

Relatives, Siblings, Rivalries

By Nathan Warner

What is the Church made up of? What are you and I? Are we members of a club, indentured servants, part of a sales team, loyal customers, savvy consumers, or a group of friends? Christians today vary all over the map in how they see themselves and others in the Church. Different expectations based on different views about what the Church is goes a long way to explain the many discords, conflicts, and disputes faced within the Church. For example, many think Church is a convenience store or a motivational marketplace – they are there to get something out of it, and like a concert audience, they expect to get their time and energy's worth or they'll walk out. Others are looking for a club of like-minded people – friends that they can hang out with and really resonate with, and if they don't feel fulfilled by the company, they leave.

But Scripture doesn't describe the Church as a store, club, party, or even a gathering of friends. The Word of God says we're a family. Jesus *"came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God"* (John 1:11-13 NASB), *"for you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'"* (Romans 8:15) *"He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will"* (Ephesians 1:5), *"so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons"* (Galatians 4:5); *"so then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household"* (Ephesians 2:19).

Being part of a family is a bit more personal and permanent than wearing a tag that reads "associate" or carrying a membership card in your wallet, wouldn't you say? Believers are the adopted children of God's Household. We are God's family. Brothers and sisters have a completely different relationship than employees or even friends. We are the adopted brothers and sisters of our Heavenly Father and are in His family. God uses the picture of siblings to convey our intrinsic, frictional relationship together under His parental authority. Siblings don't often get along, but we are supposed to love one another. Just think back – how often did you squabble with your siblings? How often did you hear your parents cry in exasperation, "Stop it you two! One more time and we're pulling the car over!" I know my parents were constantly yelling this at my brother and me from the front seat of our teal Geo Prism. Our response?

NATHAN – "He poked me again!"

ELLIS – "No, I didn't!"

NATHAN – "Yes, you did!"

ELLIS – "He poked me first!"

And on and on we went. So it often is in the Church – we war with one another over petty childish issues. It's a miracle of God's patience that He doesn't tire of our immature squabbling sometimes.

So what can we learn about God's spiritual analogy to the genetic family? I think our natural families provide us a picture. We can't choose our biological family. Some of us wish we could, but God chooses it for us. Some friends of mine once showed me how they used

Photoshop to “cut out” or remove relatives from pictures because they had “fallen out with them.” While we can say to our aunt, “You’re dead to me!” we can’t remove the fact that she is our blood relation. We may not always appreciate our family as much as we should, but they are still our family. You can’t cut yourself out of your family – you can try to avoid them, move to the other end of the world, or disown them, but technically, they are still your family. You can’t erase these relationships.

This is true of the Household of God because we also don’t choose our Christian Brothers and Sisters. Some of us wish we could do the choosing, but God does the choosing by the power of His Holy Spirit. Does this mean we can never leave a church we are attending? Of course not. Under the leading of the Holy Spirit, we can move away from one group of relatives and join another group of relatives, but that doesn’t stop us being Brothers and Sisters – and we should only do so under the express leadership of the Holy Spirit.

A Christian looking for a zesty spiritual product to pick them up or a pit crew to make them the Believer they always wanted to be will always be disappointed in the Church – an otherwise dysfunctional group of siblings justified solely by Christ’s sacrifice, held together by God’s Love, and made effective by God’s Holy Spirit. Just think of the Apostles – they were quite dysfunctional at times (arguing with each other and all over the map), yet it was towards them that Jesus pointed and said, *“Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother”* (Matthew 12:49b-50). This fact also causes much consternation for those seeking a club of like-minded friends. Family can be embarrassing and hard to deal with, and this causes many churches to try to transform the Church into a club of compatible people by weeding out Believers that annoy. They do this by trying to homogenize the Body with codes, memberships, statutes, and mandatory doctrines – “cutting out” their more “embarrassing” or irritating relatives. Just as in our natural families, we may not always see eye to eye with our adopted siblings on everything (sometimes we may even harbor thunderstorms of injured pride, irritation, and anger in our hearts), but God has made us family through adoption, and we should avoid trying to make ourselves or our brothers into something other than what we are. We should accept that living as a family is a process, not simply a destination. Becoming part of God’s Church doesn’t fade out with “they lived happily ever after” – we will do this in Glory with Christ—but here on earth, there are still difficulties and frustrations “after the Honeymoon,” so to speak.

Does this mean we should accept a life together of “dysfunctionality”? Of course not, but we do need to be patient with our family, for we are all “born” at different stages, and our spiritual birth and adoption come at different times in our lives. Some are saved late in life, some early. Some are young in years but mature in spirit. God’s path of sanctification can come in different ways to different people, and maturity comes at different times and different ages. No one is at the same exact place in their maturity, and we need to understand this as we encourage one another to earnestly seek the Lord. Think of a home-school family or a one-room schoolhouse: the young students are learning behind the older students, but they are getting a glimpse of what they will be learning through the older students ahead of them in their life, conduct, and knowledge. The older students are often tasked with aiding in the teaching of the younger ones. A 17-year-old sister shouldn’t try to push trigonometry onto her 7-year-old brother, when she should be helping him to read. We all need to be patient in teaching and building up our younger siblings when the Holy Spirit directs us. This is not to say we should avoid teaching God’s Truth. Of course not! But we should bear with one another, encouraging and challenging the less mature Believers to grow into greater maturity at the pace they can absorb.

Families take work. They take time and energy, and they take patience. But beneath it all, most importantly, families require foundational love. God's love is what holds everything together through the working of His Holy Spirit in His children. Scripture is filled with calls for God's adopted sons and daughters to love one another. A company, co-op, or a club requires similar purpose, interest, or knowledge to join, but they don't require love for them to function. Love is the foundation of the family, and it is the foundation upon which every action must depend in the Household of God. When we share knowledge, correction, or judgment, it must be in love, for only then will it be edifying and build up the Body. If we do not, it will tear down and cause us to stumble: *"The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him"* (1 John 2:10). We need to *"let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality"* (Romans 12:9-13).

Paul puts all things in perspective when he says love must be the foundation for all our activities in the Household of God: *"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love"* (1 Corinthians 13). Even so Amen, Brothers and Sisters.