

# Embracing God's Family

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by Ben Purves

As we approach Thanksgiving and Christmas, family is frequently on our minds as we make plans, travel, and gather together with relatives to celebrate. Do we share this same warmth and eagerness to see each other when it comes to the body of Christ? Think with me as we consider our spiritual family. When we place our faith in Christ, we are spiritually reborn and adopted into God's family, becoming one of the many children in God's household (John 1:12; 1 Timothy 3:15). In Mark 10:29-30, Jesus taught His disciples about the reward of discipleship, promising them that they will receive "a hundredfold... brothers and sisters and mothers and children." Watchman Nee also wrote, "Though you may be born as an only child in an earthly family, yet when you believe in the Lord, you are born again into the biggest family in the world." This is a wonderful blessing of belonging to the body of Christ.

In our gathering together as a church family, we experience the gospel reality of being in God's family. In Acts 2:46, we see this shared life in the first century church as they spent time together in corporate worship at the Temple and also in the sharing of meals in each other's homes. Throughout the New Testament we see the deep love shared between the saints in God's family (Romans 12:10; Hebrews 13:1; 1 Peter 4:8). It is God's design for His children to deeply love each other and spend time with each other, and it is a great blessing to have the saints as our family!

As you read through the New Testament, you do not find Christians living independently from the local church, because being part of God's family and the body of Christ was inseparably linked to life in the local church. Family life has never been meant to be lived in isolation. If you had placed your faith in Christ, it naturally followed for your new identity to be expressed within the community of the saints.

If we are in Christ, it also naturally follows that we would publicly identify with Christ's body through membership. If we are united with Christ, if He is our Savior, and we neglect to embrace membership in a local church, we find ourselves in a disjunctive place of affirming our union with Christ, yet not affirming our union with our brothers and sisters. In baptism we publicly proclaim our union with Christ in His death and resurrection, and in a parallel fashion we would do well to publicly identify ourselves with the body of Christ through membership in a local church.

If you attend church regularly, but have not yet embraced membership, it's sort of like going to your neighbor's family reunion. I encourage you, because you truly are family if you are in Christ, to take the step of publicly identifying yourself as part of the body of Christ through membership. To do so communicates commitment, "I am part of the body of Christ, and you are my family." It allows those in the local church to know that you are their brother or sister, and as family, they are responsible to care for you, and you for them.

In Jonathan Leeman's book on church membership, he defines membership as "a formal relationship between a church and a Christian characterized by the church's affirmation and oversight of a Christian's discipleship and the Christian's submission to living his or her discipleship in the care of the church." Membership is a commitment to a local church — that church taking responsibility for you, and you taking responsibility for that church.

In our postmodern anti-institutionalism and western individualism, we have a popular trend where some profess faith in Christ but refuse church altogether, saying "It's just me and Jesus." But this has never been God's plan for the Christian life. Together we are the body of Christ, there is one body (1 Corinthians 12:12), and it's impossible for these realities to be lived out away from our brothers and sisters. Because you and I are not God's only child, for us to attempt the Christian life in isolation is to functionally suggest to our brothers and sisters that they are not family.

We need each other in the body of Christ. God does not give us all we need in and of ourselves, but He provides for us through each other (1 Corinthians 12), and we are mutually dependent upon each other. We should continually be looking to minister to each other. God has entrusted each of us with unique gifts to love and serve our brothers and sisters. Let us use these gifts well, and embrace fellowship in God's family. Church should never become a self-focused consumer experience, because church is family — God's family.

Some are reluctant to engage in fellowship, saying "We have nothing in common with each other." Could we have anything in common greater than our Savior? Are common interests a better basis for fellowship than Christ? Our fellowship, our union in Christ, our participation in God's family, is not founded upon similar personality, musical tastes, favorite television shows, hunting, cooking, exercise, being in a particular age group, or anything except for Christ. We are one in Christ (Romans 12:5). Let us embrace true fellowship, extending love to all members of Christ's body, for all who are in Christ are our family. Each and every brother and sister is significant and needed, and no one is expendable (1 Corinthians 12).

We truly need each other as we grow together "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). God in His perfect wisdom has put us together in the body of Christ as He sees fit (1 Corinthians 12:18), for our good and for His glory. Let us gather together as God's family to love our brothers and sisters, and to live out the reality of the Gospel in our wonderful union with Christ and each other. We should be filled with thankfulness for each other, as the apostle Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 3:9, "...what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy we feel for your sake before our God?"