

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

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The Family of God - Part 2 - Joss Bray

In part 1 we looked at how the church is described as the “family of God” and “the family of believers”.

We also saw how we became part of this family. Remember what it says in John 1:

JN 1:12 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.

And we also read in Galatians 3:

GAL 3:26 You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

So all of us who believe in Jesus and who are born again are sons and daughters of God. This means we are part of the family - with the right to be called children of God. We are who we are in God, and nothing and no one can take that away. We also have a heavenly inheritance of eternal life which is a promise from God.

Whatever happens to us, we have that one right which is permanent and solid. It means that -

- We can know the love of a supremely loving Father. We can know that he wants the best for us - even if it involves some discipline from time to time.
- We now have an older brother - Jesus - the ultimate role model. He has been through whatever we will face and more and has trail blazed the way to the heavenly kingdom for us.
- We have a permanent helper and counsellor with us - the Holy Spirit. He empowers us to do the things that God has called us to do. He helps us to change to be more like Jesus. He helps us worship “in spirit and in truth” - in ways we can't even comprehend.

Isn't that all amazing! And God has put us together to be his family. Church isn't an accident or an afterthought that God had, to organise his people into convenient groups. The church is designed to be the family of God - so what should that family look like? What should it be like to be one of the family?

Families

We can learn things from earthly families that could help us to understand the family of God. At this point, we must say that there are many examples of difficult and toxic family relationships in the world. We ourselves may be thinking right now - "Well I hope God's family isn't going to turn out like xxxxx family". It may even be our own families that we are thinking of!

That is why we also need to think about what the bible says about church and to look at how the early church was. So the book of Acts is full of illustrations that show what God had in mind when he designed the church family. The thing to remember as well, is that families are not static. Families change and grow over time in many ways - but the basic principles should remain.

So let's look at a few themes that emerge from this:

The family of God should love each other. Relationships should be characterised by compassion, by patience, by bearing with each other and by forgiveness when things go wrong. And things do go wrong at times because the sinful nature still clings on in us - even though we don't want it to.

The family of God should learn together. The bible says we are to teach and admonish each other. In a family, there is learning going on all the time - even if it is unrecognised. But more than just talking, we learn from each other by our attitudes and actions. We do affect each other - we need to make sure it is in the right way!

The family of God should grow in maturity. As we learn, we become more mature - just as a child does. People will be at different stages of their walk with God - and this is exactly as it should be. A family can contain all ages and levels of maturity in it and this is the place for people to grow and develop in their faith.

However, if we are all stuck at the toddler stage then we have not done well. When we do grow through infancy, childhood and adolescence - each stage brings its own challenges. People at different stages can often help others - as in a family.

But - as we know - new babies and children bring can bring considerable joy to the older members of a family. More than that, Jesus said we should become like little children and learn from them. So it is a two way process. No-one has the monopoly on being able to teach or to be taught - and no-one can say they have reached the top level of maturity either.

The family of God should meet up regularly. This of course should be a joy and not a burden! The bible says in Hebrews 10 -

“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another”

So meeting together actually means that we encourage each other. But we can feel at times that it would be easier to stay at home rather than to make the effort to meet up because we think that it isn't really that important. This was clearly an issue in the early church as well. However, let's not forget that when we do get together it is encouraging in itself. It is more than just an opportunity to encourage each other by talking. Merely being there is helpful in itself - we don't even have to say or do anything.

The family of God honours and values each other. One of the other ways the church is described is as a body. Different parts are essential and dependant on each other. No one part can say to the other I don't need you for example. The church family is an example of unity in diversity. We do not need to be the same - in fact - that is a bad thing. God has given us different personalities and gifts and abilities. It is the same in a normal family - we enjoy each other. There is a richness and something to celebrate in it.

The family of God worships together. So this is fundamental to who we are. Remember, Jesus is the head of the church - it is his - not ours. We worship God together in the name of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. There is something about being together and worshipping and praying to God and for each other, which is what we were designed for. We were not meant to be Christians on our own - we were designed to be in the church family together.

The family of God eats together. This has been a major feature of this church from the beginning! Even if we can't make it to Sunday lunch, having the bread and wine together from time to time reminds us that Jesus was keen on eating with his disciples - and many others. He wants us to remember him when we eat - so that is why we say grace. Grace is getting what we don't deserve - and it reminds us every time we eat together that God's love for us is undeserved - we have not earned it - and we cannot earn it. He loved us first and He continues to provide all that we need.

The family of God shares together. The New Testament church had "everything in common" and shared what they had with each other so that no one was in need. This is what we try and do - and we will continue to do it. If there is someone in need in the church, then it is up to us to share what we have. That may be time or money or things - it could be anything. There is no point in having money in the church bank account if there is a need for it amongst us. So we share what we have with no strings attached. And it is a joy to give and to receive - and humbling as well.

The family of God should love its neighbours. That is whoever we know who is in need outside of the church. And in whatever way - the challenge is to be a blessing to the community around us. This can get complicated when there is unwarranted opposition to the church. The bible does say we should expect persecution. Our responsibility is to make sure we are acting in a righteous way - doing what God wants us to do, in the way he wants us to do it.

And when opposition comes, our response must be one of love and patience and prayer - not of retaliation - tempting though that is! Our prayer and focus should be for God's kingdom to come and His will to be done. That's what we are told to pray - and also to seek first His righteousness and His kingdom. The rest is up to God.

The family of God should demonstrate what Jesus is like. We are called to be salt and light to the world. Salt to be in among people with the flavour and cleansing power of God and light to show people the way to God. Our actions have to demonstrate that the Kingdom of God is not about words but about His power. Our characters must reflect Jesus as we are being transformed by the Holy Spirit.

The family of God should grow in numbers. We often say - “it’s not about numbers” and that’s right - but we want the family to grow! We have some good news here - the most important good news anyone will hear. We don’t want to be an exclusive family that people can’t join. In part 1 we mentioned “friends of the family” who are very welcome to be with us - but we long for them to be born again into the family as a child of God.

God has made the way through Jesus so many can become children of God. That is what He wants. There is great joy when a new baby is born - and that should be the same for us when a new child of God is born and joins our family.

In conclusion

These are some of the things that define and describe the family of God. It’s not an exhaustive list but if we can increasingly get to grips with them, then we will be well on the way to being the church that Jesus wants us to be.