

2/9/20 The Church is... (Week 2) - A Family

“Family” is a Complicated Word:

Your family of origin shapes you like nothing else, for better and worse. This is especially true regarding how you perceive others, form relationships, or even understand healthy social norms/patterns. In so many words, you spend your entire life becoming what your family was, or trying to escape it.

Consider the lingering implications of these sobering family statistics: 1 in 8 of us were, or currently are, in a family with someone with an untreated mental illness; 1 in 10 of us were, or currently are, in a family with someone struggling with substance abuse; and, some 25% of us were abused as children, most often by someone directly tied to our family of origin.

To compound things, we now live in an age where many are dislocated from family just because of schooling or jobs. That lack of family proximity forms a one-two punch with the fact that many adults report having few, if any, close friends. As Bryant McGill puts it, “...People are more isolated and lonely than ever before in human history.”

“Family” wasn’t any less complex a term back in the era of the New Testament. Both Jewish and Greco-Roman family units were patriarchies: the central male figure was in effect the lord of his home, the full and final authority, be it legally, morally, or practically. This was merged with a form of ageism, in that this household “ruler” was almost always the eldest man. Add to this that the 30-40% of the Roman empire who were slaves had no family to speak of at all, most ripped from their relatives because of poverty or conquest.

Church as Family:

And it is to all of this, our context and its own, that the Bible calls the church a “family” ...

“I (Paul) hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you will know how each of you ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, who is the pillar and bulwark of truth.” (1st Timothy 3.16-17)

The first Christians break with cultural norms, and say that God alone is sovereign in their spiritual household called church. He, as Father, and His Son Jesus, as our elder brother, say what’s right and wrong, what’s allowed and what’s not. They, and their “truth,” are the indispensable “pillar” and “bulwark” without which the family collapses (see verse 17). We know from psychology that a key component of a healthy family unit is appropriate, agreed-upon behavioral expectations and boundaries; for the church, we arrive at that household code of conduct by comparison with Christ, and applying His ethic to whatever situation we might face. This is how we become family for all, most especially those who have no other.

Now concerning love of your brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters, not just in your own church but throughout all of Macedonia. (1st Thessalonians 4.9-10a)

What’s remarkable about these verses is the extent of their family love. It was not limited to their own small congregation, but expanded outward to all other Christians in their region. They were willing to take responsibility in love for both one another, but also relative strangers; they were, as God always intended for humanity, “their brother’s keeper” (Genesis 4.9). Contrast that to our day when we are often so busy or stressed, or otherwise duped by faulty thinking, that we concentrate our care primarily, if not exclusively, on our biological family. If you as a Christian say that you have too little energy or time to give active love and build relationships with those in your own church, or other Christians in the wider community, then, to be frank, your life needs serious reorganization.

Questions for reflection (from Redeemer City to City, part of Redeemer Church – NY City):

(1) How do we (and/or the community) view our church, as a product to be consumed or as a family? (2) How can creating a family atmosphere in church reinforce our identity in the gospel? (3) How do you cultivate family ties in church, and become more brothers and sisters than just fellow attenders? (4) How does this change the way we think about caring for the least, lost, and hurting among us? (5) How does this change the way we think about reconciling relationships across lines of hostility? (6) And, how does this change the way we think about the importance of church unity?