

All In The Family

Ephesians 2:14-22

James Plummer of Indianapolis, Indiana, was driving his car one Saturday morning several years ago, when he saw what he thought was a puppy on a busy street. He stopped his car in order to pick up the puppy, but when he did he found instead that what he had seen was a nine-month-old baby boy. The baby somehow had gotten out of his house before his mother woke up. He was dressed only in a T-shirt and diapers in 40-degree weather, and had crawled 18 blocks before Mr. Plummer picked him up. Authorities placed the child in a foster home, mainly because the mother of the child did not call police until several hours had passed. (*The New Orleans Times-Picayune*, March 26, 1984)

It would appear that little boy was not receiving the best care in the world. It is the primary responsibility of the family to provide for the needs of its members. This family had obviously failed in that respect, so the authorities had to step in.

Last week, you will recall, we asked the question, “What is the church?” We pointed out that among other things, the Bible calls the church a family, a flock, a body and a bride. We know these things, but you and I also know that head knowledge which does not lead to action is worthless. So that leads to another question: **“If that is what the church is, then what should we be doing?”**

Today we begin to answer that question, by examining closely the concept that the church is the Family of God. In Ephesians 2, Paul used **three images to describe the church**. One of them, in verse 19, is that the church is like a **city**, where those who know Jesus in a saving way have become citizens with the full rights and privileges of citizenship. Another image is one he used in vv. 20-21, where he said that we Christians are like the various **stones in a temple**, all joined together in Christ.

But the other image is the one on which we focus today, and it is found in v. 19, where Paul wrote that we are **members of God’s family**. He said that we are *“members of God’s household.”* Of course, there are dysfunctional families, but this analogy of the church to a family assumes that the family is a healthy one. God’s intention is that a human family should provide whatever is necessary to help the children of that household mature. In the same way, a person who is born again spiritually needs to have a spiritual family where his spiritual needs are met. If the church is the Family of God what should we provide for the members of our family? **Today, let’s look at three duties of the church as a family.**

1 The Church should provide acceptance.

One of the most important characteristics of a healthy family is that the members of that family feel very definitely that they are accepted by the other members of that family. The family is where you go at the end of a long and very tiring day and know beyond the shadow of any doubt that you are loved and accepted.

It's amazing! We have faults and sins and short-comings, yet we are accepted by the other members of our family. We may come home feeling grumpy, yet we are loved. We may feel ugly and dirty, yet we are accepted. We may have been misunderstood all day long, yet when we get home to our families, we are accepted. Being accepted in a family means that you are not afraid of introducing new ideas and concepts to the other members of the family. You are not afraid that others will ridicule you if you have likes and dislikes that are different from everyone else. You know that you can express your disappointments and discouragements to the rest of your family without fear that you will be excluded from the family.

You may be thinking, “Whose family is *he* talking about? Mine certainly isn't like that!” Well, let me tell you that I grew up in a family of four boys, and there was plenty of ridicule and mockery that went on between the four of us! I didn't live in a perfect family—I have scars on my body from the fights we got into, and I probably left a few on them, too. But when we talk about the church as a family, we're not talking about the perfect family, but we're not talking about adolescent behavior, either! **We're talking about mature believers working together in acceptance and harmony.**

Children, especially, have this need and desire to be accepted in their families. They need to know that their parents, brothers and sisters love them and accept them for who they are, not for what their family would like them to be. They need to know that there is someone in their family who will listen, when perhaps no one else will. They need to be able to sense deep inside them that they do not have to be perfect for their parents to love and accept them as part of the family.

But we older ones need that same kind of acceptance. We, too, need to know that our families will love and accept us when we make mistakes. Very few of us are able to function properly out there in the world unless we have a family who understands and accepts us. When the day has been particularly hectic, and we feel like we've fought a losing battle against all the rest of the world, the home and the

family is like a haven. Your family provides you with that acceptance which is so vital to your development and maturity as a person. You learn to accept yourself, and see yourself as a person of importance and self-worth, to the same extent your family does.

Dr. Wayne Grant wrote in his book *Growing Parents, Growing Children*, that he was praying with his seven-year-old son. The son ran through a long list of things he wanted for his birthday. But then the little boy said, “But God, the thing I want most is love. I need a lot of it. Deep, deep down inside of me is an empty spot that never gets enough love.”

If the church is the Family of God, then acceptance of each other should be a major characteristic. Others in the world may shun and avoid us, others may talk about us and reject us, but the Family of God should be the one place in the world where you and I can know that we are loved and accepted. We don't have to be perfect to gain acceptance in this Family, because no one else in this Family is perfect, either.

Sure, there may be times when we have trouble getting along with others in this Family, just as we do sometimes in our human families. Knowing that, Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, “*Accept one another...just as Christ accepted you*” (Romans 15.7).

2 The Church should provide encouragement.

Encouragement takes many shapes and forms. Sometimes it will appear as a spoken word at just the right time. At other times it will show up in a kind deed or loving gesture. Whatever shape it takes, encouragement is best appreciated when it comes from someone in your family.

When we are discouraged, the first people we go to are the members of our families. We turn to them because we know they will give us the encouragement we need to keep going. Who among us has never needed encouragement? You may have needed it in the dark of the night, when you felt no one cared. You needed it when someone you loved died, or when you brought home a bad grade from school. You needed it when you didn't get that job promotion you were expecting. You needed it when the money ran short at the end of the month.

You needed it the last time you had to stay up all night with a sick child. You needed it the last time you felt God was not hearing your prayers. You have needed encouragement more times than you realize, and if you will take inventory, you

will probably discover that the greatest amount of encouragement may have come from the people in your own family. That is the way it should be!

If we are the Church of God, then we are also the Family of God. Doesn't it make sense that here is the place you and I should be able to turn to receive the kind of encouragement we need to get us through the problems we all face? Shouldn't we be confident in knowing that our spiritual brothers and sisters will provide us with encouragement to help us through our days? There will no doubt be some things that you cannot share with everyone, yet you and I are too often guilty of holding back and not sharing anything. Perhaps it is because we are afraid people will think less of us if we reveal to them that we really are human after all, that we really do have problems and situations we just can't handle by ourselves. At any rate, our church should provide an atmosphere where people of all ages and all kinds of backgrounds can receive the encouragement they need so desperately.

It is no small coincidence that the New Testament devotes a large amount of space to the subject of encouragement. Jesus told us that the Holy Spirit would be known as "The Comforter" or "The Encourager" (John 14.16), and that is exactly what we see the Holy Spirit doing in the Book of Acts (9.31). Acts shows us that encouragement became a natural part of the early Christians' participation with each other in the Family of God. So it is also natural that when Paul wrote the letters to the churches in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi and Thessalonica, he should highlight encouragement as being a necessary characteristic of the Family of God.

And in the book of Hebrews, we read these words, "*But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness*" (Hebrews 3.13).

3 The Church should provide nurture.

A third duty of the church is that we should provide nurture. The word "nurture" is derived from a Latin word which meant "to nurse a baby." Today a primary meaning of the word "nurture" is "training or upbringing," and it includes all the things necessary to help a child grow up.

When you provide adequate food and clothing for your children, you are giving them nurture. When you see to it that they receive proper medical care, you are giving them nurture. When you take the responsibility of seeing that they are educated properly, you are giving them nurture. When you are careful to lead your children in spiritual matters, you are nurturing them, training them. You are

nurturing them when you do everything within your power to help those children grow up to be well-rounded, healthy adults.

Now the Bible says that we are the Family of God, and **as a spiritual family, we should provide spiritual nurture for the members of our family**. All of us have so much growing in Christ to do yet, even those of us who have been Christians for years and years! There is so much more about Christ to be learned—so much growing up to do spiritually! If we are the Family of God, we are to provide the nurture necessary for spiritual growth.

Again, the Bible has so much to say about spiritual growth, and always it takes place within the context of the Family of God. Ephesians 4.15 reads, “...*speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.*” The writer of Hebrews tells us, “*Therefore, let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God*” (Hebrews 6.1). Peter included the theme of growth in his first letter: “*Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation*” (1 Peter 2.2).

Wynne Baptist Church in Wynne, Arkansas, once had a remarkable opportunity to nurture someone in the Family of God. Their story vividly illustrates how we who are part of the Family of God should provide acceptance, encouragement and nurture for others in the Family, and not just those who attend our church! John Klein, a ministerial student at Ouachita Baptist University, was passing through town when he was badly burned in a freak car accident. He was hospitalized in Wynne, and his needs were great. A member of the Wynne Baptist Church found out about John’s situation and started to reach out to him. Several others from the church, even though none knew him, began to respond to John’s desperate financial needs. They gave generously out of Christ-like love for that young man. In fact, their gifts provided a car for John to use so he could finish his university work and then go on to seminary, plus meet other needs he had.

The pastor, Don Dunavent, received a letter from John Klein, in which he wrote: “Your flock helped me during a very difficult time both physically and spiritually...[and] have been challenging examples to me for my current and future ministry as I prepare myself for our Lord’s work. [Your people] have been a shining example of Christian compassion at work, and again, I thank God that you were there during my time of need.” The pastor commented: “I’m so glad to be a part of such a loving church family!”

Just as a healthy human family provides acceptance, encouragement and nurture for its members, it is our duty as a healthy spiritual family to provide acceptance, encouragement and nurture for those who belong to the Family of God. We don't necessarily provide them through a new program or meeting. These are provided most often in the warm, caring, compassionate way in which we love and share with each other. They come across in the way we include each other in our social gatherings and by the way we talk to each other. We communicate these things through what we expect of each other and the way we remain faithful to each other.

Are these things within your power to provide for someone? They sure, if you are a member of the Family of God! Is it time for you to take your place in this Family, giving as well as receiving?