

The Church as the Family of God

Families come in all shapes and sizes – even more so in our multicultural society where we've imported various family models from all over the world. Is there one correct size for a family? No.

- Some very successful families are quite large with people tripping over each other all through the house and sharing all manner of things.
- Some very successful families are quite small, with only one child to fill the house.

Likewise, you can find dysfunctional large families and dysfunctional small families. Size alone doesn't dictate the success of a family.

Are there pressures on families? Sure. Some come from outside.

- Pressures from work situations – the time involved or the travelling involved or the uprooting of families to move when better job prospects come along.
- Pressures from affluence – the many entertainments on offer put pressure on quality family time.
- Pressures on the institution itself – marriages breaking down; people wanting to change the definition of marriage; letting children divorce their parents.

There are lots of outside pressures. Pressures also come from inside.

- Personalities that clash with each other.
- Individuals wanting to put their own rights and desires ahead of the family.
- Parents too interested in themselves to properly care for their children.
- Parents busy abusing one another and creating horrible family atmospheres.

- Parents abusing their children.

This evening we're looking at the concept of the church as *the family of God*. It's supposed to be a positive picture of the church – but, unfortunately, not all have fond memories of family life. Some people, because of their particular past and their particular bad experiences, carry around in their heads very negative associations with the word *family*. Each of us has a different family background and a different family experience. None of those experiences is perfect – yet:

- some have very positive, warm experiences of families – plenty of great memories of rich times shared together; and
- others have very painful experiences of earthly families – plenty of scars and moments they'd rather forget.

As we look at the church as *the family of God*, we bring those experiences with us – both positive and negative. That can be a bit of a two-edged sword.

- On the one hand, we're supposed to draw on our earthly experiences of families to try to understand the concept of the church as God's family. That's the whole point of using part of our everyday experience to describe what the church is.
- On the other hand, that brings with it the danger of the picture being less than perfect because our earthly families are less than perfect. That danger becomes especially acute where people's experience of earthly families is negative.

As we look at this picture of the church, we need to be aware of that danger – and adjust our thinking accordingly.

The Picture in the Bible

If I asked you to list the images or pictures the Bible uses to describe the church, would this picture of *the family of God* be one that came quickly to mind?

- Perhaps you'd think of *the body of Christ* – in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12.
- Perhaps you'd think of *the temple of God* or *the building of God* – in Ephesians 2 and 1 Peter 2.
- Perhaps you'd think of *the bride of Christ* – in Ephesians 5.

But the family of God – where do you find that in the New Testament?

At one level, you don't! If you look up the word *family* in a concordance, you will find it in the New Testament – but not very often (it varies depending on which English translation you're using). However, you aren't very likely to find the word *family* being used of the church in the New Testament. One possibility is Ephesians 3:15

For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom His whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

The way the NIV translates that verse, it looks like *family* is used to describe the universal church. However, as the NIV footnote indicates, that's not the only possible way to translate that verse.

A second possibility is Ephesians 2:19

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, ...

The term translated *household* could also be translated *family*. Indeed, it's translated that way in Galatians 6:10

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to

all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

That's probably about as far as you'd get if you went looking for the New Testament to identify the church as God's family.

Yet, at another level, the picture is the most common in the New Testament. The word *family* isn't used very often to describe the church – but family terms are very common. Let's quickly look at three.

God is our Father

First, for Christians, God's our Father. Now, in one sense, as Creator, God's Father of all. He made everything and everyone. Everyone is His offspring. On the odd occasion, you find that idea in the Bible – Paul speaking to the crowd at Athens in Acts 17; that may be what that verse in Ephesians 3:15 means. Yet, that's not the usual way the New Testament speaks of God as Father. When we Christians say God's our Father, we aren't just talking of His role as Creator. We claim He's our Father in a way He isn't the Father of non-Christians.

Paul writes in Galatians 4:4-7

But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

He writes the same sort of thing in Romans 8:15-17. You can look that one up later.

As you read the New Testament, you find this idea of God as Father is fairly common. Indeed, we've become so used to it, we've got a tendency to take it for granted. It's how we're taught to think of God – as our heavenly Father. Yet, before Jesus taught this to His disciples, it wasn't at all common. It's something Jesus introduced to His disciples and left as a legacy for His church.

We are God's Children

Secondly, both Galatians 4 and Romans 8 also introduce the other side of the coin: if God's our Father, then we're His children. John 1:11-13 states:

He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

Again, it's something we've got used to – especially if we've been going to church for many years. It's something fundamental to our Christian faith. Christians are adopted into God's family – as His children. Yet, it's a staggering thought.

- Think of the difference between God and us. God's infinite; we're finite. God's powerful; we're puny. God's wise; we bungle around and mess up the planet. Why should God want flesh and blood creatures like us in His family?
- Even more than that – we're rebels. Instead of bowing to our Creator's wishes and living the way He made us to live, we threw off His rule and decided we could do a better job ourselves. We got rid of Him as our boss, and installed ourselves as

our own bosses. Why should God want such rebellious flesh and blood creatures like us in His family?

Yet, that's exactly what God's done. He's adopted us into His family as children and heirs such that we can address Him on intimate terms.

We are Family

Thirdly, the New Testament encourages us to see our fellow-Christians as *brothers and sisters*. To see how common this is, come for a quick tour through one of Paul's letters with me – Galatians. Galatians 1:1-2

Paul, an apostle ... and all the brothers with me,
Galatians 1:11

I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up.

Galatians 2:4

This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus ...

Galatians 3:15

Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. ...

Galatians 4:12

I plead with you, brothers, become like me, for I became like you.

Galatians 4:28

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.

Galatians 4:31

Therefore, brothers we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

Galatians 5:11

Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?

Galatians 5:13

You, my brothers, were called to be free.

Galatians 6:1

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.

Galatians 6:18

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.

The idea just permeates this letter.

In the context of the New Testament, *brothers*, of course, doesn't simply mean the men only. It's a term that refers to all Christians – both male and female.

They aren't the only family or household terms applied to Christians in the New Testament – there are others as well. Yet, that should be enough to indicate just how common this picture is in the New Testament.

The Picture in our Lives

Rather than looking at those other terms, I want us to think through some of the implications of what it means to us as a church to be the family of God. What practical difference does it make to our day-to-day lives that we're part of God's family – part of the broader family of the universal church and the part that's known as the Bathurst Evangelical Church.

Belonging

I think one important implication of this picture of the family is the idea of belonging. That's part of what's behind that passage in Ephesians 2. Paul writes to a group of people who used not to belong.

- They were Gentiles – and thus were foreigners to God's household.

- They had no covenant with God – and thus were strangers to God's promise.
- They had no hope of a coming Messiah – and thus were far away from God.

But now, Jesus has died for them and they're part of the family. They're not foreigners and strangers and aliens anymore – they're actually members of God's household. They're part of the furniture. They belong – and they belong together.

How does this belonging thing work in our earthly families? Do we, for example, have any say in regards to the composition of our earthly families?

- Before you were born, do you remember God giving you a tour of all the families on earth and asking which one you'd like to be born into?
- When you were thinking of having a child, did you go down to the hospital and peruse all the babies and choose the one you liked best?
- As your child grew up and started to develop all your bad habits, did you go down to Centrelink to exchange him for a more polite model?

We may get to choose our spouses – but we don't get to choose our children or our brothers and sisters. The families on television may choose who they want in the cast – but that's not how things work in real life. We're simply stuck with whom God gives us.

We may be able to shape them in certain ways by feeding them plenty of junk food. We may be able to develop their character and knock off a few rough edges. Yet, we don't have the option of swapping our brother for our best friend at school or kicking our sister out of the house because her facial features aren't in the super-model class

– at least, that's not how it's supposed to work in families.

It's like that in the church as well. God brings people into His family – and He doesn't really consult us as to who we'd like brought in and who we'd rather were left out. As you look round at your church family, you can probably see a few people you wish God had left out – and there are probably a few who wish He'd left you out as well. If it were left up to me, I'd leave out all the people who aren't nice to me and who can't easily get along with me.

But you and I aren't the ones who make the choice. God decides who's in His family – who belongs. Our job is exactly the same as in our physical families – to learn to get along with whomever God puts here. We're all part of the one family. We all belong on an equal basis.

Will we always get along wonderfully with each other? Not very likely.

- We'll have differences of opinion.
- We'll rub each other up the wrong way.
- We'll have personality clashes.

And on top of those things, we're still sinful people who selfishly want our own way most of the time. Yet, we belong to this family and God wants us to work together.

The Family Likeness

Part of that working together as a family is to develop the family likeness. In our earthly families, we develop our own family ways of doing things – our own family culture. These things become the fabric of our unconscious routines each day. It's when you go to live with another family that you notice the differences.

- They put the toilet rolls on back to front.
- They leave the toilet seat up.
- They don't close doors when they should.
- They have meals at strange times.

When we came back from PNG, we stayed with my sister's family for a month. We're used to having dinner fairly promptly at 6 each evening. Their dinner time was not likely to be before 8 and could vary considerably from one day to the next.

In our earthly families, we also tend to become like one another in many ways. Our genetic makeup often results in physical similarities being passed from one generation to the next. Some children look like carbon copies of their parents. But it's more than that. Children tend to copy their parents in all sorts of ways – sometimes consciously; sometimes unconsciously. They pick up our mannerisms and habits – especially the bad ones.

It's supposed to work like that in God's family as well – not the idea of picking up bad habits, but the idea of picking up the family culture and the family likeness. What are the characteristics God wants to pass on to His children? God tells us quite clearly in Romans 8:29

For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers.

He wants us to become like Jesus.

Is that the sort of culture we're developing as Bathurst Evangelical Church? Are we helping each other develop the family likeness? At this point, people often think in two major directions.

- Some people think in terms of love. They want to

develop a church culture characterised by warmth and acceptance and friendliness and open arms. They want to get rid of any inkling of being judgmental in any shape or form. They have a tendency to drift into moral laxness.

- Other people think in terms of holiness. They want to develop a church culture characterised by being deeply concerned for doing what's right and proper and honest and pure. They want to get rid of any inkling of sin. They have a tendency to drift into cold legalism.

The truth is Jesus combines love and holiness. He doesn't see any contradiction or tension between the two. Both are important for developing the family likeness within us – both as individuals and as a church. God wants us to have a church culture that encourages both together.

Looking out for Each Other

Another part of working together as a family is to look out for each other. Back in the story of Cain and Abel, Cain asks God: Am I my brother's keeper? In a very real sense, the answer is *yes*. Certainly, I'm not my brother, nor am I responsible for my brother's decisions – yet, I am responsible for looking out for my brother and helping and encouraging where possible.

In our earthly families, we see that happen regularly.

- Siblings may bicker with each other one minute and join together to attack a common enemy the next.
- Parents have a tendency to rescue their children where possible – even their grown, married and independent children.
- When people are in trouble, their first port of call tends to be members of their own family.

There are responsibilities we have to our own flesh and blood that we don't have to those outside the family.

It should be the same in the church – in the family of God. Let me read again Galatians 6:10

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

The New Testament has a whole string of what are often called the *one another* verses.

- love one another (John 13:34-35; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; Hebrews 13:1-3; 1 Peter 1:22);
- serve one another (Galatians 5:13);
- accept one another (Romans 15:7; 14:1);
- honour one another (Romans 12:10; Philipp.2:3-4);
- encourage one another (1 Thessalon.4:18; 5:11);
- instruct one another (Romans 15:14);
- submit to one another (Ephes.5:21; 1 Peter 5:5);
- be devoted to one another (Romans 12:10);
- bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2);

If you look hard enough in the New Testament, I'm sure you can find some more.

The point is: in God's family, we have a responsibility to look out for one another – all the *one anothers* within our church family. Those *one another* verses don't single out certain sections of the church.

- It doesn't say accept those you think should be part of God's family; it says accept the family members.
- It doesn't say serve those you think deserve serving; it says serve the family members.

Of course, you'll find that easier with some people than others. That's not always sinful – that's just a function of our personalities and our personal preferences. Where it

becomes sinful is when I allow my personal preferences to cause discrimination in how I actually treat other family members – when I treat some as if they're lesser or as if they're not part of the family at all.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let me leave you with two questions.

- First, if it comes to a choice, which family should have priority – your earthly family or the family of God?
- Secondly, can you develop true family relationships within a short meeting once a week? As a church, should we be doing other things to help develop the family relationships?