their greatest need, but begins to inform what we must be for one another if we are to create that kind of community. For those who are serious about making disciples, this conversation might reveal appropriate places to begin that process based on the needs being expressed.

That being said, rarely do we hear a conversation framed primarily around what God the Father wants from this community-this *family*-he created.

Make no mistake: God wants community for us. God has designed us for community, watched sin unravel our ability to make critical, intimate human connection, and made provision for us to be re-born into a new family. He also wants community and family for himself. So what does he want from it? Why did he spend so extravagantly to make it happen?

Spend some time in prayer, ask God about this, and listen to what he has to say. Make a list of several things you think God wants from community:

Next, read and meditate on the words from Isaiah 55:8-9. In this passage, God reminds us, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Could it be that your wishes and needs in community, though valid, are not aiming high enough?

Could it be that the God who designed unity, relationship, fellowship, and family wants better stuff for you than what you want for yourself?

He does.

God Wants Better Stuff for Us Than We Want

3.2 Meditate

We talk a lot about community, and this study talks a lot about community. But honestly, the word really isn't used in the New Testament at all. Does that come as a surprise?

Nowadays, community is often used to delineate a group that has some common characteristic, such as the *gay* community, the *black* community, or the *rural* community. Also, community is used to describe a place and proximity within a geographical area. For some, though, community is more of a sense, feeling, or experience that comes when they have a relational bond with a group of people.

So what do we mean when we talk about Christian community? Do we mean that we are people who have a common set of beliefs? Do we mean that we live nearby one another? Do we mean that we have a sense of closeness due to a relational bond? How does the Bible speak to these things? Let us examine a few New Testament words and ideas in order to form a biblical perspective of community.

First and foremost, the church (Greek word *ekklesia*) is an assembly of people whom God has called out for his purposes. This is a community in the sense that the group has a common characteristic: God's calling. They are God's group of people. It is used both to describe a local congregation of believers as well as the global church. It is never used to describe a physical building, though it may refer to a group of people who happen to meet in a particular place (see Romans 16:5).

In addition to this, the familial terms of brother, brothers, brethren, and brotherhood are used to describe the followers of Jesus. It should be noted that the term brother (Greek word *adelphos*) may refer to physical relatives as well as close-knit people (men *and* women) who are part of the same spiritual family (see Hebrews 3:1). As we have already seen previously, God relates to us as the Father; we are his children ("little ones") and Jesus is our Older Brother. The Apostle Peter refers collectively to us as a chosen race or family in 1 Peter 2:9. In 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul refers to us as God's household (Greek word *oikos*).

The word body (Greek word *soma*) is also used to describe those who share a common belief in Jesus. It is not used like a *governing* body, but rather a *physical* one. The Bible says that Jesus functions as the "head" and the rest of the believers make up the various parts of that body. They are joined together, grow together, suffer together, and experience success together (see Romans 12:4-5).

One word that really brings a rich meaning to our idea of community is the word fellowship (Greek word *koinonia*). It describes a state of being or relationship that encompasses the ideas of sharing, struggling alongside with, rejoicing with, as well as mutual experience, participation, contribution, and connection. When used in the Bible, it powerfully demonstrates the relational dynamic of the church/family/body of Jesus. Thus, the church *is* community (a group of related people) that *experiences* community (a dynamic relational connection). What is most remarkable, though, is that the entire biblical concept of community is something shared in God's very nature.

The danger is thinking that Christian community is equal to the community someone might find when, for example, they join a gym and make friends there. Community (more accurately, fellowship within the family of God) is much more than that. Sometimes, when Christians say they “want community,” what they are saying is that they want to find a group with similar interests, pursuits, and hobbies so they will feel like they belong. Then, they can go “shopping” for that kind of group. Unfortunately, many find that they can find more active, more engaging, and more “relevant” groups outside the church than inside. In response, sometimes insecure church leaders scramble to re-create their churches to, in effect, market themselves as relevant community hubs in competition with other groups and other churches. This dynamic sets up a destructive consumer-driven culture within the church.

Again, this kind of community (based on mutual interests and life stages) is not bad. But as we discussed previously, pursuing this experience of community may actually hijack our chances of biblical community within the church. Both leaders and church members are guilty of a low, secularized view of community as it relates to the family of God.

*“We all want community until it gets in the way of our agenda.”
-Timothy Keller*

True Christian community is based on a shared identity with the Father and a shared relational experience with the Father. Jesus sums up this state of being as “oneness” when he prayed for us in John chapter 17. Jesus earnestly desires to share his nature with us, and his nature is *one* with the Father.

Please read and meditate on John 17.

From this passage, what would you say the Father and Jesus want from community with you?

Please read and meditate on Ephesians 2:11-3:12.

From this passage, what would you say the Father and Jesus want from community with you?

God Wants Better Stuff for Us Than We Want

3.3 Pray and Worship

Imagine sitting and talking with the Father, asking him, “Lord, what do you want from community?”

What I want from community is to share all of who I am with you.

What I want from community is for you to share all of who you are with me.

What I want from community is the chance to reveal something wonderfully mysterious about my nature.

What I want from community is to destroy division and racism and invite the outsiders into my family.

What I want from community is to boldly declare to the demonic powers that my plans prevail.

What I want from community is for all people to know that you are my followers.

What I want from community is the chance for you to grow up, mature, and experience wholeness like you’ve never had before.

Think about this! This is what God wants from community *with you!* (See John 13:34-35, John 17, Ephesians 2:11-3:12; Ephesians 4:11-16.)

Clearly, God wants us to share in his identity when he calls us his called-out people, his children, his sons, his household, and when he refers to himself as “Father.” But he did not stop there. He doesn’t just want to designate us as his community, he wants us to experience community *in himself*. He wants to fellowship with us-to give and receive, feel, come alongside of, be joined with, and enjoy a sense of mutual connection to-in a special relationship reserved only for his people. That dynamic he wants for us to enjoy is visible and active when his people relate to one another as redeemed family. It is not some esoteric spiritual truth!

Take some time to worship the Father for wanting for you (and us) better stuff than you would have wanted or imagined for yourself.

Listen to this song by Matthew West, “Family Tree”: <https://youtu.be/-opi1Qre8Cc>

Describe a time when you came to understand that what God wanted for you was so much better than you had in mind for yourself:

Especially if the idea of “diving deep” into Christian community is not appealing to you, please consider talking with God about your reservations. Ask him to reveal to you any way in which you have lowered or

secularized his view of community, and confess that to him. Submit yourself to him, and ask for him to provide better for you than what you are imagining you might “get” out of community.

God Wants Better Stuff for Us Than We Want

3.4 Change

If we need further encouragement that the things God wants to do for us and in us he wants to accomplish through community, let us examine the idea of *knowing* God. Practically, many Christians live un-integrated lives. We have a spiritual component, a friendship component, a work component, an entertainment component, etc. But the gospel penetrates all spheres of life, redeems them, and connects them in meaningful ways. Still, we act as if a church service is the spiritual component of our lives. Especially in the Western Church, we are obsessed with knowing more and more, and consider the church as a classroom. (If you doubt this, browse the aisles of Bible study materials and workbooks in your Christian bookstore!)

What we don't often consider is that *knowing* God is inextricably linked to *experiencing* him. So, only listening to a message, reading a book, or filling in study blanks does not lead to a well-rounded knowledge of God. We must experience him. We must interact with him. We must prove through experience and obedience that he is right and his words are trustworthy. We must see how his truth plays out in the world around us. How do we do that? In relationship. In community. We need to know God in a more integrated way, both through his word and in the experience of relating to people.

(Note: Our experience, though a critical component of learning and knowledge, never ever trumps the written Word of God. We may misinterpret our experiences and create "truth" from them that is not in line with what God has said. If this happens, we are in error; God is not. Through the Scripture we can interpret our experiences accurately.)

The Greek word for knowing contains within it the idea not just of perceiving knowledge, but experiencing it. Consider Jesus' conversation with Philip in John 14:8-9: "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip?" Jesus came in the flesh not to setup a Bible study or a classroom. He came so that through him we could know God and be adopted into his family. Jesus was astounded that Philip, after experiencing him in relationship, still failed to know him. How could that be? Wasn't that the point?

We have more ground to cover in knowing the Father! And the Father has more he wants to develop in us. As important as solitude, podcasts, or personal Bible study is, the Father has designed for you to know him at an experiential level as well. That is why Jesus so closely connected love to obedience (see John 14:21-26). He said he would "manifest" (make visible) himself to his disciples in the experience of acting on his words. In like manner, we come to know the Father more deeply as we act upon and experience what he wants for us in community. Christian community, by the Father's design, is the means by which he wants to shape you, relate to you, mature you, and bring you to wholeness in himself. When seen that way, we cannot consider community as a "hassle" that can be skipped while we pursue other solitary means of knowing God.



Action Step

Spend some time today pondering about 2-3 areas where you know you need to progress or mature spiritually. Write them down here. Next to each of those areas, write down the things you see God providing for you to mature in those areas. Remember, he has said that his desire is “wholeness and completeness” in you (notice the word “maturity” in Ephesians 4:11-16). After you have made a list, go back over it and consider how much of God’s provision for you to grow is tied to you being in Christian community. What would it look like for you to lean into community in these ways so that you might grow? What is your next step?

God Wants Better Stuff for Us Than We Want

3.5 Gather

Questions to process as a group:

1. Go around and share some of the things each person listed that they wanted from community.
2. Go around and share some of the things people listed that they did not want from community.
3. How are our thoughts often “lower” than God’s thoughts about community? How do we see the church taking a secular view of community and confusing it with the biblical idea?
4. Review together the New Testament words we talked about that describe an aspect of Christian community. As a group, compose a statement (1-2 sentences) that succinctly defines Christian community. If appropriate, post your group’s statement on your church’s Facebook group page for further discussion with other groups.
5. Share your answers to the challenge that was given: *Describe a time when you came to understand that what God wanted for you was so much better than you had in mind for yourself.*
6. For those who feel comfortable doing so, share your responses to the Action Step.
7. What challenged you the most in your study of community in this section?
8. As a group, bow your heads while one person reads John 17 aloud. Before you read it, remind yourselves that this is Jesus’ praying for *you*.
9. Close in prayer, allowing each person to voice a short prayer for another in the group. Encourage each person to pray that the Father would provide specifically what so-and-so shared that they needed from community (see #1 above).

“Fellowship means among other things that we are ready to receive of Christ from others. Other believers minister Christ to me, and I am ready to receive.”

-Watchman Nee

4

A Family Set Apart

This Can Go Really Badly

4.1 Explore

By this time, I hope we are grasping (or re-grasping) the biblical picture of community. Truly, when examined as the outcome of the doctrine of adoption and the Father's intense desire to share his nature and wealth with his family, community is a glorious idea. True biblical community holds him in the center. Since he is all good all the time, the relational bond flowing from him and connecting each of us is strong, pure, and for our good.

Let us not forget, though, that our adoption, though sealed and sure right now, has some unfinished elements. This physical world in which we operate is still burdened with sin, trouble, baggage, and unfulfilled expectation. In fact, the Scripture says that "we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23). So, while we are the beneficiaries of a truly exalted and special relationship both with God and with his family, we struggle to appropriate that benefit in our current groan-worthy situation.

That is why we cannot merely teach a theologically-glorious picture of community and conclude: "Can't we all just get along?" Instead, we teach a theologically-glorious picture of community so that we are inspired to draw from God's strength and endurance as we work out how to live among others under less-than-ideal conditions here on earth. Indeed, part of the glory of God's family here and now is our shared expectation and hope of fully experiencing redeemed relationships with each other when God brings us to our real home.

But for now, we have to "work it out." Consider Paul's words to the church in Philippians 2:

"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, *work out your own salvation* with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish *in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation*, among whom you shine as lights in the world" (emphasis added).

At the very least, these words should remind us of the importance of honesty. This is not going to be easy, and we each have work to do. We are children of God (yay!), but we are operating among crooked and twisted people (not yay).

Out of sheer survival skills as much as anything else, we have learned to navigate a world filled with crooked and twisted people. Some of our immediate family members could be described as crooked and twisted, as could our coworkers, fellow students, bosses, acquaintances, and neighbors. If we are honest, those descriptions could have applied to some of us as well. Or we might have developed harmful relational patterns in an effort to compensate for the flaws of those around us. Either way, we are not unscathed from the effects of relational sin, even if we are now enjoying the new family God has provided.

Let's be honest; there are many barriers both to engage in, benefit from, and stay in biblical community. Our natural wariness and learned defensiveness tell us, "Just wait, this will end up the same way as last time." Satan eagerly waits for an opening to confirm our fears, sour our hearts, and solidify our belief in the inevitability of betrayal. We may tell ourselves we'll try to connect in biblical community *one more time*, but if it doesn't work, we will make a justified withdrawal.

Without a doubt, there is risk, heartbreak, betrayal, disappointment, and conflict ahead. We are in the groan-worthy now. Expect difficulty. Though in the family, we are not untouched by the destructive relational habits we've picked up along the way. This can go really badly.

Think for a moment about some people with whom you have had to relate either in your family, the workplace, or wherever. Could any of them be described as crooked, twisted, or otherwise dysfunctional in how they related to you and others? List a couple of examples of how their relational behaviors were destructive.

Next, think about how you related to them. What relational behaviors did you adopt to counteract their behaviors or avoid unpleasantness?

If you were to ask someone close to you to name 1-2 ways in which you sometimes relate poorly to others, what do you think they would come up with?

What 1-2 poor behavioral or relational traits in the church tend to push your buttons the most?

This Can Go Really Badly

4.2 Meditate

While the church is not immune to bad relationships and betrayal, we do have the hope and motivation to work things out based on the good news of our identity in God's family. Before our adoption, we could not tell Satan "no." Now we can. We have been given a new identity and a new capacity for personal transformation fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Yet Satan subtly whispers, "You are who you are. You can't change. But you should try to make other people change." Imagine the relational destruction that would be caused if we took no responsibility to change, yet thought we could force others to change as we saw fit!

Let's examine some scenarios from Scripture where Jesus' followers got called out for how they related in community in sinful, destructive, and trust-eroding ways. Choose 4-5 passages below to read, then after each write down the relational behavior you observed and the harm it caused in community.

Example: Relational behavior-people failed to stand by their friend when he needed support. Harmful impact-friend felt abandoned and alone.

This is not an exhaustive list; there are many examples and warnings in the New Testament about sin in the community of God.

A FAMILY SET APART

Passage	Relational Behavior	Harmful Impact
Matthew 26:14-16; 20-25		
Matthew 26:55-56		
Mark 10:35-45		
Luke 9:51-56		
Luke 18:15-17		
Luke 22:24-27		
Luke 22:54-62		
Acts 6:1		
Acts 15:36-41		
Acts 20:28-32		
1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:1-4		

Continued on next page...

Passage	Relational Behavior	Harmful Impact
1 Corinthians 4:18-21		
1 Corinthians 5		
1 Corinthians 6:1-8		
2 Corinthians 6:11-12		
Galatians 1:6-9		
Galatians 2:11-14		
Philippians 4:2-3		
2 Thessalonians 3:6-12		
2 Timothy 1:15; 4:10; 4:16-17		

From this list, which passage impacted you the most?

This Can Go Really Badly

4.3 Pray and Worship

Some people make the mistake of thinking that the church is a “safe zone” for relationships just because it is church. But time and experience teach us that things go bad among God’s people, and the resulting hurt can be far more damaging because it comes from people who were supposed to be family.

So how can we maintain a soft, open-hearted posture towards our fellow brothers and sisters while also staying aware of the potential hurt that may come from those relationships? Should we be naïve about the inherent risks of relationship and community? Should we be self-protective and guarded with everyone?

Somewhere along the line, many of us have come to expect that the ideal Christian life is a high-rewards, low-risk one. That danger and vulnerability are to be avoided. That self-actualization is God’s plan for us (or, to be more accurate, God’s plan for *me*). That we are on the quest for a better life in the here and now.

But picture Jesus in your mind’s eye standing a few yards in front of you. Hear his voice saying, “Come, follow me.” *Follow him where?* “Come and see,” he replies. You hesitate, but are curious. *Is this the path to a better me? Does this mean I am part of the startup, the grassroots movement, the next big idea? Will this bring me fulfillment? Is the path safe?*

The path is not safe. Let us not forget that the things we love about Jesus: the risks he took, the danger he faced, the hardships he endured, the betrayal he suffered, and the life he lost were part of the same journey he invited those original disciples to join him in. He called them into danger and great loss on account of himself. The great gain and reward were future unseen realities.

Yet Jesus was neither naïve or cynically self-protective. He specifically did not “entrust himself” to some people because he knew what was in them (see John 2:23-25). But on the other hand, Jesus allowed Judas the betrayer to carry his money, and even washed his feet and served him Passover on the eve of his treachery (see John 12:6 and 13:1-30)!

The fact that Jesus did not always act one way toward people in community places an even greater emphasis on our need to follow him (and thus, the Father) in our own community relationships. There may be times we need to move on from certain people. But there may be times we need to stay in relationship and even serve those who hurt and betray us. It is important to note, too, that even when Jesus walked away from certain people, he never walked away from a life of community. Up until the very last night, he was urging his friends and followers to be with him, to stay awake with him, to pray beside him.

Spend some time in prayer today, asking the Father to lead you in your current relationships. Ask him to show you if you’re giving up too easily or reacting with a guarded heart. Ask him if you’re investing in the wrong people at this time, and need to step back from them and invest in others. Most of all, ask him to

give you courage for the danger and risk of following your older brother, Jesus, especially when that danger and risk come from the very community he called you to walk with.

Listen to Tedashii's song, *Chase*, and hear how he responds to the Father. Tedashii wrote this song after his young son was killed in a car wreck.

<https://youtu.be/ssTQVx01hYM>

What can you learn from this hurting man's heart about dealing with pain, devastation, and loss while continuing to follow Jesus no matter the cost?

Stop and thank the Father again for enduring the loss of his only son in order to bring us into his family.

TOXIC COMMUNITY: REFORM IT OR LEAVE IT?

It is possible to find ourselves in a community that could be considered toxic. Whether that toxicity looks like spiritual abuse, a shame and gossip culture, physical abuse and manipulation, or something else, we must decide how to wisely relate—and when to remove ourselves.

It is never OK for abuse to happen, be it physical, sexual, or emotional. Nor is it OK to excuse, conceal, or explain away such harmful behaviors. They must be confronted, and vulnerable people must be protected. At a bare minimum, we must follow the laws that specify how and when abuse must be reported to law enforcement. God’s plan for loving community does not include overlooking abuse or condoning cover-ups. Don’t be party to either.

While we cannot give a full treatment of these complex issues here, it is important to know that there may be situations in community where you need to take decisive action to protect yourself and others. This action may include physically removing yourself and others, confronting, or reporting abuse. Keep in mind that God may have you in the situation for just such action. Also, you may be in a position to offer counsel, support, healthy leadership, restorative accountability, and compassion to those who have been negatively affected by the toxic community environment.

In less extreme (but still negative) community situations, discern whether God might have put you there for a reason. Learn to be a safe person, model healthy behaviors, and reach out for supportive community for yourself (possibly outside your immediate context). If this is not an abusive situation from which you must leave, lean on the Holy Spirit for strength to stay, love, and give for as long as he directs. There will be times we should stay and suffer through relationships while God is forming character and unity among his people in that location.

This Can Go Really Badly

4.4 Change

In the course called “Freeing the Family” (see *Resources* for more information), author Anne Clippard lists eight different roles that family members commonly adopt in their families of origin in order to gain love and attention or to avoid rejection and conflict.

Without growth and maturity in Christ, we often bring these roles into adulthood and into our spiritual community. It can be very difficult to transition from a role learned in childhood, especially when that role “worked” for its intended purpose in that environment.

As the family of God, it is our Father’s explicit purpose that together we grow up into Christ in maturity and wholeness, putting off our childish ways (see Ephesians 4:11-16).

Can you recognize yourself in any of these family roles?

Role	Behavior
Rebel	Acts defiantly to gain (negative) attention or assert control
Lost Child	Allows self to be neglected to escape notice and avoid hurt
Victim	Plays on sympathy so that others focus on him/her
Chameleon	Avoids conflict by changing to be whatever they need to be to fit in
Hero	Overachieves to take personal pride and gain praise from others
Pleaser	Takes up the slack for under-functioning members
Caretaker	Over-nurtures, acting as a third parent in the home, allowing one parent to abdicate responsibility
Mascot	Distracts through humor to avoid unpleasant emotion

Now, imagine the interplay of these roles in the lives of adults in God’s family.

During times of stress or conflict, we are most tempted to act from a role that is familiar to us. It is easy to “go back” to old patterns of relating before we experienced deep healing and redemption in Jesus (if indeed we have yet experienced this). The more secure we are in our identity in Christ, the more successful we will be in avoiding poor behavior or getting stuck in assumed roles.

As adults, we will keep bumping into people in community who remind us of prominent relationships from our past. In these times, we might feel the pull to act a certain way to gain approval or avoid unpleasantness. The fact that Jesus, our older brother, is the Head of the church is great news. Through the Holy Spirit’s power, we get to re-learn in community how to do relationships in a redeemed way, not based on our past or in reaction to other people, but in response to his headship in our lives. He becomes the object of our unity and the catalyst for transformed relationships. As the Bible says, we are to grow up into him!

Community has a way of boiling our unhealed ways of relating to the surface. Too often, we leave our community when things get difficult when that difficulty was the very pressure God designed to sanctify us and our relational patterns. Also, Satan has a vested interest in disturbing our sanctification in community. He knows as well as anyone that a loving community is the loudest witness of the superiority of Jesus’ lordship (see John 13:35). So, while Christian community is glorious, it is also opposed. Expect it to be hard.

In addition to the roles we discussed above, we tend to have a default behavioral style as well, as illustrated below:

Behavioral Style	Description
Aggressive	Overpowering; lack of respect for others’ boundaries; shaming; opinionated without grace
Passive	Doormats; do not express personal needs, wants, or desires; may store up rage for later
Passive-Aggressive	Not as they seem; say one thing and mean something else; covert manipulators; appear compliant when they are planning to get even
Assertive	Honest and genuine; willing to voice their thoughts, feelings, and desires but able to compromise for win-win

Of the list of behavioral traits above, only assertive is healthy. If we are honest, though, we at times use other behaviors to get what we want.

For some of us, poor relational patterns and roles are engrained in our behavior. They come out when we are in community. Without community, they may remain as blind spots that do not get confronted with God’s truth and grace, leaving us with broken relationships, loneliness, unresolved hurt, and a poor witness of our Heavenly Father.

Spend some time today asking God to reveal where you are currently operating out of roles or behaviors formed by your past more than formed by your new identity in Christ. How might he want you to begin leaving off these old patterns and growing up into Christ?



Action Step

Find a friend you can trust and ask them to gently help you see potential blind spots in how you relate in community, whether by reverting to a role or an unhealthy behavioral pattern. Read through section 4.4 with them, and ask for their honest feedback of how they experience you. Don't just ask for negative feedback, but affirming feedback as well.

What is your next step in moving toward healthy relational behaviors?

This Can Go Really Badly

4.5 Gather

Questions to process as a group:

1. What were some of the destructive relational behaviors you had to navigate in your early life or family of origin?
2. What relational behaviors in the church tend to push your buttons the most? Why do you think that is?
3. In what ways does Paul's admonition to "work out your salvation" (Philippians 2:1-18) involve working out your relationships in community?
4. Share your observations from the Scriptures you read in 4.2.
5. What insights did you gain from your time of prayer and worship this week? How did Tedashii's song affect you?
6. Suppose a friend came to you for counsel. She said she was part of a "toxic" church community, and wondered what to do. What questions would you ask her to determine whether she should leave this community, or stay and be part of the redemption of it? Could you back up your recommendations with Scripture?
7. Discuss the relationship roles and behavioral patterns listed in 4.4. Where did you see yourself? Did you gain new self-awareness about how you relate?
8. How would you explain the process of transforming from old relational patterns to new relational patterns rooted in our identity as children of the Heavenly Father? How would you disciple someone through such a transformation?

"In the New Testament, we don't find our gift through self-examination and introspection and then find ways to express it. Instead, we love one another, serve one another, help one another, and in so doing we see how God has equipped us to do so."

-Russell Moore

5

A Family Set Apart

A Healthy Spiritual Family

5.1 Explore

“Family First.” We hear that mantra quite a bit, don’t we? It reminds us to keep our priorities straight, to take care of business with those who mean the most to us, and, in threatening times, to circle the wagons around them. We might be ticked off with Uncle Tyson for being a jerk, but when it comes down to it, we know we would set aside our feelings about him and come to his aid. Even when we’re tired, that “family first” mentality will motivate us to push through in order to work a few overtime hours, earn that paycheck, or forgo a purchase for ourselves. In short, it is not uncommon for us on some level to be at odds with parts of our family while still making sacrificial choices for the good of the family.

It’s hard though to carry a family-first value into church, especially if we’ve always thought of church as a classroom in which to learn or a service to attend. It is not all that jarring to think of skipping out on a class, leaving a service, or “shopping” for a new church. But if we truly saw the church as a family to whom we felt an obligation of priority, these decisions would take on great significance.

The church is not *like* a family. The church *is* a family.

In his book *When the Church was a Family*, author Joseph Hellerman makes the point that Jesus’ teachings on the church were much more radical to the ears of his original audience than they are to ours. Jesus spoke to Easterners who had a strong sense of communal and family identity and obligation. They thought in terms of “we” while in the West we think in terms of “me.” To them, family interests took precedence over individual decisions, even decisions as weighty as marriage and vocation. So Jesus’ declaration that we “must be born again” into a new family and his teaching that physical family relationships must now yield priority to the new spiritual family would have sounded extreme. With that in mind, read these passages:

Matthew 12: 46-50

Luke 9:57-62

Mark 10:28-31

Even in our individualistic context, it is pretty bold to think that Jesus is saying that his family takes precedence over our physical families. We tend to think of priorities something like this: God first – (physical) family second – church third. Jesus is saying: God first– church second – (physical) family third. Though extreme, at least Jesus’ original audience would have a head start in understanding what allegiance and group-first commitment was likely to entail when he put them into a new family.

It is important to note a couple of things here. Prioritizing God’s family does not mean that a person should overcommit themselves to church programs at the expense of caring for and providing for their physical families. In fact, the Scriptures say, “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8). Also, God affirms the ideas of rest and personal boundaries.

But, our first step toward church as a healthy family is to acknowledge that the church *is in fact a spiritual family*; the goal is not just a church service with a “family-like atmosphere.” And it is in the context of spiritual family where we learn to reorient our priorities and examine our decisions through the grid of “family first” for the sake of following Christ.

Again, we are not saying that we must all quit our jobs to join the ushering ministry and be at the church building for every event! We are examining the foundation of what Jesus meant by the idea of church; we are not examining the specific programs of a particular local congregation.

Our truest identity is not our last name, our skin color, or our job. Our truest identity is the *condition* God declares us to be (if we have trusted in Christ, then that condition is saved, set free, clean, redeemed, forgiven, etc.) and the *relationship* God declares us to have (sons and daughters, his family). These spiritual realities supersede all physical realities of nuclear family, job, and skin color. The condition and relationship conferred upon you at salvation never goes away.

Unfortunately, especially in western churches, we have cheapened the idea of family as it relates to church. We are quite skilled at building organizations, putting on services, and offering programs. But the closest we get to “family” is when we talk about a “friendly, welcoming” culture. This is why the church as family is so difficult for us to grasp. We see no reason to suffer for, defer gratification for, make decisions with, or prioritize a friendly service.

We must begin applying the idea of “family first” to God’s family, the church, in much the same way we applied it to our physical families.

Of course, this discussion cannot remain in the realm of spiritual realities only. At some point, we have to work out the practical implications of what it means to live in healthy spiritual family at the local church level.

If your local church experience is currently healthy and life-giving to you as a person, this might not sound as scary. But if your local church is draining, full of people who have broken your trust, or has leaders you are skeptical of, this will be more difficult.

Let us encourage one another with the thought that the original spiritual family (church) of Jesus was made up of disciples who envied each other, vied for importance, betrayed their leader, showed cowardice, and acted impetuously at very sacred times. By many metrics, we would not consider them “healthy.” But they were family, and they became healthier as they matured in the family with Jesus at their head.

In the last chapter, we examined how church community can go badly. We now want to turn our attention to what it looks like for the church to grow and mature towards health both in terms of spiritual development and relational dynamics.

But first, a few questions to ponder:

In your current church experience, what are some relational dynamics that you would say are “healthy”?

In your current church experience, what are some relational dynamics that you would label “unhealthy”? On what basis do you consider them unhealthy? (Provide biblical justification if possible.)

Which of the unhealthy dynamics at play in your current church are likely to get better by you distancing yourself or leaving the church?

If a church member was to really take hold of the idea that church was family and began reorienting life with a “family first” mentality, what might you expect to see them doing?

A Healthy Spiritual Family

5.2 Meditate

Unfortunately, we do not often teach or preach about the tremendous faith it requires to live and operate as a spiritual family. We talk about the faith needed to make a job change, to move to the mission field, or endure chronic illness. While faith is required for such things, the faith needed to remain in community and be formed into a healthy family with Christ as head is no less significant.

Read carefully the words of Paul to the church at Ephesus in Ephesians 3:14-4:6.

Especially if you are currently struggling to connect and find your “place” in the spiritual family, read again the verses in Ephesians 3:20-21. Turn these words into a prayer for what you need. Ask God for faith to endure, to invest, and to keep going.

Using the Scripture as our guide, let us now begin filling in a picture of what it looks like when the church is healthy. Read Ephesians chapter 4. Jot down some observations of what the passage teaches us about a healthy-functioning church in the following categories:

Church leaders:

How members relate to one another:

How the church relates to Christ:

How members take responsibility for themselves:

Goals for the whole church family/what the church should be known for:

Other healthy relational dynamics or traits you would add that are not explicitly stated in this text:

On one hand, we can evaluate church health by what the church does. For example, does it teach right doctrine? Does it evangelize? These are critical questions. For a starting point on these areas of church health, spend some time viewing the short videos on nine categories of church health from the ministry 9Marks: <http://9marks.org/about/>

On the other hand, we can evaluate church health by examining *how* the church does what it does, namely, how it relates and what kind of relational dynamic it creates.

Of the observations you made in Ephesians 4, which would fall under the category of what the church *does* and which would fall under the category of *how* the church does what it does?

A Healthy Spiritual Family

5.3 Pray and Worship

No doubt as you examined the biblical description of a healthy church, you faced ways in which your local church family is unhealthy and needs to grow.

When is the last time you prayed-*really prayed*-for the health, unity, and growth of your church?

Would you consider setting aside one meal this week to fast and pray for your church? Pray that it may become the healthy family God designed it to be. Even if you are not able to fast, schedule some time for prayer. Use the space below to journal some of the things you are praying about for your church.

At some point in your prayer time this week, please listen to the song *Family of God* by the Newsboys and pay attention to the lyrics. The video can be found here: <https://youtu.be/2fM9PKah1Is>

A Healthy Spiritual Family

5.4 Change

If a church is teaching inaccurate theology, minimizing the gospel, tolerating unrepentant sin among its leadership and members, or substituting pop culture for preaching, it is unhealthy. These are substantive enough issues that they need to be verbally confronted in love. If this is your situation, and you have prayed, examined your heart, lovingly confronted, and modeled healthy and godly living, good for you. If your appeals go unheeded and you have no leadership influence to help steer the church toward health, you may need to remove yourself and find another local congregation. Please do not do this in a spiteful or punitive way. As in all things, seek counsel and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you both in what to do and how to do it.

But let's say your church's unhealthiness is more in how they relate rather than in a heretical doctrine they teach or a blatant sin they justify. What then?

In the Corinthian church, things had gotten so bad between members that they had gone to court against one another. First question for you: Are things so bad at your church that people are suing you or you are suing them? Seems a bit extreme perhaps, but since we have a biblical precedent of this happening it is not out of the question. What did the Apostle Paul tell church members to do in this unhealthy and chaotic situation? Basically three things: Stop suing; choose to suffer wrong instead of fighting in court; and find a mature person in the church to mediate (see 1 Corinthians 6:1-11). It is safe to say that the church of Corinth suffered from a pretty unhealthy relational dynamic!

Certainly, there are times to leave a church, or for the church to separate itself from those who claim to follow Christ but stay in unrepentant sin (see 1 Cor. 5). But by and large, we are too quick to leave, too quick to demonize "those people" and "that church," too quick to assume we know what other people are thinking about us, and too quick to give up on those we wish would change. Add to that our desire to be entertained and be part of something exciting, and it is no wonder that area churches frequently shuffle the deck of members from one location to another. We are not saying that all of our social life, spiritual input, or friends have to come from a single church congregation, but we do need to be able to find meaningful relational connection within the church with whom we worship and serve.

Look at the list of healthy relational dynamics that we would hope are present in a church. Which ones would be *generally* true of your church right now? Put a check mark by those. Circle any that could really use some growth in your church.

- Friendly and welcoming
- Not cliquish; no person or group is treated as an after-thought or excluded from events and activities
- Leadership is open and approachable
- Positions of authority are not granted to people because they are relatives (nepotism)
- Able to form deep relationships that go beyond the surface
- Gossip is not tolerated
- Sense of unity, at least around the important things; no factions

- Willing to confront sin in love
- People make themselves available to get to know and spend time with
- Not reactionary towards sinners or people different from themselves
- Unselfish and aware of what is going on in the lives of others
- Leadership that is not self-serving or “lording over”
- Focused both on head knowledge *and* heart knowledge
- Comfortable with people showing emotion
- Skilled in mourning with those who mourn or rejoicing with those who rejoice
- Careful to credit the “behind the scenes” people; not taking undue credit for success
- Willing to initiate and/or respond to contact outside “official” church events or meetings
- Open-hearted and willing to be genuine
- Avoid being indiscrete and over-sharing when it is inappropriate (e.g. men sharing about pornography struggles with women instead of their male accountability partners)
- Avoid match-making
- Not overly focused on a particular life stage (e.g. young marrieds) and neglecting other stages (e.g. singles)
- Do not continuously tolerate behavior of people who hijack conversations and dominate people
- Allow people with other gifts to influence or lead
- Avoid passive-aggressive behavior; act assertively and humbly
- Leadership takes concerns and problems seriously
- Truth-telling with love
- High commitment, responsive, not “flaky”
- Avoid complaining to people who are not involved in the problem
- Genuine; avoid over-spiritualizing
- Quick to meet needs; generous
- Able to set reasonable personal boundaries without being shamed
- People know where they fit and can contribute
- Resolve conflict constructively
- Other:

After perusing the list, do you sense any areas where Satan may be especially at work trying to attack the church through relational unhealth?

Where might you personally need to seek forgiveness for ways you have contributed to the unhealthy relational dynamic at your church? When can you follow through on this?

Where might you need to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) to help a specific member or members move toward relational health? When can you follow through on this?



Action Steps

Have a conversation. Do you need to ask someone's forgiveness for your relational mistakes? Set up a time and do it. Do you need to lovingly speak the truth to someone about their relational behavior? Setup a time and do it. Do you need to speak to your church leadership about concerns and/or offer ways you could help the church grow in health? Setup a time and do it.

Assess your conflict style. Please take a few minutes to take a free conflict assessment, print the results, and bring them to your next group meeting. Here is a free assessment:

<http://academic.engr.arizona.edu/vjohnson/ConflictManagementQuestionnaire/ConflictManagementQuestionnaire.asp>

Give. Jesus tells us to give generously, and reminds us that where our treasure goes our heart will follow (see Matt. 6:19-21). One way to get your heart to follow you into church relationships is to invest more in the church. Step out in faith and give financially (or increase your giving) this month to the church, a ministry of the church, or to a specific need in a member's life. See if your increased investment leads your heart to connect more to your church family.

A Healthy Spiritual Family

5.5 Gather

Questions to process as a group:

1. What was your response to the idea of adopting a “family first” attitude toward the church family?
2. Please share your response to this question from section 5.1: *If a church member was to really take hold of the idea that church was family and began reorienting life with a “family first” mentality, what might you expect to see them doing?*
3. Please share and discuss your observations from your study of Ephesians 4 in section 5.2.
4. What happened in your heart when you took concentrated time to pray for the health and unity of the church this week?
5. Please discuss your thoughts and responses to the list of healthy relational behaviors in section 5.4.
6. What is your conflict style? How does it change in different situations? How does it influence how you engage in conflict within the church?
7. Pretend your group was the leadership team of First Church in your city, and you became aware that your church related in some unhealthy ways (pick a couple of hypothetical items from the list of behaviors in section 5.4). From an equipping and discipleship standpoint, come up with a plan to move your church in a healthy direction. What would that plan look like?
8. Pretend that you were a member of First Church, but not on the leadership team. You are aware your church is unhealthy in some ways. Hypothetically, what might you do to help yourself and the church move in a healthy direction?
9. Please pray together for the health and unity of your church.

“It is time to inform our people that conversion to Christ involves both our justification and our “familification,” that we gain a new Father and a new set of brothers and sisters when we respond to the gospel.”

-Joseph Hellerman

6

A Family Set Apart

Where Do I Fit?

6.1 Explore

We might get the impression that to be a good church member, one must merely be a good attendee of church functions and occasionally volunteer in the nursery. There is often little at church that demands the use of our God-given capacity, or challenges us to boldly serve in accordance with our gifts, or necessitates that others rely on us as if the very success of the church depended on it.

Since the church in America is most often run like an organization, we've gotten used to a few paid people doing the important tasks. As members, we perform minor roles as volunteers, but mostly we spectate.

Too often we are left with uninspired congregations wondering why they are there and how their role is at all significant in the kingdom of God while at the same time burned-out church leaders are wondering why their members are undependable and flaky.

This polarizing dynamic actually encourages church goers to become consumers who are chronically under-developed in their faith. It also drives church leaders to chase followers in an attempt to entertain them better than the other church down the road. The dynamic spins into an unwinnable game.

What would we think of a family that operated in this way? Certainly, it is only natural for infants and young children to be "consumers" in a family; they are not capable of working or feeding themselves, nor should they be expected to...*for a while*. But what if those infants grew up and stayed consumers, utterly dependent, never contributing to the good of the family, and were allowed to divert all the family's focus on themselves and their ever-changing desires? Would we call that healthy? Hardly.

Since the church is indeed a family (not an organization), let's consider several basic assumptions about family that might help us make sense of the relationship of each member to the whole.

The basis of family members' value is that they are family members. We do not value babies because of their industriousness, hard work, or talent. We value them simply because they are part of our family. Their worth does not have to be proven or won. It simply *is*. Why then do we often feel worthless in God's family if we do not have an "important" office or role? A member of God's family has inherent value in the relationship Christ bestows on them at their rebirth, long before that member has any chance to "prove" their value through acts of service, leadership, or financial giving. Worth is a matter of relationship, not function!

The baseline assumption of all family members is that they will grow. Growth, maturity, and new responsibilities are expected in a family. We would think something is terribly wrong if a person failed to grow, mature, or take on greater work. Why then do we create a church environment where people can continuously learn ideas, but are seldom expected to mature and take on significant responsibilities, or even allowed to try and fail?

Family members succeed when the whole family succeeds. We often look at the relative stability or instability of a child's home life as an important factor in predicting their academic success. A holistic

approach to education (or ministry) for that child would certainly take their family into context. So it is with the spiritual family. Church members need a healthy family context in which to grow and develop; individual learning absent of relationship is not God's idea of maturity at all.

Every family member has a gift to use for the success of the family. A successful family needs leadership and structure, but leadership and structure alone do not make it successful. Every single person has a gift to use and a contribution to make. Leaders who create an environment where only they can perform essentially paint themselves into a corner. They will forever limit themselves to their own capabilities while reproducing their own weaknesses. On the other hand, leaders who create an environment where those around them become equipped, use their gifts, and contribute will see the far-reaching effects of dynamic growth and healthy course correction.

Family members' gifts rise to the surface in relationship. We like to take personal gift tests, aptitude assessments, and personality quizzes. While these are helpful and instructive tools, nothing substitutes for the affirmation and confirmation we receive from others when we are actually exercising our gifts around them. If all of our church experience is listening to sermons or reading the latest Christian books, we are not likely to get a good feel for our fit and gifting.

God has made it clear that it is not his intent for church leaders to entertain church members. It is his intent for church leaders to carefully *equip* church members.

God has also made it clear that it is not his intent for church members to be flaky consumers. It is his intent for church members to be solid, mature, connected representatives of his Son Jesus here on earth (see Ephesians 4:11-16).

To this end, God has apportioned gifts to each of his children. A few certain gifts were given to *people* who were in turn given to the *church* for its equipping. The rest were given to each son and daughter according to the desire and intention of the Holy Spirit for the edification of the church.

Think back to the family in which you were raised. In what ways did you uniquely contribute to the wellbeing and success of your family? How did you "edify" your family? (Interestingly, the word "edify" means to "build up the household.")

As you grew up, who were your primary "equippers," those who helped you mature, build life skills, and discover your passions? Write down an example of someone equipping you for life.

What would you consider to be the “basics” that all followers of Jesus need to know and be equipped in?

Would you consider yourself “well-equipped” in the spiritual basics? Where do you need more help? (See *Spiritual Audit* under resources to help you determine potential growth areas.)

What are some unique ways (beyond the basics) that you would like to be equipped by the family of God?

Jared's Story

After a decade of construction work, I began feeling a vague "stirring" within my heart that God might be nudging me toward ministry. I wasn't sure where I fit, what kind of ministry I should do, or even where to start. I certainly had not been trained in ministry.

I spoke with my pastor about this feeling, and he suggested that I begin with a couple of things. First, I should enroll in some Bible courses. Second, I should start teaching some classes at the church.

I did both, and began to grow in knowledge and experience. Initially, I had all kinds of trouble creating coherent outlines and managing my time for the class I taught. I would prepare way too much in an attempt to get enormous amounts of information across to those in my class. Thankfully, my school assigned some practical textbooks on how to prepare, and my church provided some constructive feedback on how I communicated. Over time, I began discovering my strengths.

Years later, after preaching a sermon, a fellow church member walked up to me and said some of the most affirming words I had heard, "Jared, I don't know if you know this, but when you speak, we see God at work. God speaks through you."

Thankfully, I had a pastor who let me try (and sometimes fail) in ministry. As I grew in knowledge and experience, my gifting began to take shape. Obviously, this happened within community. As I look back, I see how God shaped me during that time and how he allowed my gifts to edify the church. Eventually, I became a pastor. I desire that the church where I serve will give many people a context to discover their gifts and inspire them to greater service in the kingdom!

Where Do I Fit?

6.2 Meditate

If you were to create your own ideal “job description” in the family of God, what would you write? Think of at least 3 tasks or roles. (Reminder: Don’t just confine your thinking to a job in the church *service*, think of a job where you add value to the *family* of God.)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Spend time reading through Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. What questions did you have after reading these passages about spiritual gifts?

What insights did you gain after reading these passages about spiritual gifts?

If you were to disappear from your church, what would they be missing out on?

Is there disparity between what the church usually asks you to do and what you truly care about or are gifted in? If so, why do you think this is the case?

Would others say that you are involved enough in the communal life of the church for people to have an accurate understanding of your gifts and talents? How might you allow your church to know you better?

Do you feel like you need to be asked or invited to serve in the church before you take action? Why or why not?

Pretend you were a church consultant, and First Church hired you to help each of their members discover their gifting and “fit.” How would you approach this? What type of activities would you design to reveal the unique giftings of their members?

Where Do I Fit?

6.3 Pray and Worship

No matter what ability or gift we may have, it is worthless if it is not done from a heart of love. Focus on the love of God has for you and the church in order to reset your heart and fill you with love towards others.

Listen to the song, “Before the Throne of God Above,” and let your soul worship God for his great love. The song can be found here: <https://youtu.be/LULK2nZ6sCc>

Prayerfully read through 1 Corinthians 13. Ask God to show you any ways you have sought to find your “fit” and gifting more out of a desire for significance than a loving response to him and the family he put you in.

How can your gift be used as an act of love and encouragement to your church?

As an act of worship to the Father, prayerfully commit to use the gifts and abilities he has given you to love and encourage the church.

Where Do I Fit?

6.4 Change

Set aside a couple of hours this week to work through the assessments below. Please bring the assessment results to your next group meeting.



Action Steps

Take a S.H.A.P.E. assessment. This assessment looks at your spiritual gifts, your heart, your abilities, your personality, and your experience. Please allot an hour to complete this assessment. Print your results and bring them to the group meeting. You can create a login and take the assessment here:

<http://cpc.shapesurvey.org/beginsurvey>

Read author Ken Hemphill's survey on spiritual gifts, and write down your answers. Please bring your results to the group meeting. Here is a link to pages 196-197 of his book, *You Are Gifted*:

https://books.google.com/books?id=3Jq4AwAAQBAJ&pg=PA196&ots=3Ubj_MUaFp&dq=ken%20hemphill%20open%20ended%20survey%20you%20are%20gifted&pg=PA196#v=onepage&q=ken%20hemphill%20open%20ended%20survey%20you%20are%20gifted&f=false

Where Do I Fit?

6.5 Gather

Questions to process as a group:

10. Please share your answers and insights from sections 6.1-6.3
11. Please share your assessment results from the Action Steps in section 6.4. Ask your group to give you gentle yet honest feedback on how they see your giftedness. Does their feedback confirm your assessment results? Where does it differ?
12. What might your group do together in the near future to give more people the opportunity to use their gifts in an effective way?
13. Please close by reading 1 Corinthians 13 aloud together.

“God's glory is most majestically displayed not through you or through me, but through US. God raises up the Church, and says to all Creation in the heavens, on the Earth, and under the Earth, this is the bride and body of My Son, bought and purchased by His blood to be My people and receive My power, and enjoy My presence, and declare My praise forever and ever.”

-David Platt

7

A Family Set Apart

Set Apart but Sent Together

7.1 Explore

The unity that Christ made possible among us is not an end in itself. As God's family, we do not seek to get along so that we can merely feel a sense of peace and respite when we gather together. No, the unity that Christ made possible is mission-critical to the work he has sent us to do!

Spiritually speaking, Jesus is not *from* here. He is from a place of complete union, oneness, and high honor with God the Father. Jesus radiates glory because he shares in the very same nature as God. From that place of glory, God sent Jesus to our foreign world with the praise-worthy mission of bestowing God's nature and name on people who would believe in him. As people respond to him in faith, he spiritually re-births them into God's family and gifts them with the ability to share in God's holy nature.

In other words, if you are part of God's family through faith, Jesus shared with you the highest honor and glory he had: identity in and oneness with God the Father.

But he didn't stop there. Jesus also shared with you the high honor of continuing the work that God sent him to do.

Some of Jesus' last words on earth were prayers on our behalf. In John chapter 17, Jesus asked God to keep us in his name. He told God that he had shared his own glory with us. He let God know that he had sent us in the world, *just as God had sent him in the world.*

The highest honor that Jesus could give was himself. For those of us who believe, we have Jesus in us! Due to our new nature and identity in God, we, like Jesus, are no longer *from* here. Like Jesus, we are people in a foreign and hostile land, bearing the glory of God, sent to proclaim the adoption and salvation of our Father.

Remarkably, Jesus makes it clear that it is in the practice of our unity with one another (made possible by his sharing of God's glorious nature with us) that we will be recognizable agents of his redemptive mission.

*We were called out of the world and set apart as God's family.
Now Jesus is sending us in together-as family- to continue the work he started.*

So we as the church do not strive to get along so that we may put our "best foot forward" for the world. We strive to get along because in doing so we proclaim an intensely-glorious spiritual truth. The glory Jesus shared with us allows us to walk in unity with people with whom we never could have otherwise.

The church as God's redeemed, unified family visibly communicates salvation and atonement to the world. In effect, it is a group of people saying, "Hey, look at us! Under any other circumstances, we would have been at odds with each other, but now we're family! We are devoted to one another because we all belong to the same heavenly Father who is even now preparing a place for us in heaven. Would you like to receive the same adoption we have received? Would you like to become part of this family? Let us tell you about Jesus, our older brother. He loved us so much that he paid for our adoption by his death, and

now we share his inheritance of life. Turn from your own ways and by faith experience this kind of love, hope, and belonging in him!”

As Christopher J. H. Wright so brilliantly put it, “God does not have a mission for his church; he has a church for his mission.”

But so much of the glory of mission is lost as a result of our individualistic bias in the church! Consider how the statements below reveal an individual bias that might actually be working against God’s design for communal witness.

- “I hope church is good this morning.”
- “Brother Sims is filling in as speaker today. Bless his heart, I think I’ll just stay home.”
- “Bob is leading worship today. I think I’ll just stay home.”
- “I’m better off listening to a podcast. The sermons are deeper and I don’t have to get out or be around people.”
- “I’m around people all week, I don’t need to be at church.”
- “I get more out of being alone or praying in the woods than I do from a worship service or Bible study.”
- Though not often said outright, many pastors convey the message: “Church, evangelism means that you invite your friends to hear my sermon.”
- Church Leader: “I’m not part of a small group because it would change the dynamic too much if I were to join one.”
- Church Leader: “I can’t participate in corporate worship because I have to setup for the potluck.”
- “I had a really busy weekend. I’ll build margin in my life by skipping time with the church family.”

If we’re honest, most of us still think of church as an event or a service instead of what it really is, a *family*. Church leaders and members alike tend to excuse themselves from the discipline of community when it is inconvenient, boring, scary, or in the way of pulling off the church event.

We are not saying that 100% attendance at all church functions is the standard of a good church member. On the other hand, *family members must be consistently present with one another in order to fulfill the mission for which we were sent*. Consistent presence is a huge part of what it means to live as family.

Imagine if instead of spending the majority of our time and resources on a church service, we reoriented our lives as redeemed family *sent out together* to do Jesus’ mission? Would we not, as a matter of necessity and desire, pause to worship and feast together on God’s Word in order to sustain our family’s missional direction?

If making disciples were the main function of our spiritual family (and not just holding a service), would we not lean on each other’s gifts more? Would we not be driven to more intense prayer and support for one another?

Let us ask ourselves then, did Jesus command us to go and create a Sunday service or go and make disciples? We know from Matthew 28:19-20 that Jesus commanded us to make disciples! While meeting

together on Sundays is not at all incompatible with making disciples (after all, Sunday can be a time to teach those we are discipling), we cannot allow Sunday services to be the sole focus of our energies. We must find a way to live “sent” lives that actively proclaim the goodness of our Father to a dying world. We must display our best apologetic: loving unity within the family of God.

The burden is on us as the church to go to the world together and let them experience God’s goodness as they observe and interact with us as a unified family.

Given the direction of our American culture, the neighborhood is less and less likely to observe God’s family in the context of a church service, simply because they are not naturally going to show up there. How then will they see and hear the good news?

In our relationally-broken world, our neighborhoods and cities need to see the superiority and hope of Jesus as expressed in authentic, loving, committed family. Yes, we can continue to invite people to Sunday services. Yes, we can continue to teach the tools of personal evangelism. But what if our single greatest vehicle for sharing the hope of Jesus is our family of faith, not the sermon or the tract? How can we live into our family identity in such a way that the neighborhood will “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8)?

Set Apart but Sent Together

7.2 Meditate

Read John 17 and answer the following questions.

What is the meaning of the word *glory*?

What does it mean that Jesus shared his glory with us?

How does Jesus' glory bring unity to us, his followers?

Why does Jesus say that he wants us to become "perfectly one"?

Who did Jesus send into the world?

Look at the word *know* from verse 23. If possible, do a word study on it. What insights did you find?

What does it mean to you that the church as loving, united family is our greatest apologetic? **See John 13:35.**

Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-2:5 and answer the following questions.

Where do you see the theme of “set apart but sent together” in the passage?

How did Paul deal with lack of unity in the Corinthian church family?

Read verses 1-5 of chapter 2 again. In light of this passage, do you think that we as a church elevate good speaking abilities above other gifts in the family of God?

What about your church might the world consider weak, implausible, or downright stupid? How might God use those very things to “shame the wise” and demonstrate his power?

If the witness of your church is not merely in well-spoken words but “the demonstration of the Spirit and power,” how would the world see and experience that?

Set Apart but Sent Together

7.3 Pray and Worship

Take some time today to worship God for the glory that he shared with you in Jesus. Thank him that he provided for you to enjoy unity and fellowship with the Father and with your fellow brothers and sisters in the church.

Listen to Lecrae's song, "Beautiful Feet," and think about the family of God going on mission in your neighborhood. The song can be found here: <https://youtu.be/OFNZyItIhNQ>

Listen to the Newsboys' song, "The Mission" and think about your church's role in the mission of Jesus. The song can be found here: <https://youtu.be/9mplHjYI7FI>

In no more than 3 sentences, write in your own words what the mission of Jesus is that he passed on to us, his church:

Pray for your church. Ask God to help your church live as family sent on mission together. Ask God to show you how you can help make this happen.

Set Apart but Sent Together

7.4 Change



Action Step

Please take your time to thoughtfully answer the questions below.

What are some things that you personally do to engage in the mission of Jesus? (In other words, how are you communicating the gospel in word and deed to the lost?) Are you satisfied with the frequency with which you are sharing?

Pretend that Ramon just moved into your neighborhood and heard about your church. Other than dropping into Sunday service, what chances would he have to observe, experience, and hear about the goodness of God through your church family?

Think about your community, and describe your “average” neighborhood resident (we’ll call her Carrie). Briefly list her hobbies, schedule, interests, habits, and probable family story.

What (if any) barriers does your church unintentionally create for Carrie to know about Jesus?

If you were the mission strategist for your church, what opportunities might you design for your church to intersect with Carrie's life?

What obstacles might your church face when it tried to implement a mission strategy focused on meeting Carrie where she is?

What are some other ways that the family identity of your church could be on display (easily visible) to the neighborhood? Write down at least 3.

Do you believe your church has a strong collective sense of being called to mission *together*? Why or why not?

As a mission strategist for your church, design one “easy win” for the church to go on mission together as family in the neighborhood. Whatever you design, pretend that the church budget will not allow more than \$250 to cover costs.

What relational work might your church need to focus on in order to create a more compelling witness as God’s family?

How does your spiritual gifting equip you to help the church go on mission together?

Set Apart but Sent Together

7.5 Gather

Questions to process as a group:

14. Discuss Christopher J. H. Wright's quote: "God does not have a mission for his church; he has a church for his mission." What do you think about this? Do you agree? How would you defend it scripturally?
15. Read the bullet point list from section 7.1. How do those quotes express an individualistic bias in the church? How might they hinder the mission God gave the church?
16. What stood out to you from your Bible study in section 7.2? What did you learn?
17. From section 7.3, share your definition of Jesus' mission.
18. Spend time sharing your dreams, ideas, and insights from the questions you answered in section 7.4. How can this group start planning for one collective mission idea to implement together?
19. Please close by praying together for unity and willingness to try new ways of engaging in mission as God's family.

"Just as one could not speak of the church without speaking of its mission, it is impossible to think of the church without thinking, in the same breath, of the world to which it is sent."

-David Bosch

8

A Family Set Apart

Row Well

8.1 Explore

In the classic movie *Ben-Hur*, Judah Ben-Hur was arrested and imprisoned for a crime against Rome that he did not commit. Sentenced to serve on one of Rome's galley ships, Judah, like the other prisoners, was chained to his post and forced to row the ship's mighty oars in cadence to a drum. With no regard for prisoner life or safety, Captain Quintus Arrius and his men drove the convicts by whip and abuse until they literally fell out from exhaustion or death. With lash in hand, Arrius addressed the prisoners with these now-famous words, "Now listen to me, all of you. You are all condemned men. We keep you alive to serve this ship. So row well, and live."

The life of the ship depended on these men enduring great affliction in order to row in a coordinated fashion. If one man stopped rowing, it increased the work load of the exhausted men next to him and created dangerous imbalance in the motion of the ship. Motivated by pain and crushed under the weight of their condemnation, the men rowed out of sheer survivalism and the chance to see another day.

Unfortunately, some believers see their connection to Christian community and the family of God as a fate to be endured rather than a blessing to be enjoyed.

But unlike the men on that Roman ship, we are not condemned. As the Bible says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). Nor need we shudder in fear of an angry, brutish Captain who might at any time lash out at us with a whip. On the contrary, the Bible says, "Surely he [Jesus] has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" (Isa. 53:4-5).

Jesus, the "captain" of our salvation was made perfect through suffering. He brought us to glory and is not ashamed to call us his brothers! (See Hebrews 2:10-11.)

Unlike Judah Ben-Hur, we do not need to "row well" so that we live. We *already have* abundant life and redemption in Jesus. Because of that life, we are *able* to row well, motivated not by fear but by love. We are able to stay in relationship even when it is difficult. We have the capacity to empathize with our fellow brothers and sisters. We can see how much we need one another. We are capable of mutual submission and sacrifice for one another. We are able to draw on each other's strengths and move the ship in a unified direction. Jesus himself is at the helm of this ship, encouraging us to row to the beat of his drum. Fear not; his yoke is easy and his burden is light!

Just like Jesus did what he saw his Father doing, so we do what we see Jesus doing. He put us in family not to punish us, but to bless and transform us. So row well!

Each of us has a spot on an oar that is our own. We have individual work to do, though that individual work affects the whole. Only dysfunctional families let members freeload while others bear the brunt of the work. This is why the Apostle Paul admonishes: "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons

we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (2 Thess. 3:10-15).

The more we operate as family, the harder it should be for “consumers” to find a comfortable place in our midst. Our family bond gives us the motivation to work in such a way that our fellow brothers and sisters do not get hurt either by our slack idleness or our rough aggression. When correction does need to be made, it should be handled biblically and in a manner fitting the treatment we would give a relative whose relationship we highly value (1 Tim. 5:1-2). For the most serious and unrepentant offenses, the highest form of correction the church can offer is to put the offender outside the family and treat them as an unbeliever who does not belong in the household of faith. But even then, the offender is to be offered a place in the family if and when he truly repents. (See 1 Cor. 5:9-13 and 2 Cor. 2:5-11.)

When operating as one, we present a picture of beauty and divinely-harnessed strength to the world.

So row well!

Row Well

8.2 Meditate

Please read and think deeply about 1 Peter 3:8-14 and Ephesians 4:1-6, then answer the following questions.

What are some practical ways to maintain unity in the midst of diversity within the church (whether that diversity is between age groups, family histories, ethnic backgrounds, marital statuses, or financial classes, etc.)?

What are some practical ways that you can personally cultivate and maintain a tender heart towards your brothers and sisters in the church?

When is the last time a brother or sister called you out on a blind spot or sinful behavior? How did you receive their rebuke? Was it done in a loving way?

How are you intentionally putting yourself in a position to receive correction and encouragement from your fellow brothers and sisters? Would they see you as a person open to loving correction?

Think over the past year. List 1-2 things you have seen fellow brothers or sisters do that demonstrate they are eager and proactive to maintain unity within your church.

Think over the past year. List 1-2 things you have done that show you have been eager and proactive to maintain unity within your church.

What are some ways that the church could celebrate unity within the church family?

Jeremiah and Rochelle's Story

Years ago, a lady brought Rochelle to our church gathering on Sunday. Rochelle was going through a difficult time in her life. She had chronic health problems, her twin toddlers needed more energy than she could muster, and her longtime boyfriend wasn't making enough money to support them.

The church befriended Rochelle, and over time she saw her need for Christ and chose to put her trust in him. Members of a small discipleship group that met near Rochelle's house began to involve her in their lives. In order to include her they changed their meeting location to Rochelle's house so that she would not have to travel. They brought food, helped clean, babysat, and became a supportive community around her.

As you might expect, not everything went well. There were times when well-meaning folks overstepped Rochelle's boundaries in their effort to serve her. But all in all, the church showed up big in Rochelle's life and included her in the spiritual family.

As Rochelle's health worsened, a family from church let the twins live with them as if they were their own grandchildren. The family did this willingly on and off for a couple of years.

Though Jeremiah was not as spiritually open, he agreed to marry Rochelle and go through marriage counseling with her.

It's easy to focus this story on Rochelle, but the church members who became family to her were impacted significantly as well. Even the most reserved among them found a role to play as they served Rochelle and loved her into the family of God.

Row Well

8.3 Pray and Worship

Take time today to pray for your church. Pray that God will build and guard unity among yourselves. Ask God to help you become earnest and proactive in maintaining that unity. Ask God to restore in you a tender, loving heart toward your brothers and sisters, especially those with whom you have a difficult time relating. Repent of any hardness of heart you have developed.

Spend time worshiping Jesus, the Captain of our Salvation. Think of yourself sitting next to members of your church, rowing together under his gracious direction. What insights come to your mind?

Listen to Tenth Avenue North's song, "No Man is an Island," and meditate on the importance of renewing your strength in order to maintain unity. The song can be found here: <https://youtu.be/MCsRtRf0Vsw>

Row Well

8.4 Change



Action Step

Please take your time to thoughtfully answer the questions below.

What are the top takeaways you have received from this 8-part study?

In terms of unity and togetherness in your church, where do you hope to be a year from now? Describe what that might look like.

What are some specific things you think Jesus is asking you personally to *stop* doing or *start* doing in order to live as a family set apart?

STOP:

START:

What are the biggest obstacles you face in making the changes required for a life of deep Christian community?

Who will you ask to walk with you and encourage you as you make these changes?

Row Well

8.5 Gather

Questions to process as a group:

20. Please share and discuss your responses to section 8.2.
21. Please share and discuss your responses to section 8.4.
22. What would it look like for this group to continue to function as a place of encouragement and accountability as you grow in your capacity to become spiritual family together? How might you gently influence the larger church to move this direction?
23. Where have you grown in your understanding of or capacity for genuine Christian community since beginning this study together?
24. What missional opportunities are coming up for your church? How might you do those in a way that displays the beauty and strength of your church family?
25. Pray together for one another. Commit your next steps to the Lord, and ask him to unify your church.

"We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately."

-Benjamin Franklin

Resources

Recommended Resources

26. **Freeing the Family** curriculum, Equipping Ministries International. See www.equippingministries.org.
27. **Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, ESV Text Edition: 2011.
28. **Listening for Heaven's Sake** curriculum, Equipping Ministries International. See www.equippingministries.org.
29. **When the Church Was a Family**, Joseph H. Hellerman, B&H Academic, 2009.
30. **You Are Gifted**, Ken Hemphill, B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, TN, 2009.

