BOUND BY BLOOD:
RE-DISCOVERING THE CHURCH AS A FAMILY AT THE CHURCH AT REDSTONE

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To all those to whom I am bound by “blood” –

To my wonderful wife, Mary

To my awesome kids, Sophia, Anna, Isabella, and Sam

To my “brothers” and “sisters” at Valley Center Christian Church,
Stanton Christian Church, and the Church at Redstone

To the family that gathered all those Sunday afternoons at the home
of Bob and Ruth Clark in Haysville, Kan.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

After years of ministry, I couldn't help but wonder whether something was wrong with the church. I suppose many pastors feel that way at times. Ministry is difficult by its nature. Ministry involves people, and people can be difficult. For me, my church seemed to be broken because people seemed to be relationally distant from one another. At times, the church felt like a highly orchestrated gathering of individuals who came together to get their weekly spiritual fix. Church members were friendly with one another. But they didn't seem to know each other well. They were warm but not "at home" with one another. I had experienced this in other churches, but I began to wonder whether there was more to the problem than met the eye. Aren't we "brothers" and "sisters" in the faith? If so, shouldn't we have relationships with one another that in some way reflect the relationships siblings have? I suspected many people have closer relationships with their nonbelieving co-workers than with their family members in the faith.

And so this project came to be. My central thesis is the church was created by Jesus to live out its life as a "family" in the ancient Mediterranean sense of that word. Jesus and the New Testament writers frequently described the church using familial language. It was a favorite metaphor of theirs. They surely meant something specific when they described church members as "brothers" and "sisters" and the entire congregation as a "household." But do modern American Christians know what the biblical writers meant when they used that language, and are we living out our lives in the church along these lines? The answer in most cases, I believe, is "no."

But it's not necessarily our fault. Very few of us have been taught what it means to be a church in this sense. And so my purpose was to develop a method a church could use to motivate

its members to greater engagement in the life of the church as a "family." And not just any kind of family, but an ancient Mediterranean, strong-group family.

'My mother and my brothers'

A word of context may be helpful to demonstrate what motivates this project. I was raised in a close-knit Christian family. Many Sundays during the year, my family would leave church in order to drive to my grandparents' home. There, we would have a potluck lunch with a slew of uncles and aunts and cousins. The children would play hide-and-seek and football in the yard. The adults would play cards and talk. These family gatherings mark a formative experience of my young life. Certainly, faith was embedded in these get-togethers. The conversations were loving and wholesome. But on top of this was the reality this was a place and time of comfort and joy for our family. Members enjoyed gathering together with one another. Everyone brought his or her own personality to the table. Certain experiences – both prayers and antics – were expected when the family gathered. Nothing was scripted. This was "family."

When I compared the gatherings of the extended family of my youth to what I was seeing on Sunday morning in our church services, very little was similar. The environment is more formal, the people are largely stoic, and the liturgy is scripted. Only a few people are expected to speak. Everyone else just listens quietly. That would be fine except for one thing: Jesus seemed to want the church to operate as a family!

As I read the Bible with an eye on its ecclesiology, I began to note its persistent use of family terminology. For instance, Jesus at one point looked at his followers and asked, "'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister

and mother'" (Mark 3:33-35).[1] Jesus described the church as a family – as did the apostle Paul and the other New Testament writers. This is unsurprising considering the whole of Jewish history follows the faith and activities of the literal, biological family of Abraham. This idea carried forward into the church, where members are described as a "household" and were to relate to each other as brothers and sisters (Ephesians 2:19).

I was mindful my own experience of family is not what many people in Western culture experience. Broken relationships and geographical distance are a mark of many American families today. We must ask whether our ideas about family in modern Western culture are different from the family ideals of Jesus' day. My own family was close-knit. Many other families today are not. What was Jesus thinking when he thought about his "mother" and "brothers"?

And so I began to study what Jesus and Paul and the New Testament writers meant when they used these familial terms. This required a deep dive into ancient Mediterranean culture and family systems. I looked into how the ancient Mediterranean family was structured and what sorts of relational bonds existed within it. Students of these matters know the family of the ancient world – and of many cultures in the world today – is nothing like what many modern Westerners have come to know family to be. While Western culture is highly individualistic, the culture of the ancient world was communal. Individual achievement in those cultures took a back seat to the furtherance of the family and to the protection of its honor and economics. In short, what Jesus meant when he described the church as a family was different than what many Americans understand a family to be today. And it was different –more intensely close – than what I had experienced family to be. Regular Sunday potlucks even fall short of this standard!

[1] All biblical passage referenced employ the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

"This *can't* happen" – but maybe it should

My focus began to sharpen after a specific experience in ministry. The small church where I pastor had made a practice of hiring musical guests to lead worship on Sunday mornings. The church believed it didn't have enough volunteer support to supply its own worship team each week. This didn't mean it lacked members who were gifted in leading worship. Instead, those members preferred to defer to our hired musical guests.

One Saturday, I was informed the next day's musical guests would be unable to come. So I hastily assembled a small worship team from within our church that consisted of two women who occasionally had led worship in the past. This was short notice, of course. The service the next day went reasonably well, or so I thought. The following week, a church leader chastised me about the service. One of the women leading the music had felt great anxiety about the service. It was too hastily prepared. And the lack of quality was discomforting to some members of the congregation. I remember this leader telling me, "This *can't* happen."

Naturally, my feelings were hurt. I felt badly the church had been put in that position. I resolved never to let that happen again. But the more I considered this, the more I became convinced the church had wandered into a relational desert when it came to its worship gatherings. Were we making our gatherings into too much of a production? Had the technical quality of the music – and the liturgy and preaching, for that matter – taken on too much importance? If the church really is a family, shouldn't people know each other well enough to be comfortable in serving one another, even on short notice?

I eventually came to this conclusion: The church had a faulty view of what it was supposed to do when it gathered, and it did so because it had an insufficient ecclesiology.

Namely, it was not operating as a family. I can offer all the caveats a pastor may make about his or her church. Mine was full of wonderful, godly people. They were friendly. They had kept a small church alive for decades in a secular part of the country. But the church was not living its life as a family. In a healthy family, members are comfortable with one another. They know each other better than they know anyone else. In a healthy family, mistakes are forgiven and overlooked as soon as they are made. In fact, mistakes may be anticipated from certain people at certain times, and yet those people may be loved all the more because of their propensity for making mistakes. We tend to love the foibles of our imperfect aunts and uncles! In a healthy family, people enjoy getting together "just because." In a family, very little is rehearsed. Authenticity is the expectation.

And yet so many churches, including my own, treated worship services like they are some sort of performance among strangers. Those churches aren't gathering as families. Oftentimes, they don't know each other that well, if at all. There may be no mutual comfort when people gather. And there likely is no expectation that people share their hearts and minds with one another. Some people come to perform, and some come to consume the performance.

Purpose and methodology

This project engaged my own small American church – the Church at Redstone in Redstone, Colo. – in a month-long intensive learning program that taught participants about the characteristics of the ancient Mediterranean, strong-group family and its implications for a biblical model of church. The primary research question was: "Can a greater understanding and experience of the ancient church's strong-group family model motivate greater engagement among a church's members?" The program provided church members with multiple experiential

learning opportunities where they could get a taste of some of the key components of a strong-group family-style church and begin to see themselves as a strong-group family. By "strong group," I mean a collection of individuals that has been brought together in conformity to a set of socially held values and that has a strong corporate identity and clear sense of belonging.[2] Ancient Mediterranean families were "strong-group" families while modern American families and churches frequently present "weak-group" characteristics.

Participants were surveyed before and after the project about their level of engagement with the church. The project measured participants' level affection for other church members, the sense of unity within the church, the willingness of participants to share their whole "selves" with the church, and the level of loyalty participants had toward the church. The hope was participants would manifest at least marginal quantitative improvement in these areas by the completion of the project. I also recorded my own observations of "greater engagement" among participants throughout the course of the study.

Following the post-program survey, a group of participants engaged in a focus group interview where I asked them questions related to the study and to the survey results. I studied the transcript from the focus group interview for common themes. Later, I developed a list of conclusions from the study and recommendations for those who would like to move their churches toward a strong-group family orientation.

A tiny church in the mountains

The Church at Redstone was formed in 1977 by a group of full- and part-time residents of the small mountain town of Redstone, Colo. The unincorporated community boasts a population

[2] Bruce J. Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1986), 19.

of 92 residents – according to the sign at the edge of town. The church averages between 30 and 50 in attendance each week. Attendance increases during the summer when second-homeowners return to the area from their permanent residences. The church has no denominational affiliation. Its statement of faith was patterned after that of the National Association of Evangelicals. The church has only one member of its ministry staff – the pastor. The current pastor, myself, is the church's fourth in its 44-year history.

The community of Redstone is a former coal-mining town that now serves as a tourist destination in the Rocky Mountains. The town has relatively few services outside of a historic hotel, a few tourist shops, and a pizza parlor. The town has no gas station or grocery store. Working residents travel up to an hour to the towns of Carbondale, Aspen, and Glenwood Springs for employment. Most children and youth attend schools 25 miles away in Carbondale. Many other residents are of retirement age. A relatively large proportion of homes are owned by people who live most of the year in other states, such as Texas and California. These homes are mostly vacant during the winter months.

The church has three elders, including the pastor, who oversee the congregation. It also has a Church Leadership Team that consists of elders, deacons, at-large church members, the church treasurer, and the pastor. The Church Leadership Team is responsible for the finances of the church and the upkeep of the church building. The church offers a Sunday School class in the spring and fall. A women's Bible study meets weekly throughout the year.

Familial connection or the primacy of the individual

Western culture influences how the Church at Redstone operates. Western culture is inherently individualistic. Americans generally prize self-sufficiency and desire to chart their

own courses in life. Some social scientists argue Americans have taken this propensity to the extreme. It is not just "individualism" that Americans live out in their lives. It is "radical individualism."[3] This has been an emphasis in Western philosophy since the days of Plato and has been carried through the Enlightenment and into modern American culture. Soong-Chan Rah writes, "Regardless of the philosopher's context, the repeating motif of Western culture has been the centrality and primacy of the individual."[4]

This focus on the individual is in contrast with the more collectivist cultural construct that exists elsewhere in the world and that existed in the ancient Mediterranean world where the church was birthed. In the ancient Mediterranean world, the most important relationship a person could have was with his or her siblings. The closeness of these relationships are a primary distinction between families then and now. According to Joseph H. Hellerman, "Indeed, sibling relationships reflect perhaps the most important distinction between ancient PKGs [patrilineal kinship groups] and modern Western kindred systems."[5] In these ancient kinship groups, the strongest bonds existed between siblings – surpassing even the marriage relationship in priority.[6]

This is significant for the life of the church because the Bible uses ancient kinship language to describe the relations within the church community. As already noted, Jesus in Mark 3:31-35 described the church as a family with "mother" and "brothers." The apostle Paul described the church as the "household of faith" and the "household of God" (Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:19). So numerous are Paul's familial references to the church that Robert J. Banks

[3] Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2009), 4.
[4] Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 29.
[5] Joseph H. Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2001), 35.
[6] S. Scott Bartchy, "Undermining Ancient Patriarchy: The Apostle Paul's Vision of a Society of Siblings," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 68.

argues the family "must be regarded as the most significant metaphorical usage of all" for Paul in describing the church.[7]

Meanwhile, churches living with a Western philosophical mindset do not view the church as a family in this sense, nor do they put much emphasis on the communal nature of the gathering of believers. Rah notes, "The American church, in taking its cues from Western, white culture, has placed at the center of its theology and ecclesiology the primacy of the individual. The cultural captivity of the church has meant that the church is more likely to reflect the individualism of Western philosophy than the value of community found in Scripture."[8]

'A more independent way of life'

The Church at Redstone models these Western values. Members prize personal fulfillment and personal spiritual growth and attend church to meet those needs. Even as a very small church, members do not appear to have a particularly strong loyalty to the church. Consider this email I received from one long-time member of the church:

> I'm wondering whether you consider being "all in" for the kingdom of God as including a life centered in and around the local church? ... I think living in and near the mountain[s] draws people into a more independent way of life than we experienced in the mid-west where life centered around church activities. It's not that friendships and relationships are worse here; just different. I really do think geography has a big influence on this fact of mountain life. That and the ... fact that we are so spread out during the work week: from Aspen to Glenwood Springs and many points in between. All of this is to [say], I hope you are not discouraged by the different culture here in the Crystal Valley: both inside and outside of the church. It is unique but, I find it has its own value and I have become used to it along with the independence it engenders.[9]

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[7] Robert J. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1994), 49.
[8] Rah (2009), 29-30.
[9] Personal correspondence (April 8, 2019).

Here, the individualism of the Western cultural mindset emerges, as well as the way in which that mindset can be applied to church life. This church member saw a distinction between the mountain west and the Midwest, at least in terms of church members' willingness to engage heavily in the life of the church. People in the mountains, he argued, are more "independent," and geographic and work conditions cause people to live more isolated lives. Church members don't have time to have lives "centered around church activities," and the geographic factors are a legitimate excuse for relational distance from the church.

While the geographic factors in our mountain region are real, I would argue the reluctance to engage in church life has more to do with the radical individualist mindset that springs from modern American culture. It perhaps is more pronounced in mountain communities because of the geography. But the reality is the same. Church members don't view the church in family terms. Rather, that "independent way of life" springs from a cultural philosophy that sets the individual and his or her needs at a higher priority than the group and its needs.

Another church member explained to me his own views about salvation and church involvement. Individualism emerged again. In an email, he wrote, "Of course, 'it's really about "me"!' That's why Christ came, ... for me (and certainly you)."[10] He then discussed his involvement in his out-of-state mega-church:

> Two things keep me anchored here in my … church: energizing, spirit lifting worship in song and preaching that continually engages my spirit in the Lord. … From time to time there are special events at my … church, but not often. Worship singing and inspired preaching keeps me engaged (sic). ... Of course, too many people attend now to know many of them on about eight campuses. Yes, there are small life groups that many attend. But I love my … church because I know I will come away singing in my heart and thinking about God. **Simple as that.** The benefits from this formula works for me every time (sic). (Emphasis original)[11]

[10] Personal correspondence (November 1, 2020).
[11] Ibid.

For this church member, the top reasons to attend church – to be "engaged" – are to experience powerful worship music and to hear quality sermons. Nowhere in this description of church life is a concern for the body of Christ or a recognition believers have an obligation to one another as members of the household of God. This church member admits he doesn't know a lot of people in this multi-site congregation. And he approaches church with a consumer mentality, thinking about benefits to himself and a formula that "works for me every time."

The culture within the Church at Redstone is not unique. I am sure nearly every pastor in America has heard comments like these. I also would be surprised if many pastors quarrel with these comments. After all, we also are accustomed to the "cultural captivity of the church," as Rah described it. We, too, are influenced by our culture of individualism. But this attitude toward the church is sharply divergent from the kind of community Jesus created when he founded the church and Paul and the other New Testament writers extolled in their letters to the churches.

Personally, I can't help but note the Church at Redstone has not seen new conversions or baptisms of new believers in years. It could be the worship music and preaching aren't engaging enough for potential believers! But one also can wonder whether the lack of conversions is the result of church members not abiding by the following teaching of Jesus, which hints at the attractional quality of a loving church family: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

Social imaginaries and the church as a family

As I began to formulate this project, I found myself asking exactly how a church might go about changing its cultural mindset. Was it enough simply to teach people about what Jesus

and Paul meant by the terms "brother" and "sister" and "household" when describing the church? Or did people need to experience what it *feels* like for the church actually to be a family? I decided I needed to engage project participants in a series of practices that would point them to the reality of the church as a family.

The philosopher Charles Taylor has written about the idea of the "social imaginary." This is his attempt to describe how people view the world. According to Taylor, people don't understand the world by considering the world in abstract terms, using only theories or ideas. Rather, their understanding of the world is pre-cognitive. It is how "ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends."[12] It is similar to someone who easily can navigate his or her neighborhood after years of practice. Doing so requires no thinking and is almost reflexive in nature. There is no need to engage street signs or maps. The neighborhood is imaged in that person's mind through experience. And a person may find it hard even to converse with someone who only has a map of the neighborhood. The know-how of the neighborhood has been embedded through years of a person's experience in it.[13]

Taylor goes on to argue "humans operated with a social imaginary well before they ever got into the business of theorizing about themselves."[14] James K.A. Smith pushes Taylor's ideas into the realm of Christian worship. If it is true humans had social imaginaries before they began to craft cognitive theories about the world, then it also may be true humans were religious before they ever had religious doctrines. "Rather," Smith writes, "there is an understanding of the world that is carried in and implicit in the practices of religious worship and devotion. These rituals

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[12] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.
[13] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 67.
[14] Taylor (2004), 26.

form the imagination of a people who thus construe their world as a particular kind of environment based on the formation implicit in such practices."[15] The practices and the social imaginary are tightly bound and cannot be separated. Smith says we do not form beliefs and doctrines and then develop practices to match. Rather, the beliefs and doctrines "bubble up" from our practices and the understanding that is our social imaginary.[16]

My sense was the members of my church – and many churches in America – have a social imaginary in which the church and its people are something different than "family." Hence, church members can describe church life as primarily about worship singing and inspired preaching, but not a community around which a person would center his or her life. The practices of the church lead to this idea when no expectation exists that church members be deeply connected to one another like siblings or that each member shares with the entire church family during its gatherings. The very practices of the church oftentimes do not lead to a robust sense of community. In contrast, because we live in an individualistic culture, we tend to emphasize the elements of our Christian practices that most suit us as individual Christians. The church as a community and family is left out of the picture – or the social imaginary. The church instead is a collection of like-minded individuals who may or may not be full invested in the life of the group.

But perhaps a change in church practices, or even just a new emphasis in existing practices, can help spur a change in church member's social imaginary. In his exegesis of the ritual of the Lord's Supper and the understanding of the world that is implicit in it, Smith draws out the way in which the meal is designed to be taken with one another. It is a meal of forgiveness, reconciliation, and dependence. "As dependent, social creatures, we are created for

[15] Smith (2009), 69.
[16] Ibid., 69-70.

community."[17] But I would argue the church too often over-emphasizes the personal benefits, like salvation and personal piety, of the Lord's Supper over the communal ones. As a result, the church as a loving and loyal family, bound together by the blood of Christ – forever and irrevocably – never finds its way into our social imaginary, or our vision of the good life.

Smith suggests our habits are formed by our practices, when our routines and rituals create default tendencies and inclinations in our lives.[18] I take this to mean we can shape our desires and our social imaginaries by carefully attending to the practices in which we engage. If we engage in the ritual of the Lord's Supper, time and again, with a certain "discernment" of the body of Christ, as the apostle Paul urged in 1 Corinthians 11:29, then perhaps we can shake loose of the highly individualized social imaginary that grips our Western culture. The practices laid out in Chapter 3 of this study will take aim at building toward a new social imaginary that views the church as a family.

Next steps

With that background in place, I will describe in Chapter 2 the historical and biblical foundations for the concept of the church as an ancient Mediterranean family. In Chapter 3, I will provide the foundations of the four practices in which participants in this project engaged. Chapter 4 will describe how I carried out the project, as well as its results. In Chapter 5, I will offer my conclusions and recommendations.

[17] Ibid., 201.
[18] Ibid., 70.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL AND BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Pastor Francis Chan has written the church ought to operate like a modern-day "gang." By this, Chan does not mean the church should engage in law-breaking, violence, or drug dealing. But its members should exhibit the same allegiance, loyalty, camaraderie, and love gangs garner among their members. Chan argues today's American church presents itself less as a loyal, committed community and more as a gathering of individuals who may barely know each other. "Something that God has designed to function as a family has been reduced to an optional weekly meeting."[19]

Tim Chester and Steve Timmis echo this sentiment, noting divine personhood is described in relational terms – Father and Son. In turn, Christians also should define their personhood in relational terms – namely, brother and sister. Humans are inherently relational, and this creates a culture gap between the church and the individualistic, Western worldview. According to Chester and Timmis, "By becoming a Christian, I belong to God and I belong to my brothers and sisters. It is not that I belong to God and then make a decision to join a local church. My being in Christ means being in Christ with those others who are in Christ."[20]

Based on their reading of Scripture and their understanding of Western culture, it is unsurprising Chan, Chester, and Timmis have advocated the church return to its roots by gathering together as smaller, house churches. A common feature in their arguments is the need for the church to operate more like a "family." This project proposes something similar, with the caveat that the Western church should begin operating like a specific kind of family – an ancient

[19] Francis Chan, *Letters to the Church* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: David C Cook, 2018), 71-72.
[20] Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2008), 40-41.

Mediterranean one. This family system formed the backbone of the Mediterranean culture where the church first took root. And Jesus and the New Testament writers frequently described the church in these familial terms.

This chapter will lay out what life was like in the ancient Mediterranean families known to Jesus, Paul, and the other New Testament writers. A central thesis of this project is that when Jesus and the apostles used terms like "brothers and sisters," "family," and "household," they had specific types of relationships in mind, and these relationships emerged from life within the ancient Mediterranean family. This is why some knowledge of life in these families is important for church members to know, especially in our Western culture that is highly individualistic. Our idea of brothers and sisters likely is much different than what Jesus and Paul were describing when they called Christians "brothers and sisters."

Families – then and now

According to Bruce J. Malina, the "cultural script" known by the New Testament writers living under Roman domination consisted of individuals who defined themselves by the groups to which they belonged.[21] We also might think of this as their "social imaginary."[22] Within ancient Mediterranean culture, the personal identity of any individual was tightly linked to his or her group. The family group was primary, but other groups also may have operated like the family group. Members of trade organizations or the church were to be "like" brothers and sisters in the biological family sense. To enter into a group, within this cultural context, a person often had to undergo certain rites of passage. We might think here of baptism. The group, likewise, was formed to provide stability within a person's life – as opposed to the instability that existed

[21] Malina (1986), 38.
[22] Taylor (2004), 23.

outside the group. The group itself, Malina writes, became a "sacred place" as opposed to any physical structure. Boundaries were important within this social system. Knowing who was in and who was out of the group was a key concern.[23]

Strong-group v. weak-group cultures

Malina contrasts this ancient strong-group culture with the individualist culture known by most Americans today. For Malina, these two cultural anthropologies are opposites.[24] A key consideration for living in what Malina calls the "weak-group" culture of modern America is a lack of concern for group traditions – and really any tradition at all. The cultural drivers are primarily pragmatic. Old ways of doing things – even old buildings and material objects – are good only insofar as they provide pragmatic benefit to people. Malina notes, "Practicality knows no law."[25] Because of the high value placed on practicality, things like group identity take a backseat to personal desires and tastes that bring practical benefit to individuals. According to Malina, weak-group individuals "feel that they can walk out on anything and often do – church services, movies, lectures, and even football games. As individuals they are above the rites of the group, whether celebration or ritual."[26] Because practicality takes the highest priority, individuals view the body – both the physical body and the various social bodies within the culture – as the means to some end.[27]

This weak-group mindset has implications for a person's group loyalty. If practicality truly knows no law in American culture, then social constructs like the family system are good

[23] Malina (1986), 38-39.
[24] Ibid., 14-15.
[25] Ibid., 46.
[26] Ibid., 47.
[27] Ibid., 48.

only so long as they are practical for one's individual needs and desires. One can see why a decline in "family values" may exist in America today. One also can see how a person may exhibit little loyalty to his or her church community. If a person values the church only because of the practical benefit it may provide to his or her life, that person easily can break from that church community once the personal benefit no longer is discernable. The individual's needs and wants take priority over the group.

A closer look at the ancient, strong-group family

One of the purposes of this project is to explain to a local church how an ancient, strong-group family operated. That is, what would it have been like to be a member of a biological family during Jesus' time on earth? Moreover, how might strong-group family values look within the new surrogate "family" Jesus and the apostles founded? If Jesus and Paul said Christians were to live their lives as "brothers" and "sisters," what did they mean by that and how would that have looked in their day? How can today's church live this way?

Certainly, the ancient strong-group family was different from the nuclear family that dominates the modern Western culture. Instead of only two adults residing in a home, the Hellenistic family often consisted of a family patriarch who shared a residence with his married sons and their wives. Some of the patriarch's unmarried brothers and sisters also may have resided in the home, which may have consisted of multiple dwellings surrounding a common courtyard.[28] In contrast to modern American culture, the goal of children in these homes wasn't necessarily to leave home. Some never would. It was not uncommon to live in close proximity to their other family members for their entire lives.[29]

[28] Stephen Finlan, *The Family Metaphor in Jesus' Teaching* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013), 40.
[29] Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 27.

Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch note that traditional Mediterranean families are both "diachronic" and "synchronic." They are diachronic in that they include all known generations of the family, even those members who are deceased. And they are synchronic in that all living units of the family – including those who are part of the family by blood or by contractual obligations – are included in the life of the family. The patriarchal nature of these families means familial connections were closer to the husband's family than to the wife's.[30]

Within this family structure, the strongest bonds were not between husbands and wives – as they are in modern Western culture. Rather, the strongest bonds were between siblings. S. Scott Bartchy says the most egregious breakdowns of family values in Jesus' day would have been between siblings. The first-century Roman poet Ovid said one of the most serious tragedies in social relations was when affection "between brothers" was rare.[31] Hellerman writes, "Note this well. In Mediterranean antiquity, blood runs deeper than romantic love."[32]

Family identity and loyalty were key aspects of the lives of members of ancient, strong-group families. The modern idea of the individual or of individual identity simply did not exist in these families. A family member may have had a sense of individuality, but it never was disconnected from that person's identity as a member of the family. Any sense of individuality would have emerged from that family member's contribution to the family itself. Because their lives were so linked to the family, members did not consider their vocational and family lives to be in separate spheres. Work and family were interconnected, and the well-being of the family was elevated in priority over the well-being of any individual member of the family.[33] Carol

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[30] Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 41-42.
[31] Bartchy (1999), 69.
[32] Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 38.
[33] Carol Meyers, "The Family in Early Israel," in *Families in Ancient Israel,* Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 21.

Meyers writes, "The power of the agrarian mode to establish corporate identity as more important than individual freedom should not be underestimated." Small, independent family farms even in modern Western culture value the well-being of the farm over individual members.[34] In these cases, the family comes first.

Close-knit family identity – as demonstrated in these ancient, strong-group families – resulted in a solidarity among family members that exists in a much lesser extent in modern Western families. Because work and family life were not separated in these ancient kinship groups, members tended to be interdependent. Older members of the family would rely on younger members, children even, for a certain amount of vocational production in order to keep the family moving toward sustainability. Everyone in the family would contribute. Younger members of the family eventually would care for their elders who were in their last stages of life.[35] Even prosperous parents hoped their children would care for their funeral arrangements and to ensure their deaths were commemorated properly.[36]

The church as family in the Bible

Because this is a study about life in the church, we must consider the family nature of the church. A reader of Scripture will quickly notice the familial language that exists within the people of God. The Trinity includes a Father and a Son. And the entire people of God in the Old Testament literally was a biological family, descended from one man, Abraham. The New Testament continues this imagery for God's people. It describes the members of the church as

[34] Ibid., 22.
[35] Ibid., 32-33.
[36] Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Family* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 108.

brothers and sisters under the common name of Christ. Those brothers and sisters have a Father, and they operate within the confines of a household.

The family of Jesus

When Jesus described the church, he described it as a family. All three of the Synoptic gospels record the story of Jesus' mother and brothers coming to fetch him. They were concerned he might have been out of his mind as he began his ministry in Galilee:

> And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:31-35; par. Matthew 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21).

Jesus in this episode described the church as a family. The people in the room with Jesus, those who did the will of God, were brothers and sisters and mother to one another. These weren't casual relations. Even in our Western context, the concept of a brother or sister included bonds that run deeper than those of acquaintances and even friends. Jesus also elevated this new "family" beyond the loyalty one has to his or her own blood relatives.[37] This new family of God took priority even over a person's biological family. In essence, Jesus was re-prioritizing the whole world of relationships that were available to an ancient Mediterranean person. In the ancient world, this would have been counter-cultural. But to Jesus, the family of God came first.

This was not the only time Jesus described his followers as a family. When Peter announced the disciples had left their own families and possessions for the gospel, he was promised by Jesus he would have no shortage of family members – or necessary possessions:

> Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a

[37] Hellerman (2001), 65.

> hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life (Mark 10:29-30; par. Matthew 19:27-29).

Jesus said church members would treat each other like siblings, and these siblings would provide for one another's material and relational needs.[38] Even those who must leave their biological family members behind in order to pursue the way of Christ wouldn't be left without families. They actually were joining a new family – the family of God.

The view of Paul and the apostles

Jesus' first followers affirmed this picture of the church as a family. The metaphor became the basis of how Christians interacted with one another within the church. The apostle Paul, in particular, seemed to prefer the family metaphor when describing the church. He frequently addressed the congregations to which he wrote as "brothers" – or "brothers and sisters." He used the term nineteen times in 1 Thessalonians, twenty-one times in Romans, eleven times in Galatians, nine times in Philippians, and five times in Philemon.[39] Paul declared the church was a new kind of family, where people were bound together as brothers and sisters. And these brothers and sisters had a common Father.

To the Ephesians, Paul explained God "predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:5). Members of the church were bound to God, just as they were to one another. They were brought into God's very own family by a process of adoption. Paul told the Romans, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Romans 8:14-15). Again, the picture of a family – with

[38] Ibid., 66.
[39] Bartchy (1999), 70.

sons and daughters and a Father – comes into view, as does the picture of adoption and a new kind of family.

Using even broader terminology, Paul wrote about the "household of God." To the Ephesian church, he wrote, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19). To Timothy, Paul wrote about the "household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). The "household of God" was a leading metaphor in all three of the pastoral epistles, and some scholars see the pastoral epistles as laying out a sort of "Household Code" under which the church should live.[40] Paul told Timothy to encourage older men "as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity" (1 Timothy 5:1-2). Some scholars see Paul in 1 Timothy structuring the church in the mold of an *oikos*, or household.[41]

Other New Testament writers wrote along the same lines. The apostle John wrote, "Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling" (1 John 2:9-10). Peter called Christians "obedient children" (1 Peter 1:14, emphasis added). The writer of Hebrews admonished the church, "Let brotherly love continue" (Hebrews 13:1, emphasis added).

As a result, we can see how the "family" was a common motif among New Testament writers when describing the church and its members. Christians are siblings in their relations to each other. They are children in relation to God. And their love for one another is to be modeled after the kind of love siblings would have for one another. In summary, the church was to view itself as a family, and its members were to treat each other as such.

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[40] Christopher R. Hutson, *First and Second Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 17.
[41] Ibid., 124.

A different kind of family

It now is time to turn our attention to what kind of family the church is supposed to be. Joseph H. Hellerman has identified four areas where ancient, strong-group family imagery was used by the apostle Paul to describe the intended design of the church. Hellerman identifies these areas as affective solidarity, family unity, material solidarity, and family loyalty.[42] These will be described in the following four sections of this chapter with the aim of considering how these strong-group family values might be incorporated into the life of the modern American church.

We will discover the "family" or "household" of Jesus' day is far removed from what we know to be a "family" or "household" today. This might be welcome news for church members leery of the idea of the church being a "family." Many Americans have emerged from broken homes and have witnessed the fractured parent-child and sibling-sibling relationships so common in Western culture. But that modern Western "family" is nothing like Jesus' vision for the church family – because it is nothing like the ancient Mediterranean family Jesus knew.

In his book *On Brotherly Love*, the first-century Greek philosopher Plutarch described many facets of life in the ancient Mediterranean family. Forgiveness, reconciliation, and patience were key aspects of this family life. Brothers and sisters had a responsibility to one another.

> For either it is vain and to no avail that Nature has given us gentleness and forbearance, the child of restraint, or we should make the utmost use of our virtues in our relations with our family and relatives. And our asking and receiving forgiveness for our own errors reveals good will and affection quite as much as granting it to others when they err. For this reason we should neither overlook the anger of others, nor be stubborn with them when they ask forgiveness, but, on the contrary, should try to forestall their anger, when we ourselves are time and again at fault, by begging forgiveness, and again, when we have been wronged, in our turn should forestall their request for forgiveness by granting it before being asked.[43]

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[42] Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 78-79.
[43] Plutarch, "On Brotherly Love," 18, Loeb Classical Library, 1939, accessed December 28, 2020, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Moralia/De_fraterno_amore*.html.

Forgiveness and asking for forgiveness were part of the expected give-and-take within an ancient family. Brothers and sisters were to grant forgiveness to their siblings before their siblings even said they were sorry.

This may be quite unlike what modern Americans have experienced in their own biological families. But it fits well with the ethos of the new surrogate family Jesus created. Jesus taught, "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). Forgiveness between siblings was part of the expected give-and-take within Jesus' new family – the church. Jesus' first listeners would have understood exactly what it meant to be a family in this sense because this is what they knew a family to be.

Family affection

In ancient Mediterranean families, brothers and sisters cared deeply for one another. Affection was a defining mark of these families. Several factors accounted for this, including the way in which families lived and worked together. As noted, it was common for more than two generations to share a home together. The mixing of these generations, and the care they had for one another, emerges in ancient texts, including the Bible. For instance, the disciple Peter seemed to have taken his mother-in-law into his home, as well as his brother Andrew (Matthew 8:14; Mark 1:19).

As noted above, these were considered ancient "households," consisting of blood relatives as well as, possibly, servants and slaves together. In the case of wealthy families, the

household may have extended beyond those who lived under the same roof to include family guests and clients.[44] As such, households took in a diverse group of people.

Ancient families didn't just live together. They also worked together in a common trade, such as leather-working or pottery. Many homes had rooms dedicated to this work that faced the street where families could sell their wares. Separate commercial office and retail space didn't exist like it does today. And so the home also was a place of meeting with clients and customers, making it a central location for the furthering of the family's economics. Wealthy families may have had a home in the city, along with an estate in the country where agricultural products such as grain or wine would be produced. Family members and servants at those distant estates also were considered part of the family's "household."[45] And so not only did ancient households share common space, they shared many of the same common interests – both in occupation and in economic status. The family lived together, and it worked together.

My brother's keeper

With this domestic, vocational, and economic connectedness came an emotional connectedness. Ancient writers noted the strong bonds within households. Family members were treated with special care that was not afforded to outsiders. In an ancient Greco-Roman world marked by competition, people often viewed those outside their households as potential rivals, or at least as people who might bring shame upon the family. But this was not the case when dealing with other members of one's family. Competition within the family was not acceptable

[44] David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 174.
[45] Ibid., 179.

because it meant besmirching family members and fracturing the family bond. The Jewish scribe Ben Sira condemned the dishonoring of one's father, saying such actions did not bring honor.[46]

This attitude was especially true among siblings, who maintained the closest relationships of any in the ancient world. Instead of competing with one another, siblings loved each other with deep affection. Aristotle explained, "Brothers love each other as being born of the same parents; for their identity with them makes them identical with each other (which is the reason why people talk of 'the same blood', 'the same stock', and so on). They are, therefore, in a sense the same thing, though separate individuals."[47]

These close relational bonds appear in Scripture. In the history of the Hebrew people, siblings especially were expected to love and protect one another. The first sin recorded after the fall of Adam and was not the murder or betrayal of a spouse. It was the murder and betrayal of a sibling.[48] God had a plan for siblings from the beginning. When Cain replied to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9), ancient readers would have known the answer to that question. Siblings cared for one another.

Honor and affection

Because siblings lived and worked together throughout their lives, they shared many of the same experiences in their formative years. We can imagine them doing the same chores, learning from the same teachers, having the same playmates. Plutarch noted this common upbringing and the way in which sibling affection is a pleasure to one's parents. "Hence when, on the other hand, brothers love and feel affection for each other, and, in so far as Nature has

[46] Ibid., 166.
[47] Quoted in deSilva (2000), 166.
[48] Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 49.

made them separate in their bodies, so far do they become united in their emotions and actions, and share with each other their studies and recreations and games, then they have made their brotherly love a sweet and blessed 'sustainer of old age' for their parents."[49]

Of course, brothers and sisters aren't equals in all things – even as they try to be united in their emotions and actions. Some siblings have superior talents and abilities compared to others. Plutarch also wrote about this. The superior sibling never should leave an inferior sibling behind but instead should "make his brothers partners in those respects in which he is considered to be superior, adorning them with a portion of his repute and adopting them into his friendships, and if he is a cleverer speaker than they, to make his eloquence available for their use as though it were no less theirs than his."[50] Sibling rivalry was not tolerated. Brothers and sisters were to make it appear as if the successes of one family member were the successes of the others.

These affections lasted even when siblings left their immediate households, such as when sisters were married into other families. Ancient texts tell stories about sibling love and allegiance remaining in place even in these circumstances – and even taking precedence over marriage relationships.[51] Even today, wives in some cultures prefer the companionship of their brothers over that of their husbands, and brothers may still retain their roles offering friendship, advice, and defense to their married sisters.[52] Scholars have noted one modern family in Turkey, as an example, in which a married sister regularly returned home from her husband's family to spend time with her brother. Brother-sister relationships in that culture, scholars say, have "an

[49] Plutarch, "On Brotherly Love," 5.
[50] Plutarch, "On Brotherly Love," 12.
[51] Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 41-45.
[52] Ibid., 46.

almost romantic quality" while the relationships between husbands and wives sometimes never become major sources of companionship.[53]

Family affection in the church

This type of close family affection appears in the early church. The apostle Paul came to the churches in Galatia as a sick man and was met with the loving care of the believers there. "You did me no wrong. You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus" (Galatians 4:12b-14). Providing hospitality was a social expectation in the ancient world. People were to treat guests as if they were their closest relatives. Paul said this hospitality was a trial for the Galatian believers, but he also said they treated him as if he were an "angel" or Christ himself. And this was not all: "For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me" (Galatians 4:14-15). Paul knew the Galatians loved him to the point of being willing to make a physical sacrifice on his behalf.

Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica provides additional examples of familial affection in the church. Paul had been forced to leave Thessalonica when opposition was stirred up against him by the Jewish leaders of the city (Acts 17:1-10). But Paul kept looking back over his shoulder, eager to know how his new friends in Thessalonica were faring. A positive report from Timothy spurred the writing of 1 Thessalonians. Paul wrote, "But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves,

[53] Ibid., 37.

because you had become very dear to us. ... For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you" (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8, 11-12). Paul used familial language – as both a mother and a father – in describing his relationship to the Thessalonian believers. His affection was such that he desired to share not only the gospel but his own vulnerable self with the church.[54] According to Nijay K. Gupta, Paul's words make clear the "innocent love that is given and shared amongst close family members. That sense of intimacy is reinforced by the language of her *own* children – that is, *the children she holds most dear, those closest to her, the ones she nurtures and cherishes and feeds from her own body."*[55]

Paul went on to describe his last moments in Thessalonica: "But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you – I, Paul, again and again – but Satan hindered us" (1 Thessalonians 2:17-18). The Greek term for "torn away" in this passage – *aporphanizo* – brings to mind the image of a child being separated from one's parents. The English word "orphaned" comes from this word.[56] The emotional pain involved in Paul's departure from Thessalonica is clear.

Paul's relationship with his co-worker Titus and with the church in Corinth also exhibit this kind of affection. Titus had gone to the Corinthians to see how the church was doing with its moral and spiritual problems. Paul had been waiting for Titus' return, anxious for news.

> When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. ... For when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn – fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as

[54] Nijay K. Gupta, *1-2 Thessalonians* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 57.
[55] Ibid., 56. Emphasis original.
[56] Ibid., 66.

> he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more." (2 Corinthians 2:12-13; 7:5-7)

Paul had longed to hear news from the Corinthians. He even turned away from an "open door" to preach the gospel in Troas because of this longing. This, in itself, is a striking demonstration of how important the familial bonds were in the early church. In this case, family affection and unity took precedence over evangelism! Paul also was overjoyed when he learned the church longed in return for him. And as he so frequently did, Paul referred to another member of the church as his "brother." Paul was tied emotionally to the church and to his fellow Christians, and he was happy to call them his siblings in Christ. A new family had been formed.

Family unity

Affection marks one attribute of ancient Mediterranean families that showed up in the early church. Unity is another one. Members of this strong-group culture viewed themselves first and foremost as members of their households, clans, or tribes. They understood their identities not as isolated individuals but as members embedded within their groups.

In the ancient world, so different from modern Western culture, groups competed against each other.[57] We might think here about a tribe or clan expanding its territory for the grazing of animals or the raising of crops, pushing against the land claims of other tribes. However, if competition and division occurred, it typically only did so between families, and not within them. Because families were producing units and not simply consuming units, they could ill afford intra-family splits. According to Carol Meyers, family members in ancient times had a "profound interdependence" that created "an atmosphere of corporate family identity."[58]

[57] Malina (1986), 38.
[58] Carol Meyers (1997), 21.

> As is widely recognized by anyone looking at premodern societies, the concept of the individual and of individual identity as we know it today did not yet exist in the biblical world. This was especially true on family farms – and is even to this day, under certain circumstances. Whatever sense of individual agency a person may have had derived from his or her contribution to household survival rather than from individual accomplishment.[59]

Family unity in the ancient world

Ancient Hebrew and Greco-Roman texts demonstrate sibling unity was a crucial part of life in those families. Plutarch described sibling life as "nature from one seed and one source has created two brothers, or three, or more, not for difference and opposition to each other, but that by being separate they might the more readily co-operate with one another." It is similar, he wrote, to multiple fingers working together on a single hand.[60] Plutarch said brothers didn't compete against each other. Envy was precluded. Instead, one brother "yields in his turn and reveals that his brother is better and more useful in many respects."[61] And so competition had no place in the life of siblings. Brothers and sisters were to defer to one another. This kind of sibling unity, to Plutarch, was an honor to one's parents. "Fathers do not find such pleasure in seeing their sons gaining a reputation as orators, acquiring wealth, or holding office as in seeing that they love one another."[62]

Sibling solidarity also had a harsh side in the ancient Mediterranean world. Siblings were bound to defend and avenge one another against outsiders. The unwarranted death of a sibling brought vengeance from his or her relatives. Defending the family honor was essential. During the early years of the first-century reign of Tiberius, an attempted mutiny of an entire Roman legion occurred on the northeastern frontier of the empire – all the result of the accusation that a

[59] Ibid., 21.
[60] Plutarch, "On Brotherly Love," 2.
[61] Plutarch, "On Brotherly Love," 12.
[62] Plutarch, "On Brotherly Love," 5.

brother had been unjustly put to death, his corpse "flung aside."[63] The accusation proved false, but the story demonstrates how deep the solidarity between siblings ran in ancient Greco-Roman culture.

The ancient Hebrews had the same attitude about family solidarity. An entire psalm is dedicated to sibling unity: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" (Psalm 133:1). In the ancient Hebrew world, even when siblings wronged each other, no license existed for retribution. Siblings were to hide each others' shame.[64] The second-century *Testament of Joseph* tells a fictitious account of the patriarch Joseph's life after being betrayed by his brothers and thrown into a well. Joseph, the *Testament* narrates, could have freed himself from slavery if he had implicated his brothers and made known he was a son of Jacob. Instead, in this story, Joseph remained silent and twice denied his relationship to Jacob. He did this so as not to bring dishonor to his brothers for selling one of their own into slavery. In the story, Joseph told his children from his deathbed, "Ye see, therefore, my children, what great things I endured that I should not put my brethren to shame. Do ye also, therefore love one another, and with long-suffering hide ye one another's faults."[65]

Unity among siblings in Christ

This ancient Mediterranean worldview was present in the early church. Siblings in Christ were to live in unity. One of the more striking passages in the New Testament – especially to our

[63] Hellerman (2001), 45.
[64] deSilva (2000), 171.
[65] Testament of Joseph 17:1-2, *Sefaria*, accessed December 28, 2020, https://www.sefaria.org/The_Testaments_of_the_Twelve_Patriarchs%2C_The_Testament_of_Joseph_the_Eleventh_Son_of_Jacob_and_Rachel.17?lang=bi..

modern American ears – comes from 1 Corinthians 6 as the apostle Paul was dealing with one of the many problems within the church at Corinth.

> When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not suffer wrong? Why not be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud – even your own brothers! (1 Corinthians 6:1-8)

Lawsuits were forbidden within the church, Paul wrote, because plenty of competent and wise people existed in the church who could judge such matters – without going outside the "brothers," or family, to the secular courts. Moreover, disunity in this family brought shame upon the whole church. It was better to be defrauded than publicly to oppose a sibling in Christ. This passage runs counter to the modern, individualistic, Western worldview. Lawsuits never would have happened within the confines of an ancient Mediterranean family, and they shouldn't happen within the church either.

The issue of lawsuits highlights the dichotomy Scripture presents between members of God's family and those outside the family. Insiders are not to be treated as outsiders. The apostle Paul said Christians have been adopted into the family of God. God "predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:5). Believers are adopted through Jesus Christ, by faith in him. "You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:18). People were either "fellow citizens" or "strangers and aliens." An identity exists within the family.

And unity was core to being part of the family. Plutarch wrote, "It is therefore of no slight importance to resist the spirit of contentiousness and jealousy among brothers when it first

creeps in over trivial matters, practicing the art of making mutual concessions, of learning to take defeat, and of taking pleasure in indulging brothers rather than in winning victories over them."[66] Plutarch was describing ideal family relations in the ancient Mediterranean world, and the church was set up no differently. The apostle Paul wrote, "Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called ... eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:1-6). The concept of unity – "one" – controls this passage. A bond of peace was to exist between members of the church. All were under one Father.

Paul said much the same in his letter to the Philippians. Members of the church were to be united, "standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel" (Philippians 1:27). Still more, the church was to be "of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves" (Philippians 2:2-3). And again, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:14-15). Church members were to maintain deference for one another. And they were to maintain the internal honor of the church despite living in a "crooked and twisted generation." Here, too, we see the dichotomy between insiders and outsiders.

Members of the church were to let go of perceived offenses levied against them by fellow members. Paul told the Corinthians they were not to use their freedom in Christ if it might harm the consciences of fellow church members (1 Corinthians 8:9). At the time, this applied to

[66] Plutarch, "On Brotherly Love," 17.

numerous aspects of the Old Testament law that no longer held sway over Christian behavior. Paul wrote he would be sensitive to the law if that would help his brothers and sisters: "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble" (1 Corinthians 8:13). Paul later would write to the Romans, "For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. ... It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble" (Romans 14:15, 21). Pulling back from hurting a brother or sister takes a higher priority than a believer's own freedom in Christ.[67]

Family sharing

A third major characteristic of ancient Mediterranean families and the biblical church – in addition to affection and unity – is sharing. The second-century work *The Passing of Peregrinus*, by the Greek satirist Lucian, provides an early evaluation of the Christian movement by a secular observer. When faced with persecution, believers were quick to share.

> They [Christians] show incredible speed whenever any such public action is taken; for in no time they lavish their all. So it was then in the case of Peregrinus; much money came to him from them by reason of his imprisonment, and he procured not a little revenue from it. The poor wretches have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody; most of them. Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they all are brothers of one another. ... Therefore they despise all things indiscriminately and consider them common property.[68]

To those cynical of Christianity, the ancient faith was perceived as one in which believers freely gave of their material possessions to one another – as if they were siblings. Church members would sacrifice their wealth and their time to help their own in need. This isn't surprising, as we read of the early church: "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were

[67] deSilva (2000), 214.
[68] Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus,* 13, http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/lucian/peregrinus.htm. Retrieved September 25, 2020.

owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:34-35).

Wanting nothing in return

The mutual sharing in the church took its cues from life in the ancient Mediterranean family. Family members were bound in all things to each other. What Lucian cynically described of the church, he easily could have straight-forwardly described of any family in his culture. Ancient Mediterranean families practiced what is called "generalized reciprocity," which is the practice of giving something to another person without the expectation of receiving anything back. The score is not kept. The key factor is the recipient got his or her needed goods. There was no obligation to return something to the giver.[69] This included material goods like food, clothing, and shelter, and it extended to other resources like military power and strength.[70]

Part of the motivation for generalized reciprocity came from the shared understanding that everything in a family's possession belonged to all its members. According to Plutarch, brothers were "to use in common a father's wealth and friends and slaves" in the same way "one soul makes use of the hands and feet and eyes of two bodies."[71] The dividing of an inheritance likewise was to be done with generalized reciprocity between siblings. Plutarch said siblings were to defer to each other to allow each family member to receive what was preferable and suitable to each. Siblings were not to try to outmaneuver each other because then they would lose "the greatest and most valuable part of their inheritance, a brother's friendship and confidence."[72]

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[69] Malina (1986), 102.
[70] Hellerman (2001), 47.
[71] deSilva (2000), 170.
[72] Ibid., 170-171.

The Jewish historian Josephus demonstrated generalized reciprocity in his own eventful life. Before being captured by the Romans, Josephus was a commander of Jewish forces in Galilee. One of his chief concerns was keeping peace in Galilee among the factions that operated there. Josephus on multiple occasions could have accepted bribes from the people over which he had authority, but he confessed to never abusing his power. But Josephus did say this in his autobiography:

> I was now about the thirtieth year of my age; in which time of life it is a hard thing for any one to escape the calumnies of the envious, although he restrain himself from fulfilling any unlawful desires, especially where a person is in great authority. Yet did I preserve every woman free from injuries; and as to what presents were offered me, I despised them, as not standing in need of them. Nor indeed would I take those tithes, which were due to me as a priest, from those that brought them. Yet do I confess, that I took part of the spoils of those Syrians which inhabited the cities that adjoined to us, when I had conquered them, and that I sent them to my kindred at Jerusalem.[73]

Josephus admitted no abuses of power, but he did "confess" to sending some of the spoils of his military victories to his family in Jerusalem.

Material solidarity in the biblical church

Life in the church was designed to operate in the same fashion. Jesus re-oriented his disciples' view of material possessions during his encounter with the rich young man (Mark 10:17-31). The young man was disheartened by Jesus' instruction to sell everything he had and to give it to the poor. Jesus's subsequent teaching about the difficulty of the wealthy entering the kingdom of God puzzled his disciples. The disciple Peter promptly noted, "See, we have left everything and followed you." At this point, Jesus made a promise.

> Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a

[73] Josephus, *The Life of Flavius Josephus,* Chapter 15. https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0037-0103,_Flavius_Josephus,_The_Life,_EN.pdf. Retrieved September 28, 2020.

> hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29-30)

Jesus promised everyone who left his or her family or material possessions to follow him would have a hundred times more of each – family and material possessions – as a result.[74] This hundredfold reality would be for "now in this time," as well as the time to come. In other words, Jesus was establishing a new family here on earth that would operate as an ancient Mediterranean family, where members cared for each other's material needs. In the church, Jesus seemed to be saying, no one would go without the necessary material goods – houses and lands – and no one would go without the necessary familial support of brothers, sisters, or mothers. The church was a family.

In the book of Acts, Luke describes life in the church:

> And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44-47)

The sharing of material possessions was part of the church from its earliest days. There is no sense of compulsion here or a total loss of private property in a communist sense. People continued to own their own private homes. But we also understand the idea the "brothers and sisters" of the church were looking out for each other like biological brothers and sisters would have looked out for each other. No need went unmet:

> Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. … There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

[74] Hellerman (2001), 66-67.

Even houses were sold for the benefit of the brothers and sisters in Christ. The mutual sharing was so pervasive that all neediness was rooted out of the church.

The church maintained this kind of sharing even as it expanded outside the walls of Jerusalem. The apostle Paul at times seemed obsessed with collecting funds for the famine-stricken Christians in Jerusalem, and he made his appeal in a way that brought out the family ideals that undergirded it. Already in Acts, the first hint of this large collection was described in family terms. "So the disciples determined, every one according to his own ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 11:29-30). Again, the word "brothers" is used to describe fellow believers.

The collection re-emerged as a topic in 2 Corinthians, and the idea of mutual support for one another came to the forefront: "For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness" (2 Corinthians 8:12-14). According to David deSilva, "No single group of Christians was permitted to lose sight of the fact that it was part of the vastly extended and ever-growing global family of God."[75]

Mutual sharing pervaded the early church. Paul told the Romans, "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality" (Romans 12:13). Paul told the Galatian church, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10). James wrote, "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without

[75] deSilva (2000), 216.

giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:15-16). John wrote, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:16-18).

The early church and all things in common

This attitude – that the church was a family of the ancient Mediterranean variety – lingered for well over 100 years after the time of Christ. Tertullian described the church as "brothers" united in one mind and soul who shared nearly everything they had with each other. And he wrote about a common fund used for the support and burial of the poor, for children who had no parents, for aged men who were confined to their homes, and for extreme benevolence cases, like shipwrecked sailors and those in prison.[76]

Clement of Alexandria advised against wealthy members of the church giving away all their possessions. He argued it would be impossible to meet needs of members of the church if everyone already was in need. Clement said Jesus' admonition to the rich young man in Mark 10 was for those with material resources to share them with those in need – the thirsty, hungry, homeless, and naked. According to Clement, the wealthy ought to understand their wealth was given to them from God, and it ought to be used for the ministry of the gospel. Material possessions are transitory – "ever slipping away" – and believers have an obligation to care for their brothers and sisters in Christ.[77]

[76] Hellerman (2009), 108-109.
[77] Ibid., 107-108.

Similarly, Justin Martyr wrote, "We who once took most pleasure in the means of increasing our wealth and property now bring what we have into a common fund and share with everyone in need; we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with men of different tribes because of their different customs, now ... live together."[78]

'Our own selves'

One final note about mutual sharing in the church: Church members were to share even more than their material possessions with one another. The apostle Paul told the Thessalonians, "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:8). Family affection lends itself to a desire to share more and more from a person's life with his or her church family members. Paul's term *psyche* (or self), according to Nijay K. Gupta, refers to a person's "most intimate and vulnerable self."[79]

> Some people guard their lives from their work. Think of a lawyer defending a client, not wanting to get too emotionally involved in every case. Or a surgeon who tries not to become attached to suffering and grieving patients and families. So to with apostles, it can seem professional to maintain a cool distance; but with the Thessalonians Paul simply could not help himself.[80]

Family loyalty

So far, we've considered the roles of affection, unity, and sharing within the life of ancient Mediterranean families and the church. Finally, we'll consider loyalty as a key attribute of both the family and the church.

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[78] Quoted in Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 108.
[79] Gupta (2016), 57.
[80] Ibid., 57.

A conflict likely would have arisen for any ancient person considering the claims of Christ. If a person's first allegiance was supposed to be to Christ, then that person, at least to some extent, must turn aside from his or her biological family. That person must resist the cultural mandate *first* to pledge allegiance to one's own biological family, and especially to one's own biological siblings. In the ancient world – and in many cultures today – biological families and family members came *first*. It also is highly likely such a conversion would have created tensions within families as some members threw their allegiance toward their new "family" of Christ.[81]

It was no small thing for Jesus not to respond to the calling of his mother and brothers (Mark 3:31-35). Jesus was creating a new family to which a person must pledge allegiance *first.* It would be reasonable for a first-century person to ask, "But what about my biological family?" Family loyalty was a critical part of the cultural expectations within an ancient Mediterranean family. To forsake that loyalty for something else was counter-cultural, radical, and shameful.

To be willing to sacrifice oneself for the sake of his or her siblings was quite natural. Even Christians, those who had switched allegiances to the family of God, could feel that pull back to their biological families. The apostle Paul seemed to experience this as he considered his own, extended biological family – the people of Israel. "I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit – that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Romans 9:1-3). The loyalty to one's biological family – and Paul understood the entirety of the Jewish nation as his "kinsmen" – was ingrained in the psyche of ancient men and women. And the same Paul who

[81] Stephen C. Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1.

had been shamed and persecuted and stoned by some of his fellow Jews could not easily shake his allegiance to his family and nation. He said he had great sorrow and unceasing anguish because his Jewish brethren had rejected the Messiah. This fact pained Paul because they were his family. Family loyalty ran deep in the ancient world. And even if Paul had a new family in Christ – notice his use of the term "brothers and sisters" in his letters, referring both to Jewish and Gentile Christians – he still had an emotional pull toward his "old" family. This helps us keep in mind how strong this sense of family loyalty was to people in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Family loyalty – then and now

The Hellenistic Jewish scribe Ben Sira described the priorities of ancient life in a particular order: "agreement between brothers, friendship between neighbors, and a wife and husband who live in harmony."[82] Loyalty to siblings came before friends – or spouses. Again, family came first. Siblings also came before wealth. Ben Sira wrote, "Do not exchange a friend for money, or a real brother for the gold of Ophir."[83] Loyalty among siblings was a high priority in ancient Mediterranean families.

Plutarch said much the same thing. Brotherhood in the ancient Mediterranean world also took precedence over friendships, which Plutarch described as "shadows and imitations and images" of more primal parent-child and sibling-sibling relationships.[84] For Plutarch, it was one thing to have a friendship with someone, but the bonds of biology were another thing altogether. Again, family comes first:

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[82] Quoted in Hellerman (2001), 36.
[83] Quoted in Hellerman (2001), 36.
[84] Reidar Aasgaard, "Brotherhood in Plutarch and Paul: Its Role and Character," in *Constructing Early Christian Families,* edited by Halvor Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), 170.

> But even if we feel an equal affection for a friend, we should always be careful to reserve for a brother the first place in public offices and administration, and in invitations and introductions to distinguished men, and, in general, whenever we deal with occasions which in the eyes of the public give distinction and tend to confer honour, rendering thus to Nature the appropriate dignity and prerogative. For undue precedence in such matters is not so grand a thing for the friend, as the slight is shameful and degrading for a brother.[85]

Again, a deeper connection than mere friendship is at play between siblings. It is connected to nature itself and is a reason why family came first in the ancient Mediterranean world.

This family-first mentality exists today in other parts of the world. Just because our modern American culture is strongly individualistic does not mean the world as a whole maintains this perspective. Joseph H. Hellerman tells the story of Juan Jose Espiritu, who moved to the city of Tijuana as a 13-year-old with his divorced mother and five younger siblings.[86] Juan dropped out of school in order to work during his teenage years to support his family. He sacrificed his education and childhood in order to provide education and opportunities to his siblings. For Juan, family came first. In a *Los Angeles Times* story, Juan was quoted as saying, "Perhaps one of them will become a doctor. ... That is my desire."[87] For Juan, sacrificing himself for his family was natural. It was probably as natural for Juan to do this as it was for the apostle Paul to say of his own kinsfolk, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Romans 9:3).

Loyalty in the church family

The family loyalty that pervades strong-group cultures also showed up in the early church. In establishing the church, Jesus created a new family where people were bonded

[85] Plutarch, "On Brotherly Love," 20.
[86] Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 20.
[87] Quoted in Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 20.

together in a "blood" relationship. That is, they were bonded together by the blood of Christ. This family had a Father in heaven. And its members were the adopted children of God. This household of God was to operate *not* like a modern American family, where the break-up of the family seems just as common as its unity. Rather, the household of God was to operate like an ancient Mediterranean family, where members were fiercely loyal to one another – to the family of God.

We get a taste of this by looking at what Jesus told people who wanted to join his fellowship. The community of Jesus' followers required the utmost allegiance, and it was an allegiance that was to come before any other allegiance a person may have. On one occasion a man said he would follow Jesus but, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead" (Matthew 8:21-22). On another occasion, a man approached Jesus and was ready to follow, but, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:61-62). Jesus seemed to create new priorities for his followers. The family of God came first.

These loyalty teachings by Jesus demonstrate the concern ancient Mediterranean people had toward their families. They were to take care of their dead, and they were to give honor to their families by offering a proper farewell. Even modern Americans, who often hail from families that are broken, can sympathize with these ancient people, because their desires were reasonable and good. But these passages also tell us something more. They demonstrate to us the way Jesus was demanding loyalty within the new family of God – a loyalty that superseded any other loyalty a person may have toward another group, including that person's family.

Jesus was creating an alternative family – one that commanded the same type of loyalty of one's biological family. We see this concept again in Jesus' teaching in Luke 14:26. There, Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." The word "hate" likely could mean "sever one's relationship" or "leave aside" or "abandon." It is not a matter of intensely disliking a person's biological family. It is a matter of turning to the new family of God.[88]

Jesus was not telling his disciples to abandon their families and never to care for them again. Peter clearly had a relationship with his own biological family after he began following Jesus (Luke 4:38-39). Rather, Jesus was teaching about degrees of loyalty. The family of God was to come first, followed by loyalties to one's biological family.[89] The apostle Paul seemed to establish this kind of prioritization in 1 Corinthians 7 as he explained the marriage relationship's standing in light of one's obligation to Christ, and especially considering the looming end times. Writes Stephen C. Barton, "Whatever the reasons, 1 Cor. 7 provides clear evidence of the eschatological relativization of marital and household ties in the thought and practice of Paul."[90]

[88] Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 69.
[89] Ibid., 69, 74.
[90] Barton (1994), 5.

CHAPTER 3

PRACTICES

Thomas O'Loughlin has written the aim of church rituals is to keep "the world that ought to be before us."[91] That is, Christian rituals ought to present the church a picture of what a fully realized eschatology brings into the world – a world without sin and brokenness and where the kingdom of God has come in its completion. It is the world as it "should be" in Christ. O'Loughlin likened this to the Queen of England's official birthday celebration each June – the "Trooping of Colour" in London – when the British army carries out an elaborate ceremony near St. James' Park. Anyone watching the spectacle "does not simply see a display of military marching skills," O'Loughlin wrote. Rather,

> This ritual is about an idea of an ordered society where everyone knows her or his place in society and can carry it out in harmony with everyone else; it is about power, prestige, what values the society would officially want to headline, and about a place for Britain in the world based on its past achievements and present good order. This is one of the official statements about Britain "as it should be."[92]

O'Loughlin's view of ritual is not far off from the concepts included in Charles Taylor's "social imaginary" – the idea people "imagine" their social surroundings in embodied and storied ways, rather than through abstract theory.[93] For O'Loughlin and Taylor, an understanding of our world is implicit in our rituals and practices.

Applying this principle to congregational life means if the church is a family in the New Testament and gospel sense – and if that family means something more than what we understand family to be in modern Western culture – then its rituals ought to provide the church with a picture of that family and to contribute to the establishment of that family. A church's rituals

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[91] Thomas O'Loughlin, "The Eucharist as 'The Meal That Should Be,'" *Worship* 80, no. 1 (2006), 30.
[92] O'Loughlin (2006), 31.
[93] Taylor (2004), 23.

need to match its vision. According to O'Loughlin, "if a ritual supposes 'a world,' it also contributes to establishing a world. Whenever we communicate, through our assumptions about what should happen, we contribute to making that pattern part of the world around us."[94]

However, the church's rituals may not naturally move the family of faith toward the vision laid out by Jesus and the apostles. This is certainly something churches should regularly evaluate, and this is especially true in the church's Western context, where individualism has such a priority. Churches may aim only at serving the felt needs of individuals, thereby making them consumers and reinforcing their identity as individuals. A church might ask whether it has any rituals that encourage individuals to become contributing members to the church "family." Are there any rituals that can build loyalty and unity among members of the "family"? Are there any that encourage greater affection among members of the family?

In order to appease its individuals, the church and its rituals could become disconnected from its vision. Nearly forty years ago, William H. Willimon wrote, "The rugged individualism and the self-made-man mentality in the United States have led to a vast heresy which speaks of religion as a private affair. Communion and community are forsaken for the so-called electronic church – a 'church' where everyone stays home and does his or her own thing without the bother of other people."[95] Willimon's words are perhaps even more appropriate today considering the prolific use of live-streamed church services and pre-packaged, individual Communion kits. These rituals can heighten a sense of Christian individualism. But what rituals might a church employ to bring the "household of God" together as a family?

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[94] O'Loughlin (2006), 32.
[95] William H. Willimon, *Sunday Dinner: The Lord's Supper and the Christian Life* (Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 1981), 104.

This chapter will consider four practices of the local church – the common meal, the Lord's Supper, communal prayer, and mutual sharing between members. I will consider how these practices might contribute to establishing a world in which church members come to know the local church body, in a more robust and biblical sense, as their "brothers and sisters" in Christ. These practices were selected not because they are the only ones that can foster greater engagement among members of the church family. Rather, these practices were chosen because they are rooted in Scripture and history, either as core parts of ancient Mediterranean families or of the historic church. These practices either foster greater engagement by their very nature or could be re-framed to do so.

This chapter will be broken into four sections covering each of the practices listed above. As appropriate, each section will include historical, biblical, and theological data connected to its respective practice and will consider how a local church might put each practice to use in establishing the church as the "family" of God, or the church as it "should be."

The common meal

To be in the church means to be invited to a potluck meal. This is an unavoidable truth in most churches in America. At some point during the year, and perhaps many points, the church will sit down to eat together. Some consider this a frivolous and antiquated part of church life. And yet, the common meal may be the church's oldest practice – pre-dating baptism, the Eucharist, and even communal prayer. For Jesus, the sharing of meals in an inclusive, servant-oriented manner demonstrated the kingdom of God. The argument of this section is the ritual of the common meal is designed to put before the disciples the idea of the church as a new kind of family.

The table fellowship of Jesus

From the beginning, Jesus' followers at together. Jesus dined regularly with his disciples and would-be disciples. As a ritual, this table fellowship painted a picture of Jesus' vision for the kingdom of God. It was a counter-cultural and inclusive vision that included even tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:15-17). For this reason, table fellowship became a noticeable part of Jesus' ministry. Jesus taught his disciples not to seek out favored places at the table (Luke 14:7-11). And he criticized the scribes and Pharisees for seeking out "the place of honor at feasts" (Matthew 23:6). Jesus' followers were not to do such things. According to Nathan Mitchell,

> "Normally, a table's prime function is to establish social ranking and hierarchy (by what one eats, how one eats, with whom one eats). Normally, a meal is about social identification, status and power. (We don't call them power lunches for nothing!) But the very *randomness* of Jesus' table habits challenged this system of social relations modeled on meals and manners."[96]

Jesus went out of his way to teach and demonstrate servant leadership at communal meals. "Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them" (Luke 12:35-38). In the world Jesus was picturing, masters became the servants, and leaders washed their followers' feet (John 13:1-20). This system of table fellowship ran counter to the culture of the day. But the theology behind this practice is clear. According to Maxwell E. Johnson, Jesus' table companionship was "nothing other than the concrete sign, prophetic enactment, and very embodiment of the reign of God."[97] In other words, it was a ritual that pointed to the world as it should be.

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[96] Nathan Mitchell, *Eucharist as Sacrament of Initiation* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2003), 89.
[97] Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation,* rev. ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007), 4.

Meals in ancient Mediterranean families

Ancient kinship groups in the Mediterranean world were well-acquainted with the family meal. Roman families annually would converge for a clan sacrifice and meal that affirmed solidarity within the group and confirmed the hierarchical status of each participant in the family. This mandatory annual family meal not only recognized the living members of the clan who were present during the meal, but it also recognized the dead members of the clan.[98] In the Old Testament, David attended just such a meal, to the chagrin of King Saul (1 Samuel 20:5-6, 28-29). According to Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Saul's anger on hearing that David had skipped attendance at court to participate in this event was no doubt fueled by awareness that such 'gathering of the clans' could also serve as occasions for plotting revolt."[99]

Ancient Mediterranean families engaged in other types of household and community meals, including the Greek *symposia* and the Roman *convivia*. An ancient upper-class home would have included a dining room, or *triclinium,* with dining couches lining three walls. These rooms typically held about 20 people. Guests would be assigned seats based on their status within the community or clan.[100] A typical *symposium* consisted of eating, followed by drinking, entertainment, and discussion. These meals built community and family affection. According to Osiek and Balch, "Friendship – both private and political – was celebrated and deepened with good cheer."[101]

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[98] Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Family in First Temple Israel," in *Families in Ancient Israel,* by Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 79.
[99] Ibid., 80.
[100] Osiek and Balch (1997), 194-195.
[101] Ibid., 196.

The Jews also had their own versions of the *symposia.* Philo described a banquet adapted by a Jewish mystical group that lacked wine and was marked by the ideals of self-control, chastity, and prayer. Men and women dined separately. Because slave ownership was considered unnatural, free men served the meal. According to Philo, "They give their services gladly and proudly like sons to their real fathers and mothers, judging them to be the parents of them all in common."[102] As such, this particular *symposia* had a family orientation. An exposition of Scripture preceded the meal, as did a hymn. Bread, salt, and water served as the meal itself. An all-night spiritual vigil followed.[103] According to Osiek and Balch, "Family terms of endearment are used, but they are metaphorical. The spiritual community has replaced the biological family."[104] These Jewish meals were not far afield from those instituted by Jesus.

The meals of the early church

The common meal found its way into the life of the church. In Scripture, we find Jesus' followers eating together frequently. According to Thomas O'Loughlin, "These meals, recounted here and there in the gospel tradition, were the foundation in praxis for what would be the central gathering event of the churches: the regular gatherings to offer thanks to the Father for what he had done in his Son through the sharing of a common meal." Direct continuity existed between the meals of Jesus and the meals of the early churches that looked to him as their risen Lord.[105]

Dining together, perhaps combined with the Lord's Supper, is mentioned as a core practice of the church in Acts 2:42. And the apostle Paul made clear the church ate together on a regular basis (1 Corinthians 11:21). The term Paul used for "dinner" (*deipnon*) in 1 Corinthians

[102] Ibid., 196-197.
[103] Ibid., 197.
[104] Ibid., 198.
[105] O'Loughlin (2006), 34-35.

11:20 and 11:25 refers not only to bread but to an entire meal.[106] Later, Paul's debate with the apostle Peter about the Judaizing influences in Galatian church was set against the backdrop of table fellowship within the church – "eating with the Gentiles" (Galatians 2:11-14). Toward the end of the New Testament, Jude made a passing reference to "love feasts" and the dangers of inviting false teachers and blasphemers into their meals (Jude 12). The common meal and the solidarity it represented were important to the early church. Of course, meals didn't come without their social challenges, as the situations at Corinth and Galatia suggest.

The ancient church continued to gather for meals for at least several decades after the end of the biblical writings. The Didache, an early church manual dating to the end of the first century or the beginning of the second, contains multiple references to meals shared by the church. While the Lord's Supper also was in view, the early church clearly was dining together. Chapter 10 of the Didache starts with, "And after you have had your fill ..."[107] And so it appears the early church continued in some way – like at Corinth – to combine the Lord's Supper with an actual meal.

The theology of eating together

Alexander Schmemann writes that Christianity was "born and preached at first in cultures in which feasts and celebrations were an organic and essential part of the whole world view and way of life. ... And, whether we want it or not, whether we like it or not, Christianity *accepted* and made its own this fundamentally human phenomenon of feast, as it accepted and made its own the whole man and all his needs."[108] Feasting has a long history within God's people. Meals

[106] Osiek and Balch (1997), 200.
[107] R.C.D. Jasper and G.J. Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed* (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 1990), 23. All quotations from the Didache come from Jasper and Cuming.
[108] Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World* (Yonkers, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2018), 66-67.

were central to the ritual existence of the nation of Israel, as the Passover celebration and other feasts attest. They fostered community living and reaffirmed the nation's relationship with God. They also reminded participants of their obligations to one another.[109]

Theologically, feasting is doxological in that it turns the attention of the church to God, the Creator.[110] People feast in joyful praise of God. The common meal becomes a celebration of God's goodness. Feasting also acknowledges God's abundance and generosity. The meals of the church recognize not only God's greatness, but also his provision for his people. The meal is a recognition God's economy provides more than enough for his children. In the meal, Christians get a handle on their own sense of scarcity and recognize the limitlessness of God. According to L. Shannon Jung, the realities of "famine, malnutrition, poverty, disease, and starvation have no part in that vision."[111] Feasting also is a communal celebration. A feast is not a feast without others. Participants are reminded of the community – that it indeed exists – and that an even larger community stands just outside the walls of the local church. According to Jung, "The sheer magnitude and grace reflected in Christian feasting makes us yearn to share that feast, both spiritually and physically, with others. We get a glimpse of the kingdom and want to share."[112] Here again is O'Loughlin's concept of ritual – bringing to light the world as it "should be."

Eating together in the church as a family

If the practice of sharing meals was central to life in the family of God during the time of Jesus and the early church – and if theological significance can be attributed to these meals –

[109] L. Shannon Jung, *Sharing Food: Christian Practices for Enjoyment* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2006), 61.
[110] Ibid., 62-64.
[111] Ibid., 63.
[112] Ibid., 64.

then the church would do well to find ways to engage in such meals today. This project is aimed at providing to church members a greater understanding and experience of the ancient church's strong-group family model. The hope is this will motivate greater engagement in the life of the church as a family.

To help accomplish this, I simply had project participants eat together. The meal became the foundation of the entire gathering during the four occasions we met together away from the Sunday morning church services. Meals also would have been part of the Sunday morning gatherings were it not for the COVID-19 pandemic and the health concerns it raised. But a small church might consider the theological and ritual validity of opening its Sunday morning worship services with a brunch. The meal could lead immediately into the Lord's Supper and a time of worship.

These meals could be fashioned in the following way:

First, they could be potluck style. Everyone can contribute to the foundation of the meal. Church unity is built on the reality that every member has something to contribute. The church is one body – a family. In this mutual sharing, the solidarity of the ancient Mediterranean family can begin to emerge within this new family of God. This family does not just consume. It also produces. And every member is needed.

Second, the leaders of the church could serve at the meals. Like the Jewish mystical group and its symposium, the idea of servitude or slavery has no part in the church. Instead, serving one another is valued. In the kingdom of God, the first are last, and the last are first. And Jesus came not to be served but to serve. And so the elders, deacons, and other leaders of the church could send a message about the nature of the kingdom of God as they fill the plates or refill the drinks of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Third, these meals could be open to all-comers. No one needs to be barred from the gathering of the church. While a church can discuss and teach the practice of hospitality, nothing replaces the actual practice of it. If anyone were to walk in off the street to a church meal, that person would be welcomed at the table. God's people – as a family – always have been called to welcome the stranger (Leviticus 19:34). Table fellowship recognizes God's creation of every person, and it is a way for the church to recognize each person's equal value and dignity.[113]

Fourth, the agenda during these meals could be left open. Simple fellowship and hospitality could be the main theme. The idea would be to maximize the joy and deepen the relationships within the church family. During the meal, conversations could reveal needs among members and give each member a chance to provide encouragement where it would be helpful (Hebrews 10:25).

Fifth, as noted above, the meal that opens a worship service could lead into the celebration of the Lord's Supper. It is to this subject that this study now turns.

The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is one of the core rituals of the church. One of the arguments of this section is the church regularly ate meals together and paired the Lord's Supper with those meals. That practice was lost – possibly as soon as 150 AD – because the growing size of the church made the sharing of meals impractical and because Christian meals were deemed suspicious by government officials.[114] Justin Martyr's mid-second century description of the celebration of the Lord's Supper shows no sign of a full meal.[115] Without the meal, the church was left with a ritual

[113] Ibid., 46.
[114] Herman A.J. Wegman, *Christian Worship in East and West: A Study Guide to Liturgical History* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1985), 42.
[115] Ibid., 41-42.

that included a blessing and then the sharing of the bread and the cup. This has been the tradition ever since among the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches.

But I wonder whether the church began to lose its sense of "family" – in the robust, ancient Mediterranean sense of that word – when it abandoned the regular sharing of meals. In addition, the Lord's Supper itself has a strong biblical and historical legacy of pointing individual Christians toward the concept of the church as a community or family. In this section, I am seeking to emphasize the original substance of the Lord's Supper – as a moment to "discern the body" of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:29) – while still honoring the long history of ritual.

The Lord's Supper in the New Testament

The New Testament offers relatively little information about the practice of the Lord's Supper. But the most detailed descriptions of the practice – found in the gospel institution narratives and Paul's treatment of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians – show the ritual took place alongside an actual meal. The Passover meal is in view in each of the three Gospel institution narratives. Matthew's account notes Jesus blessed and broke the bread "while they were eating" (Matthew 26:26). Mark records the same (Mark 14:22). Luke notes Jesus was reclining at table with his disciples (Luke 22:14-16).

Ben Witherington III argues the Lord's Supper in Corinth was celebrated as part of a communal meal and perhaps even after a drinking party. It wasn't a highly ritualized moment for the church. "It would appear that the Lord's Supper was not viewed as, or had not at this juncture been transformed into, a ritualistic act that was part of a worship act distinguishable from a fellowship meal. On the contrary, meals, the Lord's Supper, and worship were all part of one

ongoing event."[116] The identification of the group within this ongoing event was central. Paul's critique of the Corinthians focused on the way church members were acting against the unity of the group by not dining together in the egalitarian way modeled by Jesus. The unity of the church was broken by the church's table manners.[117]

Paul's correction of the abuses in Corinth were focused on leading the church back to its proper understanding of a unified church body. Paul already had described the church as "one body" that partakes of "one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17). His condemnation, then, of the church's eucharistic practices focused on the way in which the church failed to recognize itself as one body. Anyone who takes the bread and cup must engage in the practice of "discerning the body" (1 Corinthians 11:29). Paul did not say the church was to discern the body *and the blood.* Rather, Paul seemed to be stressing the singular nature of the church group. According to Witherington,

> One is to be cognizant that this is a group meal, a group-building ceremony. The least probable interpretation is that Paul is warning against forgetting the sacramental presence of Christ in the elements. The Corinthians are eating in a selfish and self-centered manner without taking cognizance of their brothers and sisters present. They should be partaking with them as one body of Christ, rather than following pagan protocol that gives the elite better treatment and first dibs on the meal.[118]

And so a key element of the Lord's Supper was its role in reaffirming Jesus' welcoming and egalitarian practice of table fellowship. At the same time, the focus seemed to be on the community nature of the meal and on Jesus' act of submitting himself to death on the cross. The ancient term *anamnesis*, so important to the development of the eucharistic prayers of the church, has the idea of bringing the past into the present. Enrico Mazza writes, "The faithful are caught

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[116] Ben Witherington III, *Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord's Supper* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 54.
[117] Ibid., 54.
[118] Ibid., 59.

up in the action of remembering; they are remembering the death and resurrection of Christ and are offering the bread and wine to the Father."[119]

Finding the family of Christ in the Lord's Supper

Following the biblical era, the practice and meaning of the Lord's Supper took on greater complexity and has led to debate among Christians. That debate will be left aside here. Instead, I will consider the way in which the Lord's Supper, throughout much of its long history of development, consistently helped participants focus on the "one body" of the church – picturing the church as it "should be." The following is a collection of historical examples.

As already noted, the Didache shows the church's continued practice of eating together at the end of the first century and the beginning of the second. This ancient church manual also shows, through its prayers, the nature of the Lord's Supper as an event drawing together the communion of saints in the church. Over the bread, the church was to pray, "As this broken bread was scattered over the mountains, and when brought together became one, so let your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom; for yours are the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forevermore."[120] The Didache draws attention to the collective nature of the church, that believers are scattered across the world and are brought together in harmony as one kingdom. Not long after the Didache, Justin Martyr wrote about deacons taking portions of the bread and wine from the Lord's Supper to those who were not present with the local assembly.[121] The Lord's Supper was a communal event that took into account even those not physically present. The early third-century *Apostolic Tradition* by

[119] Enrico Mazza, *The Celebration of the Eucharist: The Origin of the Rite and the Development of Its Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 290.
[120] Jasper and Cuming (1990), 23.
[121] Ibid., 29.

Hippolytus of Rome likewise made note of the unity of the church. Hippolytus' *epiclesis* asked God to recognize his church, "gathering her into one."[122]

Other eucharistic prayers in church history also recognized the scattered and gathered body of Christ. The eucharistic prayer in the sixth-century liturgy of Addai and Mari acknowledged Jesus Christ's teaching "of the prophets, apostles, martyrs, confessors, bishops, priests, deacons, and all sons of the holy Catholic Church who have been sealed with the living seal of holy baptism."[123] This eucharistic prayer, not uncommonly, drew the church's attention to those who had gone before and to those who were part of the church presently. Likewise, the Third Anaphora of Peter (*Sharar*) went to great lengths to bring the whole body of Christ before the church in prayer. Its eucharistic prayer recognized the "memory of all righteous and pious fathers, of prophets, apostles, martyrs, confessors, and all our patriarchs, and the pope of the city of Rome and metropolitan bishops, area bishops, visitors, priests, deacons, deaconesses, young men, celibates, virgins, and all sons of holy Church." The prayer sought intercession for "the absent and the present, the dead and the living, the sick and the oppressed, the troubled, the afflicted, and those who are in various difficulties."[124] The entire church was in view.

To this point, it is clear the historical church followed the example of Jesus and Paul in at least this one thing: The church is the body of Christ and is to discern this as it celebrates the Lord's Supper. The community aspect of the Lord's Supper was clear. In some ways, this has echoes of the annual clan sacrifice and meal of ancient Roman and Hebrew culture. The church, both past and present, was bound together in this ritualized meal of the Lord's Supper. As people came together to celebrate this feast, they expressed their solidarity within the family (or church).

[122] Ibid., 35.
[123] Ibid., 43.
[124] Ibid., 49.

This tendency continued in both the West and East. The Mass of the Roman Rite, with roots in the fourth century and manuscripts dating to the eighth, includes a *Communicantes* claiming the church's "fellowship with ... and venerating" the virgin Mary, along with a list of apostles and leaders of the church "and all your saints."[125] In the East, the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom has since 1000 AD been the chief rite of the Orthodox Church.[126] In it, the church offers the Lord's Supper to God "also for those who rest in faith." The eucharistic prayer goes on to list the church fathers, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, preachers, evangelists, martyrs, confessors, ascetics, and "all the righteous [spirits] perfected in faith."[127]

In the Protestant tradition, the eucharistic prayers don't always have this emphasis. John Calvin's 1542 *The Form of Church Prayers* tended to focus more on the individual believer and the state of that person's heart upon taking the elements of the Lord's Supper. *The Book of Common Prayer* of 1552 makes no reference to the larger communion of saints.[128] A recollection of the "universal church" and its leaders did make its way into *The Nonjurors' Liturgy* of 1718. That eucharistic prayer asks God to "inspire continually the Universal Church with the Spirit of truth, unity, and concord; and grant, that all they that do confess thy holy Name, may agree in the truth of thy holy Word, and live in unity and godly love."[129] In this and other ways, the liturgy of the *Nonjurors* more closely resembled some of its Catholic and Orthodox counterparts. But by and large, the emphasis on the larger communion of saints began to fade to the background in the Protestant tradition – one that seemed more focused on individual holiness than discerning the body of Christ as a community of the faithful.

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[125] Ibid., 159, 164.
[126] Ibid., 129.
[127] Ibid., 133.
[128] Ibid., 213-218, 248-249.
[129] Ibid., 295.

The Lord's Supper in the church as a family

With this history in mind, I am proposing the reconnection of the actual eating of a meal with the celebration of the Lord's Supper within the local church. The thesis is both the meal and the Lord's Supper – as rituals – ought to heighten the church's awareness of the body of Christ as a community of believers. The church dines together in fellowship and mutual encouragement and then discerns the body of Christ in the taking of the bread and the cup, a practice that sharpens its awareness of the historic and universal church and draws its collective mind back to the saving events of the cross. The meal and the Lord's Supper build community, and they enhance solidarity among church members. They also provide an environment for mutual encouragement and accountability.

This project is aimed at providing church members a greater understanding and experience of the ancient church's strong-group family model. The hope is that this will motivate greater engagement in the life of the church as a family. And so in about half the meetings of the church for this project, I had participants eat together and then take the Lord's Supper together. The COVID-19 pandemic prevented some group meetings from including a meal – particularly those held during our Sunday morning worship gatherings. But the focus at least was on the communal nature and the family identity of the church as we ate meals and celebrated the Lord's Supper together.

The practice proposed here is best suited for smaller congregations – perhaps even so-called micro-congregations of thirty or fewer members. But why not? William H. Willimon has argued, "Larger churches sometimes claim that Communion is difficult for them because they have so many people to serve or it takes too long. If a church is too big to serve people, too big

for people to fellowship with one another and with Christ on a regular basis, a church is too big to be a church!"[130] And so this proposal is best suited for gatherings of perhaps 30 people or less.

Several practices could be engaged to make this meaningful for the congregation:

First, as the church is concluding its meal and transitioning toward the taking of the Lord's Supper, members could engage in a remembrance exercise that draws its attention to the foundations of that local church. The pastor could ask church members to recall the lives of the founders of that church or members who have died or moved away from the church. In doing so, members would be invited to tell stories from the church's collective past. In the present project, we did this during some of the communal prayer exercises in which the church engaged. The church, in this way, understands itself as a unique part of the global body of Christ. L. Shannon Jung wrote, "When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we too are recreating the community. We are re-membering and reconstituting the community as the one that participates in Christ's life, death, and resurrection."[131]

Second, before taking Communion, members could be invited to recognize the global communion of saints. The pastor could ask for stories from the congregation about other churches that members have attended over the years or other Christians – faithful strangers to that congregation – who left their mark on members of the church. The stories of these churches or Christians can draw the church out of its local shell and to think about its connection to the larger body of Christ. Here, again, the church would be discerning the body.

Third, the Lord's Supper, like the meal itself, should be open to all Christians. Some church traditions, such as the Roman Catholic Church, prohibit Christians who are unaffiliated with those traditions from participating in the Lord's Supper. Thomas O'Loughlin has mused

[130] Willimon, (1981), 107.
[131] Jung (2006), 135.

about what it would be like if such a prohibition actually were announced at a local celebration of the Eucharist in a Catholic church:

> Does some announcement of this position at an actual celebration – as distinct from a statement of principle in a book or on a website or in a discussion/teaching forum – actually contravene the welcome that must characterize the table manners of those who are presiding not at their own table but at the Lord's? Are we really displaying the re-gathering of the scattered that is at the heart of the symbolism of the loaf and crushed grapes, if we then state that there are canonical difficulties so that brother or sister Christians who are actually in the room with us are made unwelcome at the meal? Being told one is welcome at a meal but being told one cannot have food at the meal belongs to the world of absurdity.[132]

As such, a strong argument exists that this meal must be open to any who would profess their faith in Jesus Christ as the risen Lord and as the Savior of the world. Christian hospitality demands it.

Fourth, the church need not reduce its communion elements to tiny crackers and cups of grape juice. A single loaf of bread broken that is shared among church members better illustrates the single-loaf theology of the church (1 Corinthians 10:17). Of course, when health and sanitation concerns dictate, such as in the COVID-19 pandemic, church members might want to be given their own bread rolls to break on their own – not a perfect scenario but one that could work when necessary. This was a practice of the present project at the Church at Redstone.

Fifth and finally, with the exception of an institution narrative that is read from the gospels or 1 Corinthians, none of the prayers or remembrances need to be gathered into a formal document. If a church truly is a family, then an impromptu reminiscence and thanksgiving should suffice. With that said, the prayer for the Lord's Supper – or the meditation that accompanies it – ought to focus on the communal nature of the ritual. Numerous scriptures could be used. But the point is church members should recognize they aren't alone as they take the

[132] O'Loughlin (2006), 38-39.

bread and the cup. They shouldn't just slip into a silent, individualistic reverie. They should discern the body.

Communal prayer

The communal meal and the Lord's Supper were two practices included in this project at the Church at Redstone, and they are very much intertwined, helping to build family affection, unity, and loyalty among members of the church. The next two practices – communal prayer and sharing – are similarly intertwined. We will begin by looking at communal prayer, a foundational practice of the early church.

When Jesus entered the temple in Jerusalem and began driving out the merchants and overturning their tables, he said, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations" (Mark 11:15-17). Jesus used this quotation from Isaiah to proclaim the Jerusalem temple to be open to all, both Jews and Gentiles. And the temple was to be "a house of prayer." This has implications for Christians and the church Jesus was in the process of forming. Some years later, the apostle Paul told the church in Corinth it had become the "temple" of God by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16). The people of God were to be a worshipping community, centered on the activities of God – just as the Jerusalem temple was for the Jewish nation. But the church also was to be focused in prayer. The household of God was to be a household of prayer.

But what does a praying church look like and how might the church in prayer put before us a picture of the world as it "should be" – or at least the kingdom of God as it should be? In this section, we will consider how the communal examen, modeled from the general examen

prayer of Ignatius of Loyola, might help church members better see themselves as part of a church family that has its own identity, history, and way of life.

About the general examen

Ignatius of Loyola, the 16th-century founder of the Jesuits, made the examen prayer the indispensable daily prayer of Ignatian spirituality.[133] It forms an anchor of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* and is used by believers as they seek to understand the movements of God in the course of their days. The examen primarily is understood as an individual exercise, but it can be used communally to discern the movements of the spirits in the life of the individual and community.

The examen prayer, also known as the general examen, aims to bring to mind the daily and hourly movements toward or away from God that appear in a believer's life. Participants undertake the examen at least daily and, ideally, more often than that. The examen consists of five steps: 1) gratitude to God for the gifts received from him; 2) a petition for the grace to know one's sins and to be rid of them; 3) a discernment of the movements of one's soul, hour by hour, in thoughts, words, and deeds; 4) a petition for forgiveness for one's faults; and 5) a resolution to amend one's faults with the help of God's grace.[134]

Historically, the general examen has been viewed as an examination of "conscience." But George Ashenbrenner reoriented the examen as an examination of "consciousness." Ashenbrenner noted an examen of conscience is too narrowly focused on morality and the good or bad actions a believer engages in during the course of the day. He sought to remedy this by

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[133] From the forward by George Aschenbrenner in Timothy M. Gallagher, *The Examen Prayer* (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 10.
[134] George Ganss, *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 134-135.

turning the focus of the examen toward the way God is affecting and moving a person from one moment to the next. His conviction was what is happening in our consciousness is more important than how we may act hour by hour. This examen of "consciousness" pushes the believer to attend to the drawing of God and to be conscious of the opposite tendency of one's sinful nature to pull one away from true intimacy with God.[135]

Timothy Gallagher makes note of Ashenbrenner's re-framing of the general examen and outlines it in this way:[136]

Step one: Gratitude – We note God's gifts from the day and give God thanks for them. Salvation history is a record of God's loving acts on behalf of his people. "The primary reality is always what *God does*," Gallagher writes.[137] Understanding with gratitude the works of God establishes peace in our hearts and forms the foundation for our relationship with God.[138]

Step two: Petition – We ask God for insight and strength so the examen will be a work of grace beyond any human work. We ask for deep understanding about God's work in our lives, as well as insight into the opposite movements that pull us away from God. We seek to overcome whatever may hinder our relationship with God and grasp God's movements in our lives.[139]

Step three: Review – We review the day with God and look for the stirring of our hearts and the thoughts given to us by God that day – as well as thoughts NOT given by God that day. Here, we look for moments of consolation and desolation as we review the events of our day. We attempt to understand the desires of our hearts and whether those desires align with God's.[140]

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[135] George Aschenbrenner, Excerpt from *Consciousness Examen* (1972) in *Resources for Jesuit Schools* (Jesuit Institute London): 1-2.
[136] Timothy M. Gallagher, *The Examen Prayer* (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 25.
[137] Ibid., 60.
[138] Ibid., 67.
[139] Ibid., 69.
[140] Ibid., 78.

Step four: Forgiveness – We ask for God's forgiveness and the removal of one's heart burdens. This petition, Gallagher notes, is a "relational step" and is the key to the prayer of examen.[141] In this fourth step, we remove any barriers between us and our Lord, and we accept and receive the abundant love God has for us.

Step five: Renewal – We look forward to the following day and plan how to live it in concert with God's desire for our lives. This is the prayer for spiritual progress, pushing toward spiritual growth in the day to come.[142] We allow the past to shine a light on the future. We may find "small" decisions can help us live out more fully our relationship with God.[143]

The general examen in a communal context

The general examen typically is viewed as an individual practice. But it need not only be that. Gallagher writes of a husband and wife who pray the examen together and find it opens the door to discussions about the "tougher things" of their lives with God and each other. The examen allows them to discuss the spiritual realities they experience in life. The husband said, "Feeling loved through the prayer of the examen gives me the hope I need to talk about things that could become big problems before they do become big problems."[144] In this situation, the communal use of the examen enables participants to sense the leading of the God, as well as their own desires. Then they can articulate them in ways that can give the larger community – even if only two people – room to respond. Faulty desires can be identified and curbed, and desires that draw the individual or community toward God or each other can be nurtured.

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[141] Ibid., 92.
[142] Ibid., 96.
[143] Ibid., 102.
[144] Ibid., 162.

Gallagher also writes of a family that daily practices a "family examen." The parents engage their four young children in the examen during their evening meal, asking the children two questions: What have you been the most grateful for today, and what have you been least grateful for today? Family members are invited to engage with one another in a respectful manner. The mother said the practice allows each family member to review the day with gratitude and to share with the others the events of the day that had positive or negative meaning. The communal practice of the examen is especially important on hard days when difficult circumstances arise that make family members want to skip the examen altogether for that day. But sharing difficult aspects of the day can bring "healing and insight." The practice, the mother said, also "encourages us to listen to each other, and at times to be challenged to listen more than superficially."[145]

Joel Boehner writes of using the examen in a group setting, among college students who enroll in remedial classes. Students prayed and journaled through the examen twice a week for a semester. The aim of the examen was to help students implement personal change in their lives, such as better study habits and living arrangements.[146] Boehner recognized students could be told to make changes in their lives by authority figures but that such changes were better accepted when they emerged from a self-awareness fostered through regular prayerful reflection.[147] Boehner guided students through a five-step prayer that roughly followed the Ignatian examen. Students journaled about their experiences and offered insights to the class.[148] The examen helped students identify and bring about needed change in their lives. In this way, the use of the

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[145] Ibid., 167-168.
[146] Joel Boehner, "Praying for Change: The Ignatian Examen in the 'Remedial' Classroom," *Journal of Education & Christian Belief* 16, no. 2 (2012): 221, accessed March 23, 2020, https://search-ebscohost-com.milligan.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001927386&site=eds-live&scope=site.
[147] Ibid., 222.
[148] Ibid., 222.

examen in a community setting can help guide individuals into holy spaces where they can better hear from God and make necessary decisions about their lives.

Perhaps the most helpful example of the communal examen for this study comes from Philip Shano. He writes of the use of a "communal examen" within a Jesuit novitiate. The members of the community were led through a forty-minute examen – half of which consisted of a guided Ignatian examen of consciousness and half of which was a conversation among the members about the fruits of the examen.[149] Shano said the goal was *not* to foster individual discernment by members, helping them to understand how they were living as individuals within the community. Rather, it was to discern how the community itself was living *as a community*.[150] The fruits of this communal examen were multiple. The community could begin to notice how much of its life was spent in consolation or desolation. The dialogue could help the community grow through "shared thanksgiving and shared self-awareness (or community-awareness)" – as well as a shared sense of communal sin and common sorrow.[151] A communal examen like the one laid out by Shano could successfully move believers out of their individualism and into the life of the community. Participants could begin to see themselves as part of the community and to see how God is shaping the community's life.

The communal examen in the church as a family

With some suggestions about how to use Ignatius' general examen in a communal setting, we now turn our attention to how a communal examen might be put into practice in a church learning to view itself as a family. As noted, the purpose of this project is to provide

[149] Philip Shano, "Communal Examen," *Review for Religious* 68, no. 3 (2009): 253.
[150] Ibid., 252.
[151] Ibid., 256.

members with a greater understanding and experience of the ancient church's strong-group family model in hopes this will motivate greater engagement in the life of the church as a family. Certainly, for the church to live as this kind of family, its members must view the community of faith as central to their lives. The church body, as a whole, is to contribute in meaningful ways to the spiritual growth of its individual members. The church has been exhorted to "consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:24-25). The communal examen, as members join in prayer and spiritual discernment – and as they share the results of those prayers – can be a catalyst for this stirring up and mutual encouragement.

For this project, I engaged participants in a communal examen exercise during each of our nine gatherings. I offered a Scripture and then a prayer prompt. Members were asked to remember events in the life of the church, perhaps from long ago, as well as events within their own spiritual histories. The following is a description of each of the nine sessions of communal examen and the rationale behind each. I relied in part on adapting communal examen exercises laid out by John English in *Spiritual Intimacy and Community*.[152] I will write more about English's work in the following section about emotional and spiritual sharing within the church.

Gathering #1: Using Hebrews 12:1-2 as a guide, the church was invited to recall its history and the many people who had been part of the church through the years. They were asked to imagine all of those members of the church sitting in the sanctuary at the same time and to pay special attention to any emotions that arose during that exercise. They were invited to take those emotions and memories to God in prayer, asking what it is he would have them know about the

[152] John English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community: An Ignatian View of the Small Faith Community* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992). See exercises IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX, XII.

Church at Redstone. The aim was to help the church begin to understand it is a family with a common history, and that history includes many family members who had passed away or moved away. And yet, those family members contributed to the life of the church.

Gathering #2: Using Mark 1:9-11, group participants were invited to recall moments in time when they knew they were the "beloved" of God. They were to recall the feelings they had in those moments, as well as the results of those moments in their lives. The aim was for participants to recognize their sacred position in Christ and to share with each other the spiritually significant moments in their lives. Participants were invited to see each other in deeper ways, coming from different backgrounds, but still joined together in the one family of God.

Gathering #3: Using Hebrews 12:1-2 again, the church was invited to recall people who made spiritually significant impacts on their lives, such as parents, Sunday School teachers, or mentors. They were to imagine having those people with them in the sanctuary and to consider the feeling those thoughts stirred within them. Again, participants were to share with one another these memories and to learn more about each other. The larger church also was in view in this exercise.

Gathering #4: Using 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3, group participants were invited to recall moments when they felt the presence of God in the church's midst. These were moments of peace, joy, unity, or even sorrow. They were to consider the things that most stuck with them from those times. They were to share with one another, growing deeper in their affections toward one another and in unity as a church.

Gathering #5: Using Deuteronomy 1:30-31, the church was invited to recall significant events in the life of the church and the spiritual impact of those events – such as the founding of

the church, the coming and going of pastors, and the death of prominent members. After the prayer, these events were plotted on a "history line," where members could see the major happenings of the church's history. The aim was fostering unity and affection within the church body.

Gathering #6: Using Luke 14:34 and 1 John 2:2, group participants were asked to consider the "sin history" of the church. They were to recall episodes in the life of the church where the church was faithless toward God or unloving toward people. They were to pay attention to the effects of those moments of sin and to pray for God's wisdom about where the church needed to be vigilant. The aim was to foster unity and repentance as a community as people shared the moments of sin that came to their minds.

Gathering #7: Using 2 Corinthians 3:18, members of the church were invited to select a single event in the history of the church – perhaps based on the church's "history line" – and prayerfully think through the spiritual or emotional impact of that event on the life of the church. They were to ask themselves whether that event marked life, death, or resurrection in the church. The aim was to build a sense of identity within the church and to foster affection and unity within the church.

Gathering #8: Using Matthew 16:13-26, group participants were asked to put themselves in the story of Jesus rebuking Peter. They were to consider ways in which the church community sometimes is deceived and how it handles those moments. The aim was to begin to move participants toward a discerning attitude when it comes to its life as a church.

Gathering #9: Using Mark 6:30-44, church members were asked to put themselves in the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. They were to consider how they might speak to each

other, considering the great truths of this event. They also were to consider how they listen to Jesus as Lord. The aim was to bolster discernment and unity within the church.

Some notes on the use of the communal examen

Practically speaking, a group leader could gather the leaders of the church together at least monthly and invite them to pray through the five steps of the examen – gratitude, petition, review, forgiveness, and renewal. As with Shano's use of the examen within his Jesuit novitiate, the aim would be to discern how the community is living AS a community of faith. The group may ask itself whether it is living out the call of Christ to be a family, loyal to one another and their heavenly Father. The first half of their time together would be spent on the five steps of the examen and the second would be spent in communal discussion of what they learned while in prayer. For this project, the communal examen involved both the whole church and the official project participants. But members still considered their life in community and shared the results of their prayers.

Church leaders are likely to find resistance to the practice of the communal examen, at least initially. Pastoral experience tells us the tendency of some members is to withdraw and isolate themselves from the church. However, by carefully selecting topics of prayer and using a modified version of Ignatius' general examen, churches may be able to foster a sense of family identity. The communal examen can bring to light past consolations and desolations in a church's history. It can help members recall events and experiences that had significant spiritual and emotional impact on the church. The church also can uncover its sin history, which often is swept under the rug. And the communal examen can help a church do the work of spiritual

discernment as a community – asking what God is saying to the congregation today and where the church is being led for the future.

Sharing

Just as the Lord's Supper is intimately connected to the eating of meals within the church, so too is the "sharing" one's thoughts and feelings with the church connected to communal prayer. Members share with one another the results of those prayers – for better or worse. This sharing can aid a church in its spiritual discernment. It can root out hidden problems and head off other problems before they begin. The practice of "sharing" can be done in other ways within the life of the church as well, from the sharing of prayer requests to the sharing of material possessions. Sharing in these ways may not come naturally to a lot of people in our individualistic culture. Nor does full sharing with one another mean church members are stripped completely of their individuality. But sharing does move Christians toward more maturity as individuals, and it moves churches toward a greater sense of togetherness.

Togetherness and individuality

Ronald W. Richardson has written about life in the healthy church as an emotional and relational "system model." Members view each other in relation to one another. Everyone is affected by the actions of others within the group. No one acts in isolation from the others. Some churches, however, live out an "individual" model of life together, where their members do not see their connectedness with others in the group. I would call this a symptom of our radical individual and consumer-oriented culture. Richardson writes, "Who they are as individuals is understood on the basis of their 'insides,' their own biological, psychological, and moral being.

This leads to seeing particular people as 'the problem.' No one includes himself or herself as part of the problem."[153] In a church that operates properly as a "system," members see themselves as "all in it together. ... Responsibility is automatically shared, with each person doing his or her part."[154] The ancient Mediterranean family operated in this way as it shared in its life together – from material property to the family business to the emotions and feelings of siblings.

Church members face two "forces" in life, according to Richardson – the "togetherness force" and the "individuality force." Both of them can be healthy if lived out by emotionally mature people. The "togetherness force" drives us to connect with others and to recognize our dependence on community. Theologically, God is an expression of the togetherness force, holding "all things" together (Col. 1:17). The danger is when anxiety co-opts this healthy drive for togetherness with attempts to control others and to drive out a spirit of tolerance.[155] On the flip side, the "individuality force" recognizes every human's need be become "our own persons" – to be emotionally and intellectually independent people who can think for ourselves. We recognize our own personal responsibility for our actions and, in our better moments, step outside the "group think" that often stifles creativity and keeps us stuck in old problems. The danger is when the less emotional mature among us become isolated from others or seek to move through life, as Richardson says, "by being the strong, silent, John Wayne type ... the 'rugged individualist.'"[156]

Churches should find to nurture both togetherness and individuality in its members. According to Richardson, "More mature individuals, who have a stronger sense of their own self

[153] Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 25.
[154] Ibid., 25.
[155] Ibid., 58-59.
[156] Ibid., 60.

or their individuality, experience mature togetherness as attraction to, interest in, and curiosity about others, especially about getting to know others' differences. In this form of unity, there is greater comfort with diversity, variety, and uniqueness."[157] To be this kind of church requires sharing. It requires allowing individuals to be individuals and not to ask them to leave their personalities and histories at the door of the church sanctuary. But it also asks them to live with an "attraction to, interest in, and curiosity about others." This means they ask questions and they listen for answers. And it means church members gradually grow comfortable in answering those questions with honesty and listening to others' answers with tolerance and love.

Sharing in the Bible

Differences can be ironed out with an approach to sharing that accepts the natural human desires for both togetherness and individuality. As an example of this, Richardson pointed to the early church controversy about whether Gentiles needed to convert to Judaism before becoming Christians. Peter and Paul at different points both took stands for Gentile-inclusion in the church. Paul's example was perhaps most striking, standing mostly alone against the Judaizing influence in the church. "Eventually the early church agreed with Paul, but the community achieved this new understanding only because Paul was willing to stand, alone, by his understanding of the gospel."[158] The path from Paul's individuality in one moment to the church's togetherness on a controversial issue was achieved because Paul was willing to share and the church was willing to listen.

In his entire ministry, the apostle Paul set the tone for what "sharing" in the church ought to look like. Church sharing consists of a give-and-take among members who often are very

[157] Ibid., 63.
[158] Ibid., 63.

different from one another, as Paul's admonitions to the church in Corinth relate (1 Corinthians 9-13). Members were called to unity, but the body also was not permitted to impose conformity or sameness onto all of its members.[159] Togetherness and individuality were recognized.

Sharing also requires generous transparency. In writing to the church in Thessalonica, the apostle Paul said, "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:8). The affection that Paul and the apostles had toward the church in Thessalonica was evident. They were "affectionately desirous" of a group of believers who had become "very dear" to them. As a result, the apostles wanted to share the gospel with the church but not only that. They wanted to share their "own selves" with the church. The word used here is *psyche,* which often is translated as "souls" and refers to a person's most intimate and vulnerable self.[160] Paul and the apostles were open in every way with the new believes in Thessalonica. They appeared to have no reservations about sharing themselves. They were not apostles of the "John Wayne" variety. Nijay K. Gupta offers the following comment:

> Some people guard their lives from their work. Think of a lawyer defending a client, not wanting to get too emotionally involved in every case. Or a surgeon who tries not to become attached to suffering and grieving patients and families. So too with apostles, it can seem professional to maintain a cool distance; but with the Thessalonians Paul simply could not help himself. As Charles Wanamaker surmises, "He committed himself totally to the Thessalonians rather than remaining aloof and uninvolved in their struggles to come to terms with the new faith that had been declared to them."[161]

The things we share

In his book *Spiritual Intimacy and Community: An Ignatian View of the Small Faith Community*, John English writes about the practice of using a version of Ignatius' general

[159] Ibid., 62.
[160] Gupta (2016), 57.
[161] Ibid., 57.

examen in a small group of believers. English's approach to Ignatian spirituality is that it is best understood and practiced in community. I based the majority of the communal prayers for this project on English's examen exercises. Those prayers are described in the previous section of this chapter. English's use of Ignatius' examen in a small group setting also unearths the value of "sharing" in the church.

As people enter into community with one another, they begin to form a communal identity. They no longer view themselves only as individuals but also as part of a group that has its own identity. As this group identity begins to form, members share themselves with others. They risk their reputations. They admit their shortcomings, like their fears and their sinfulness. They share their stories with one another and the way in which God has been moving their stories along.[162]

This was the way in which the early church developed under the leadership of Christ and after his ascension. Christian fellowship, or *koinonia*, manifested itself in sharing. "The sharing of everything (property, food, prayer, miraculous powers and the good news of Jesus Christ) was the sign of their communion with each other in the Lord."[163] This sharing is part of the covenant Christ has with the church and with the world. "Covenant is most present at the time of deeper sharing of one's inner life with others. At this time members are conscious that they can risk themselves and know they are fully accepted."[164]

To establish Christian community under the covenant of Christ, members must learn to tell their stories. They share their own person life story, and they mutually recount the group's communal story with God. This sharing of stories is how community is created. English notes it

[162] English (1992), 17.
[163] Ibid., 18.
[164] Ibid., 20.

also is a part of communal spiritual discernment.[165] People share their "graced histories" with one another. This involves telling one's history as well as listening to the histories of others. Memory and the re-telling of the spiritual story of Christ is an old part of the eucharistic sacrament – the *anamnesis*. The faith is kept alive by the re-telling of the story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.[166] Community is built when its members tell these stories. The telling of the communal story – that of the group itself – opens members to the reality of the group as a covenant community in Christ. It is a community that is, as English says, "limited and sinful, but gifted too with a call beyond itself for the betterment of humanity."[167] When we do this, we recognize the giftedness of other members of the community and that we, too, have our own gifts that should be nurtured.[168]

In all of this, the group begins to take on new meaning for its members. They grow to appreciate the group as something that impacts each member in positive ways. They develop a greater sense of "we" versus "I" in the way they communicate. And they develop greater honesty and boldness with one another. "The ability grows to 'say it as it is' in situations of tension and crisis arising from personality differences in the group." Groups learn to persevere through difficulties. They keep communicating until things are resolved. And they remain humble.[169]

Of course, group members may find it difficult to share with one another. The depth and commitment to sharing takes time to develop. English says difficulties can be overcome:

> Some members may be unwilling to share. Others may have trouble finding the correct words to share. The introverts in a group may feel oppressed by the extroverts' apparent ease of expression. A third challenge may be recognizing the level of sharing; members

[165] Ibid., 59.
[166] Ibid., 61.
[167] Ibid., 63.
[168] Ibid., 65.
[169] Ibid., 67.

> may be challenged to encourage deeper levels of sharing. Of great importance is discerning the communal significance of what is shared.[170]

As these difficulties are overcome, and as members begin to share their experiences with one another and as they listen to the stories of others, true community develops. English says it is similar to the experience of a family. "There is a life-line connectedness among all the members."[171] This is a community built on something other than biological bloodlines. It is built on commitment to one another in Christ, and commitment grows through continued "investigation, dialogue, and sharing" with one another.[172]

Sharing in the church as a family

The practice of "sharing" in the church as a family could involve multiple exercises. Ample biblical precedent exists for church members to share freely with each other of their time and material possessions (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37; Hebrews 10:25). But for the purposes of this project, I chose to narrow down the possible ways to share with one another to the idea of sharing their "own selves" with one another, as the apostle Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 2:8. In this, I sought practices that would encourage participants to open up to one another about their personal histories, their thoughts about Scripture, and the results of their prayers. I opted for this approach because it seemed foundational to creating greater engagement among participants in the life of the church as a family. I predict that as church members are better able to dialogue with each other about personal and spiritual things, they eventually would be better willing to share with one another from their personal possessions and from their time and energy.

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[170] Ibid., 73.
[171] Ibid., 80.
[172] Ibid., 81.

With this in mind, I gave project participants three key moments during our gatherings to share with one another:

First, they could share with one another during the communal meals that were offered during each of the home group meetings. As noted earlier in this chapter, communal meals ought to be left open – with no agenda. Members simply can sit and talk with one another as they eat. The sharing of meals offered an opportunity for members to share of themselves. The depth of those conversations depends solely on the participants and the level of comfort they have with each other. The hope is the comfort level will grow over time. John English writes, "The communal activity of breaking bread is always an experience of intimacy."[173]

Second, participants could share with one another following their times of communal prayer. This time of sharing was described earlier in this chapter. The idea here was to allow members space to remember, imagine, and pray over a specific topic, and then to share the results of those prayers with one another. This required a certain amount of boldness and honesty on the part of participants. The hope was the sharing would bolster affection and unity among participants.

Third, participants could share with one another following the teaching component in each gathering. I taught for approximately twenty minutes during each of our gatherings about various topics related to the church as a family. At the end of each lesson, I offered discussion questions participants could answer together about the content. Again, the hope here was members would be able to share their thoughts and feelings. They could grow in greater understanding of one another and, hopefully, grow in their affection and unity for one another.

[173] Ibid., 114.

Implementation

The four practices described in this chapter – meals, the Lord's Supper, communal prayer, and sharing – were incorporated into the nine gatherings that comprised this project. The initial plan was to begin each gathering with a potluck meal, both as part of the Sunday morning services and the home group meetings. However, the COVID-19 pandemic precluded meals during most of the church's Sunday morning gatherings. As a result, only the last of those five Sunday morning gatherings incorporated a common meal. However, meals were part of the four home group meetings, which were attended only by participants in this project.

Following the meal – or the beginning the service, in the case of most of the Sunday morning gatherings – was a time of communal prayer and sharing. The communal prayers were designed to focus the church on its history and identity as the family of God. These prayers encouraged participants to recall significant people and events of the church's history, as well as significant people and events of their own personal histories. Participants also were encouraged to pray "as the church" about its own times of consolation and its own patterns of sin and to try to discern the movement of God in its life. Participants were asked to share the results of their prayers. All of this was designed to foster affection, unity, and loyalty within the body of Christ.

The communal prayer and sharing was followed by the Lord's Supper. Here, I offered a meditation that brought to light the communal nature of the church as we "discerned" the body of Christ. In order to make each of these services different from our typical gatherings, the Lord's Supper involved fresh-baked bread rolls for each member of the congregation and cups of grape juice. I had wanted to use a single loaf for the entire congregation but, again because of the COVID-19 pandemic, found it more appropriate to have every one break his or her own small "loaf" of bread. The idea of having a larger piece of bread was to help people picture the

expansive grace of God as well as the expansive nature of the body of Christ. I wanted to make sure those participating in the Lord's Supper were able to keep the body of Christ in view – to "discern" the body.

After the Lord's Supper, I shared a lesson about the church and the ancient Mediterranean family. This was concluded with discussion questions to which members could respond. I left time for dialogue within the group. Interspersed in these elements were times of singing and prayer.

CHAPTER 4

THE PROJECT

This project sought to answer the following research question: "Can a greater understanding and experience of the ancient church's strong-group family model motivate greater engagement among a church's members?" The project consisted of nine gatherings designed to show project participants some of what Jesus and the New Testament writers meant when they described the church in familial terms. Each gathering included both a teaching component and a series of practices to help group members put what they learned into action. Participants were surveyed once before the first gathering and then again after the final gathering. As I will describe in more detail below, the surveys sought whether participants demonstrated growth in their sense of affection, unity, and loyalty within the church group and in their willingness to share with the group. With the help of the survey results – which did show a notable growth in this kind of "engagement" – I put together a focus group that further explored these topics. An analysis of the focus group transcript brought to light four key themes that influenced how participants approached the church as a family.

This chapter will provide an overview of how the gatherings were carried out as well as a description of how the surveys and focus group discussion were used as tools of measuring growth in "engagement" among project participants. The results of the surveys and the focus group discussion round out this chapter.

Learning and living

Fourteen people at the Church at Redstone participated in the gatherings. Five of the gatherings consisted of the church's Sunday morning worship services – on Oct. 4, 11, 18, 25,

and Nov. 1, 2020 – and included members of the church who weren't official participants in the project. The format of those worship services was altered to fit the purpose of this project. The remaining four gatherings were placed between the Sunday morning gatherings – Monday, Oct. 5; Tuesday, Oct. 13; Tuesday, Oct. 20; and Sunday, Oct. 25. These evening gatherings followed the same format as the Sunday morning gatherings. Two of those gatherings occurred at my home. One of them occurred at the home of a church elder. And one, because of a snow storm, occurred in the fellowship hall of the church building. See the gathering schedule in Appendix A.

The fourteen people who joined in the study were recruited through email and verbal requests I made during the two months leading up to the first gathering. The participants represented about half of the church's regular attenders. Two of the participants had been part of the Church at Redstone for roughly forty years as adults, dating back to the founding of the church. Six participants had been part of the church for twenty years or more. One participant, who is in her thirties, grew up in the church, moved away for a several years and then returned. Two participants had been part of the church for about three years. And three participants had attended the church for less than a year. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 80. Both singles and married couples were represented. All participants were white and middle- to upper-class in economics, which matches the demographics of the overall church. Nine participants were women, and five were men.

The following is a broad outline of the three major components of the project – gatherings, lessons, and practices.

Gatherings

The nine gatherings brought the group participants together twice a week for an interactive curriculum that explained the idea of the ancient Mediterranean, strong-group family. Participants were asked to attend every gathering unless extreme circumstances dictated otherwise. Each gathering included a lesson, communal prayer, the Lord's Supper, and music worship. The evening gatherings and the final Sunday morning gathering also included meals. The gatherings served as the vehicle by which the main content of the project – the lessons and practices – could be delivered to the project participants. The complete content from each gathering can be found in Appendix C.

Lessons

The first Sunday morning gathering provided a broad overview of the project, explaining the strong-group family metaphor used by Jesus and the New Testament writers and what it may mean for the church today. During the next eight gatherings – both midweek and Sunday mornings – four major themes were discussed. They were as follows: 1) the affectionate kinship bonds between siblings that marked ancient, strong-group families; 2) the unity that existed in ancient, strong-group families; 3) the material and emotional sharing that marked ancient, strong-group families; and 4) the family loyalty that was pervasive in ancient, strong-group cultures.

During each midweek gathering, the teaching focused on how one of those themes played out in families in the ancient Mediterranean world. The lessons relied heavily on historic Jewish and Greco-Roman texts. During each Sunday morning gathering, the preceding midweek teaching was fleshed out to consider how each theme manifested itself in the early church – and possible ways to apply it to the modern church. For instance, one midweek gathering considered

the affection siblings displayed toward each other in ancient Mediterranean families. That lesson relied on ancient sources like the Jewish scribe Ben Sira and Greek philosopher Plutarch. During the following Sunday morning gathering, the lesson carried that same theme toward an application in the church, focusing primarily on the high level of affection the apostle Paul demonstrated toward the churches under his influence. The list of teaching topics can be found in Appendix A.

The lessons provided the cognitive content for the project. It is my perception many Christians don't think very deeply about the significance of terms like "brother" and "sister" and "household" as they read their Bibles. These metaphorical descriptions have lost their punch in our individualistic culture, where relationships between brothers and sisters often are fractured and the unity and loyalty within a household are not as strong as they were in the ancient Mediterranean world. The first and primary task seemed to be teaching modern believers how these terms applied in the original writing of the scriptures and how they might apply today.

Practices

The lessons were accompanied by a series of four practices designed to give participants opportunities to put into action what they were learning. The practices were meals, a re-considered Lord's Supper, communal prayer, and personal and emotional sharing. The details and rationale for those practices can be found in Chapter 3. The practices aimed at showing participants what it might mean truly to live out strong-group family values as a church. While it is difficult to replicate the strong-group family culture in an American church, the project hoped at least to push church members in that direction with targeted activities.

For instance, participants learned about the affection and loyalty of ancient Mediterranean families as well as the loyalty that is to exist in the church. At the same time, they engaged in times of communal prayer that brought to mind the history of the church and the people who have filled it over the years. This practice aimed at bolstering group identity and solidarity – to help participants see themselves as members of this church "family," a family with its own history and personality. The aim also was to strengthen the sense of affection and loyalty within the group.

Measuring change

The primary research question can be summarized as: "Can a greater understanding and experience of the ancient church's strong-group family model motivate greater engagement among a church's members?" By "greater engagement," I sought whether church members began to show greater affection, unity, personal sharing, and loyalty among each other. These four categories were identified in Joseph Hellerman's review of the apostle Paul's teachings about the church.[174] They form the basis of the four secondary questions that undergird this study. I provided the historical and biblical background for these questions in Chapter 2.

I envisioned "greater engagement" could happen in overlapping ways. For instance, the meals shared by group participants could help group members get to know each other better, bolstering affection for one another. The times of communal prayer could help participants see themselves as part of the church "family," strengthening unity and loyalty. The multiple opportunities during each gathering to share thoughts about the church and the results of their prayers could help participants feel like active and valued members of the church family. If

[174] Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 79-95.

nothing else, the additional time spent together – meeting twice a week – could grow unity and affection among the participants.

To measure the engagement of project participants, I selected a pair of measurement tools – surveys and a focus group. My intention was to produce two sets of data from different sources that could be compared and contrasted. This "data triangulation" was designed in hopes of providing a more robust description of the participants' responses to the project.[175]

Surveys

To measure the engagement of project participants, I had each participant complete a survey before and after the project gatherings. The survey asked participants to express their level of agreement to various statements regarding life in the church as a strong-group family. Participants completed the survey the week before the first gathering on Oct. 4 and then again immediately after the final gathering on Nov. 1. The survey can be found in Appendix B.

Survey questions focused in four areas:

1) Affection – I sought to know whether participants grew more affective relationships with one another, whether they had greater emotional attachment to each other, whether they were willing to go to greater lengths, even sacrificial ones, in order to demonstrate love and care for one another.

2) Unity – I sought to know whether participants developed stronger internal unity, were more likely to overlook offenses by other participants for the sake of unity, and had a greater sense members of the church are "brothers" and "sisters" to one another.

[175] Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 72-73.

3) Sharing – I sought to know whether participants developed a greater willingness to share their "whole selves" with the group, including their material resources, their spiritual gifts, and their thoughts and feelings about spiritual things.

4) Loyalty – I sought to know whether participants developed more loyalty toward the church and whether they grew in their willingness to make the needs of the church a priority in their lives, perhaps even over their loyalty to their biological families or social communities.

The survey consisted of twenty questions. Five questions focused on each of the four areas listed above. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with a statement related to one of those four themes. They were given five possible answers, from strongly agree to strongly disagree. I scored these answers as follows: strongly agree=5; agree=4; neutral=3; disagree=2; strongly disagree=1.

I averaged the responses to get an overall score for how "engaged" participants were in the life of the church before the nine gatherings of the project. I did the same with the survey that was completed following the project. My goal was to measure whether participants exhibited "greater engagement" after learning about ancient Mediterranean family values and experimenting with their application in the church.

Focus group

Five days after the last of the nine gatherings, I brought together six of the fourteen project participants for a focus group discussion. My goal was to hear their thoughts about the idea of the church as a "family" and to gather more detailed information about the pre- and post-project survey results. To prepare for the focus group discussion, I analyzed the survey results and identified data that reflected the participants' overall responses. I gave focus group

participants ample time to share their thoughts about the idea of the church as a family, and then I asked them to give their feelings about some of the key questions in the surveys.

To better analyze the data of the focus group discussion, I enlisted Dr. Jack Holland, the Doctor of Ministry Director at Emmanuel Christian Seminary, to conduct a review of the focus group transcript independently of me. This "investigator triangulation" was designed to produce a cross-check of my own interpretation of the data.[176] Dr. Holland's findings were similar to my own, which will be described toward the end of this chapter.

Survey results – macro view

The following is an explanation of the overall score from the surveys, as well as a breakdown of the average responses from each of the four sub-categories of questions. I also will highlight specific questions that I found interesting in the results. The complete survey results can be found in Appendix D.

Summary of the pre-project survey

In the participant survey that was conducted before the project began, the average response to each of the twenty questions on the survey was 3.8 out of 5, which meant participants responded somewhere between "neutral" and "agree" in their overall engagement in the life of the church as a family. This showed a relatively high level of engagement in the church from the outset of the project, which isn't particularly surprising. The Church at Redstone is a very small church, and most of the project participants have been members of the church for

[176] Ibid., 72-73.

many years. My hope was the project would stimulate even "greater engagement" among these participants.

The highest average response to any of the twenty questions in the pre-project survey was 4.5 – "I am glad that I am a part of this church." Other high responses came from the following questions: "If there was a serious disagreement within the church or between members of the church, I would be very bothered by that" (4.29), and "When the church gathers, I know there will be encouraging people with whom I will be able to interact" (4.29). Those two latter questions came from the category of "affection." The "affection" category averaged the highest scores of any of the four categories in the pre-project survey, with an average score of 4.06. The Church at Redstone, it appeared, was an affectionate church.

The lowest average response to any of the twenty questions in the pre-project survey was 2.71 – "I consider the needs of the church as more important than the needs of my own biological family." Other low responses came from the following questions: "Before making a major life decision, I am likely to consider how it may affect the church" (3.0), and "I consider the needs of the church as more important than my own personal needs" (3.36).

These three lowest scoring answers came from the category of "loyalty." The "loyalty" category averaged the lowest scores of any of the four categories in the pre-project survey. At the same time, the question with the highest average score from any on the survey also came from the "loyalty" category – "I am glad that I am a part of this church" (4.5). As we will see in the analysis of the overall data, participants didn't seem certain about how to gauge church "loyalty" in comparison to their loyalty to their biological families and to themselves as individuals.

To complete this analysis of the overall findings from the pre-project survey, the highest scoring category was "affection" (4.06). That was followed by "sharing" (3.89) and "unity" (3.7). The lowest scoring category was "loyalty" (3.54).

Summary of the post-project survey

In the participant survey that was conducted after the project was completed, the average response to each of the twenty questions on the survey was 4.2 out of 5, which meant participants responded somewhere between "agree" and "strongly agree" in their overall engagement in the life of the church as a family. That marked an increase in "engagement" of 0.4 from the average response to the pre-project survey (3.8). This was an increase of more than ten percent in the participants' level of "engagement." Based on this alone, the project lessons and practices seemed to have a positive effect on engagement in the life of the church as a family.

The highest average response to any of the twenty questions in the post-project survey was 4.86 – "I am glad that I am a part of this church." That is the same question that scored the highest response on the pre-project survey. It marked an increase of 0.36. Other high responses came from the following questions: "When the church gathers, I know there will be encouraging people with whom I will be able to interact" (4.79), and "There are several church members for whom I would feel emotional distress should they have a serious physical ailment" (4.71). Like with the pre-project survey, those two latter questions came from the category of "affection." And like in the pre-project survey, the "affection" category averaged the highest scores of any of the four categories in the post-project survey, with an average score of 4.53 out of 5. Again, the Church at Redstone presented itself as a very affectionate church.

The lowest average response to any of the twenty questions in the post-project survey was 3.43. Two questions shared that score, and I am inclined to disregard one of them – "If another person within the church were to wrong me in some way, I would not respond in kind." The average response to that question did not change from the pre-project survey, also 3.43. However, one participant noted that question was not clearly worded. And based on the other responses from the post-project surveys, which showed a strong trend toward greater engagement, I am inclined to believe the question was indeed poorly worded.

With that said, the other question that averaged the lowest average score on the post-project survey was this: "I consider the needs of the church as more important than my own personal needs" (3.43). The average response to that question grew only 0.07 from the pre-project survey (3.36). This question came from the "loyalty" category of the survey, where the next two lowest scoring questions also were located during the post-project phase – "I consider the needs of the church as more important than the needs of my own biological family" (3.57), and "Before making a major life decision, I am likely to consider how it may affect the church" (3.79).

As noted above, participants seemed unsure how to think about loyalty to the church in comparison to their loyalty to other groups in their lives, particularly to their biological families. My initial guess was that I could have done a better job teaching on this subject and could have allowed more time for group discussion of this topic. More details about church loyalty emerged from the focus group discussion, which will be summarized below.

To complete this analysis of the overall findings from the post-project survey, the highest scoring category remained "affection" (4.53). That was followed by "sharing" (4.23) and "unity" (4.09). The lowest scoring category was "loyalty" (3.96). Those categories scored in the same

order as they did in the pre-project survey. Each category did increase in its average score – "affection" (+0.47), "loyalty" (+0.42), "unity" (+0.39), "sharing" (+0.34). Notable here is the category of "loyalty," which marked the second highest growth in its average score. Loyalty remained the lowest scoring category on the post-project survey, but participants did exhibit engagement growth in this area.

Survey results – micro view

In this section, I will take a closer look at each of the four categories of the study that emerged from the secondary questions – affection, unity, sharing, and loyalty. These four themes formed major teaching components in the lessons, and they helped guide the project practices. Included in the following four sections will be some observations I made during the project regarding "engagement" from both participants and church members as it related to these four topics.

Affection

As noted, "affection" was the highest scoring category among the four that were measured in the surveys, and its growth from the pre-project survey to the post-project survey also was the strongest among the four categories. In the pre-project survey, the average score for questions related to "affection" was 4.06, and that grew to 4.53 in the post-project survey.

The question that made the biggest jump in this category was this – "There are several church members for whom I would feel emotional distress should they have a serious physical ailment." Its average score moved from 3.93 to 4.71 – an increase of 0.78.

Another question that scored very high among all those on the survey was this – "When the church gathers, I know there will be encouraging people with whom I will be able to interact." The average answer to that question on the post-project survey was 4.79, making it the second highest scoring question on the entire survey.

Clearly, the project participants presented themselves as affectionate toward the church and its members. The surveys demonstrated they were affectionate toward one another before the project began, and their affection toward one another only grew as they obtained a greater understanding and experience of the ancient church's strong-group family model. According to the surveys, members reported increasingly close emotional connections to those in the church and greater commitment to attending church gatherings.

Close relationships within the church frequently were a topic of discussion during the group gatherings. At one meeting, the communal prayer time asked participants to recall moments in the church's history when they felt the presence of God in the church's midst. One longtime member recalled attending church camp-outs as a girl and spending the day at the campfire of fellow church families and how those times were very meaningful to her even while recalling them as an adult. Other participants responded by describing other moments of togetherness in the church family – such as times of prayer together, the experience of a recent pastoral search committee, and even one particularly memorable church budget meeting. Participants said they could see God's presence with the church during events when church members were together and relying on one another for joy, guidance, and correction. Their affection for one another and for the church as a corporate body was obvious. When I asked what God may have been saying to the church in that moment, as participants recalled those events in the history of the church, one member said the events seemed to demonstrate the importance of

relationships within the church. The affection church members had for one another was a key component of their experience of God.

The process of remembering past moments and people from the life of the church – something every biological family does from time to time – seemed to have a positive influence on the sense of affection within the group. One gathering asked members to recall specific individual members from the church's past. This was relatively easy for participants to do. They named former pastors and lay members of the church. They began to tell stories about these people. One person remembered a former member's regular gatherings to celebrate the Fourth of July. That former member was recalled as very patriotic. Another person remembered a member serving as Goliath during a children's activity. At times during these reminiscences, participants looked at and conversed with one another as they recalled past members of the church. They expressed happiness in recalling these people of the past. When asked what feelings these memories invoked, the word "nostalgia" quickly emerged. Another person said it made her have a sense of longing, of wanting to have some of those members back with the congregation. In the focus group discussion that came later, one participant said these times of remembering were important. "In a lot of families, every time they get together they may go through picture albums and, 'Remember when we did this,' and 'Remember old uncle so-and-so and how he was.' And everybody's laughing," she said. "And it's fun to remember what you've experienced together. And I think that is a big thing for a family."

Affection among church members manifested itself in other ways during the project. The day after the very first gathering, I ran into a member of the church while she was watering flowers at the church building. She was not an official participant in the project but had been at the Sunday morning gathering. She said the lesson prompted her to reach out to a married couple

in the church who had been absent for a season. "It just made me think of them," she said. This is the kind of "greater engagement" I was seeking from members of the congregation.

Unity

The category of "unity" was the third highest scoring category among the four that were measured in both the pre- and post-project surveys. In the pre-project survey, the average score for questions related to "unity" was 3.7, and that grew to 4.09 in the post-project survey. It might be notable that this category, along with the category of "loyalty," scored slightly below the overall average score across all categories – 3.8 for the pre-project survey and 4.2 for the post-project survey. This means "unity" and "loyalty" were areas of relative weakness when it came to the church's engagement as a family. At the same time, participants still scored the area of "unity" consistently in the "neutral" to "agree" range on the surveys.

The question that finished with the highest average score in the "unity" category was this – "I feel as if unity within the church is strong." Its average score moved from 3.79 to 4.36 – an increase of 0.57.

The question that made the most improvement in the category of "unity" was this – "I have a strong sense that other members of the church are my 'brothers' and 'sisters.'" The average answer to that question on the post-project survey was 4.29 – an increase of 0.58 from the pre-project survey.

Overall, participants demonstrated growing unity. Their membership within the church felt increasingly a part of their identity, and they were more willing to set aside their own preferences for the sake of unity in the church. All of this points to the reality that the unity

within the project participants grew as they obtained a greater understanding and experience of the ancient church's strong-group family model.

Unity within the church was one of the most prominent themes that was observable during the gatherings. The church's history of unity emerged. At one gathering, a participant recalled being new to the church and attending an after-church potluck. She remembered who was flipping the hamburgers during the meal, as well as the "table-hopping" that took place while people were eating. It wasn't uncommon for members to eat at one table and then move to another to join in the conversation there. Members didn't isolate themselves. "There were no cliques," she said. And so participants were able to recognize the established unity with the church.

At the same time, the project seemed to push the church toward even greater unity. One married couple who had been coming to the church for about six months – and who were not official participants in this study – expressed their own "greater engagement" in the church during the project. They had lived near our church for several years but only began attending about six months before the beginning of the project. They were longtime Christians but admitted to keeping churches at arm's length because their trust had been broken in other churches they'd attended. The wife admitted during a Sunday morning gathering she was now beginning to sense God's call to greater participation in church life. She thanked the church for making her and her husband welcome.

I observed other episodes in which family "unity" manifested itself during the project. One communal prayer during a Sunday morning service encouraged the congregation to recall spiritually significant moments in the history of the church and then to plot those events on a "history line." I placed poster board on one wall of the sanctuary and wrote down on a line each

of the events church members called out – things like pastors coming and going, the construction of the church building, church camp-outs, baptisms in a local farm pond, and the congregation's "Oldie-Wed Games." Later that week, I was at the house of a church member who was not an official participant in the project. The "timeline" exercise had prompted her to pull out a collection of old church directories, some dating back more than thirty years, which were full of the names of past members. She had brought them out for the women's Bible study that met in her house, and one woman, in looking through those directories, admitted she'd not thought about some of those people in years. The women ruminated on past members of the church. I couldn't help but recall the way ancient strong-group families were "diachronic" in the sense that all generations, even those deceased, belong as part of the family.[177] The Church at Redstone was demonstrating, at least to a certain degree, that characteristic of family.

Sharing

The category of "sharing" was the second highest scoring category among the four that were measured in both the pre- and post-project the surveys. In the pre-project survey, the average score for questions related to "sharing" was 3.89 out of 5.0, and that grew to 4.23 in the post-project survey. This category scored slightly above the overall average score across all categories – 3.8 for the pre-project survey and 4.2 for the post-project survey. This means "sharing" was an area of relative strength when it came to the church's engagement as a family.

The question that made the biggest jump in the "sharing" category was this – "I have no problem sharing my thoughts and feelings with the church about most topics, including spiritual

[177] Osiek and Balch (1997), 41-42.

ones." Its average score moved from 3.43 in the pre-project survey to 4.14 in the post-project survey – an increase of 0.71.

A question that did not show any movement, one of just two such questions on the entire survey, was this – "I am comfortable using my spiritual gifts for the benefit of the church, whether during our Sunday gatherings or at other times." This question finished at 4.14 in both the pre- and post-project surveys. This could have been because the use of spiritual gifts was not a major topic in the project. And it can be noted an average starting score of 4.14 already was a strong one in the total study.

Still, participants grew overall in their engagement with the church when it came to sharing. By the end of the project, they expressed a greater willingness to help the church or individual members of the church who may be in financial need. And they expressed a greater comfort with teaching on material generosity in the church.

But the bulk of the emphasis during the project focused on making participants more comfortable with the idea of sharing their thoughts and feelings with the church, especially as it related to spiritual matters. This is why there were so many opportunities each gathering for members to share their thoughts about their prayers, Scripture, and the topics of this study.

The first home group meeting demonstrated this. As the group shared prayer requests, a church elder asked for prayers for his stepson. The young man had been injured in a car wreck. The elder's wife, sitting beside him, then noted – "in full transparency" – that her son had been intoxicated and was facing a DUI charge. Her willingness to "share" was obvious. This led to an exchange later in the gathering when, during our communal prayer, a group member shared about his own struggle with alcohol addiction. The group member looked at the elder's wife and told her he credited his own salvation from alcoholism to his mother's many prayers. This is the

kind of mutual sharing the project was seeking as a sign of “greater engagement.” Participants were showing signs of being, as the apostle Paul told the church in Thessalonica, "affectionately desirous" of one another and were ready to share not only the gospel "but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:8).

Other moments of sharing within the church body were apparent during the gatherings. During one meeting, a church member described a spiritual experience that accompanied a stroke he suffered at the age of 40. Another church member recalled feeling God's presence when praying for a struggling child. And another – an elderly member – talked about the time in her youth when she and her fiancé were in a head-on car collision. Her fiancé was killed in that wreck. Toward the end of one gathering, a couple who were relatively new to the church, said the church had quickly begun to feel like a family through acts of kindness the church showed to them. An elder later remarked to me how meaningful the couple's declaration was to the others in the gathering, many of whom had been part of the church for years.

Of course, group members didn’t feel a universal level of comfort in sharing their thoughts and feelings. After one gathering, a participant expressed to me he felt the urge to speak up during one of the times of sharing but was reluctant to do so. His introverted personality was a barrier to sharing. While that member didn't vocally contribute, he said he could see the value of sharing in such a setting and desired to break out of his habit of remaining silent.

At one gathering on a Sunday morning, the group was talking about affection within the church family. One man, who was not an official participant in the project, told the church he grew up the son of a Baptist minister and watched as divisions and “cliques” in his father’s church harmed both his father and the church. He said the things being discussed in our gathering – about how better to love one another and to reject division – would have been

"taboo" in that church. He said he was impressed by the candor of the congregation and the commitment members were showing to loving one another. He said a lot of churches would never enter into those discussions. This was an affirmation the project lessons and practices were having the desired effect.

As the gatherings continued, the group showed a willingness to share in different ways – both material and spiritual. After one gathering, I got a call from a church member who felt led to offer up his truck to a couple who were preparing to move residences. During another gathering, a participant expressed concern the church sometimes was too worried about the outside community and its perception of the church rather than doing the things of God. Another member echoed that sentiment – and the group found solidarity because of their agreement. At another gathering, members talked about the church's "sin history." This should have been a challenging moment for the church. But as the participants reflected, some interesting sins came to mind. One recalled a time a church member said something disrespectful to her in the presence of the pastor. The issue never was resolved. Another participant recalled an elder who occasionally visited the local bar and was publicly removed from his position in the church because of that. "The church never recovered from that," another participant said, recalling that moment as well.

Perhaps more than any other topic in the study, this category of "sharing" seemed important in moving participants toward greater engagement in the life of the church. The very act of sharing one's thoughts and emotions – and the results of one's prayers – fostered unity within the group. One member of the focus group said, "If you don't know people, and you haven't shared with an individual in church, and you don't know them, you don't know where they are. You don't know any background. But the more you share with them, the more you can

pray for them in a way of knowledge about what they're going through and some of the pitfalls or the problems they may be facing."

Loyalty

As noted above, the category of "loyalty" was the lowest scoring category among the four that were measured in both the pre- and post-project surveys. In the pre-project survey, the average score for questions related to "loyalty" was 3.54, and that grew to 3.96 in the post-project survey. This category scored below the overall average score across all categories – 3.8 for the pre-project survey and 4.2 for the post-project survey. This means "loyalty" was an area of relative weakness when it came to the church's engagement as a family.

The question that made the biggest jump in the "loyalty" category was this – "I consider the needs of the church as more important than the needs of my own biological family." Its average score moved from 2.71 in the pre-project survey to 3.57 in the post-project survey – an increase of 0.86. This was the biggest jump of any response in the entire survey and demonstrates participants gained a greater understanding of what it means to be loyal first to the family of God.

But at the same time, participants expressed some confusion as it relates to being loyal to the church. A question that showed little movement in the "loyalty" category was this – "I consider the needs of the church as more important than my own personal needs." The average answer to this question moved from 3.36 to 3.43 from the pre-project survey to the post-project survey. The "engagement" grew in this area, but not by much.

And one question that saw zero growth in engagement was this – "There are very few reasons why I would miss a church gathering." This posted an average score of 4.14 on both the

pre- and post-project survey. Noted here is the relatively high score at which this question started. People were fairly well committed to attending the church's meetings from the beginning of the project.

And so this topic of loyalty was a bit of a puzzling one based on the survey results. Members were much more willing to put the church before their own biological families, and they were much more willing to consider how their major life decisions might affect the welfare of the church. But they weren't as willing to put the church before their own needs, and they didn't move much when it came to committing to attending all church gatherings. These mixed responses lead me to believe the issue of "loyalty" to the church family remained rather murky for group participants.

In observing the group as we moved through the study, I could sense the topic of loyalty was one that gave participants moments of pause. This attitude was especially acute after one home group meeting that was sparsely attended because of a snowstorm. I moved the group meeting to the church building for ease of access for group members. But only six out of fourteen attended. Some of them told stories later about being conflicted about attending. One single man said during the focus group he had planned to attend and even ventured partway to the church before turning around because of the snow, not wanting to endanger anyone's life. But he said he normally would "run you over" in order to be where he said he would be. Another member loaded up her children to come to the group meeting only to turn around, not wanting to endanger her kids on snowy roads. She later emailed me:

> I have lots of questions about loyalty to the church family vs the biological family. The practical side of it. Frankly, taking good care of my children is more important to me right now than showing up to a church gathering. But maybe that's the thing ... a church gathering is only supposed to be a small part of church life and the Body should be interacting throughout the week in everyday ways. But I don't even have energy for that – ha! And if my husband doesn't seem to need the same level of emotional/relational

> support from others that I do, does that mean I veer off on my own and seek support from church family interactions while he stays home or do I stay home to be his companion and helpmate?[178]

While these participants expressed conflict, others did not. Some were resolute about their decision not to attend for personal reasons and expressed no sense of conflict.

Focus group findings

With the survey results in hand, I called together a group of the project participants for a focus group discussion about the project. The discussion took aim at the four secondary questions driving this project – affection, unity, sharing, and loyalty. I picked participants for the focus group who would give it a good mix of ages and personality styles. I tried to balance extroverts with introverts.

In the course of the ninety-minute discussion, four themes emerged from the conversation that seemed to be answering the question of what it means for the church to be a family. I discerned these themes by closely examining the transcript from the focus group interview. Using a word search, I looked for key words or phrases that continued to emerge in the discussion, such as "close" or "closeness" and "comfort" and "comforting." I highlighted and grouped these concepts into categories and discerned four overarching themes: 1) A church family must have a relational *closeness* within it; 2) the environment of its gatherings needs to foster a high level of *comfort* and safety for its members; 3) the individual member's participation, or non-participation, in the church family is an active *choice* a person must make; and 4) that member's choice to be involved in the church family may cause *conflict* in his or her life, especially when it is weighed against one's loyalties to other social or family groups.

[178] Personal correspondence (November 2, 2020).

Dr. Jack Holland, the Doctor of Ministry Director at Emmanuel Christian Seminary, also reviewed the focus group transcript and independently identified four themes: 1) participants desiring to take care of one another; 2) participants desiring to spend time together; 3) participants sharing a common purpose; and 4) participants desiring to share with others. I felt these four themes closely matched some of the concepts I identified, which I will summarize below.

Closeness

Participants were interested in the idea of a family being "close" – and the attendant implications for a church. Closeness for the focus group participants entailed friendship and a willingness to help one another in times of need. This closeness can transcend generational boundaries, and it is rooted in actual deeds undertaken for one another. One focus group participant came to the meeting in work clothes, planning to leave immediately afterward to help clean the house of a church couple who were in the process of moving. Another participant said, "It can't just be in theory only. It has to be in action." Closeness in the church means members serve one another and look out for each other's interests. Closeness is fostered by working on projects together and sharing a common mission. It also is fostered by spending significant time with one another and moving through the joys and sorrows of life together.

Deep and intimate knowledge of one another facilitates closeness. It enables people to pray for one another, and it opens the door to meaningful bonding. One focus group participant recalled times during worship when other members of the church spontaneously gathered around her during a difficult stretch in life – and none of them even verbalized the problem. This gesture was very important to her and could be identified as closeness with other church members. "That

is just such a good feeling." Another focus group member remembered the emotional bonds that existed among a group of girls in a church plant she joined while in college. "We cried together. We pranked the neighbors together. We did everything together, you know. I lived with them." This type of closeness requires significant time spent together, including in times outside the normal Sunday morning worship service.

Focus group members also acknowledged closeness within a group has an attractional quality. People see that closeness and are intrigued. At the same time, that closeness can make fractured relationships within the group harder to manage. Those who leave the group are deeply missed, and group members hope that feeling is reciprocated. At the same time, some participants recognize closeness is a choice. People can choose to be close to one another or more distant from them. Even in biological families, closeness isn't something that is guaranteed.

Comfort

Another theme the focus group kept circling had to do with the comfort level members of the group needed to achieve in order for it to feel more like a family. A member's comfort-level in the group is highly prized, and the environment created when the group gathers takes on the utmost importance. Smaller gatherings are better, and gatherings need to be facilitated in such a way that group sharing is encouraged. Simply meeting together and listening as a passive observer will not suffice. One group member said, "The expectation of a traditional service is you sit there quietly, and you're taught, right? And you're preached at, which is fine. There's a place for that, but that doesn't foster sharing if that's the only way we'll ever ... gather as a group." The more a person deeply knows the others in the group, the easier it is for a person to share his or her problems with the group. A gathering, in order to foster sharing, must be

designed to encourage sharing among members. The environment must be safe. Eating together helped facilitate that feeling of comfort.

Choice

Focus group participants seemed to understand they could choose which local church they wanted to join. Ideological differences and ministry emphases among local congregations may play into those choices, and members may choose to change their church affiliation when necessary. A person can choose to be in unity with a church body or choose to break away from that same body. One member contrasted the church family with the biological family along those same lines. A person does not get to choose his or her biological family: "It seems like that's kind of the crux of this whole idea of family and trying to wrap [our] minds around it because with the biological family, there is no choosing. You're born to who you're born to, and there's no changing that. They are your family. They always will be. But in our culture, in our minds, you choose your church family." At the same time, a member can choose just how close to become with his or her biological or church family. One can choose to abandon either of those social groups. And one can choose how loyal to be to competing social groups, whether to the church or to the family.

Conflict

Obvious in the focus group discussion was the conflict that sometimes crept into the minds of participants when it came to weighing their loyalty to the church with other loyalties they have in their own lives – especially to their loyalty to their own biological families. That biological pull remains strong, even in the Western, weak-group cultural context. "Well, Jesus

didn't have grandkids," one focus group participants noted, informing the group she would miss any other gathering – including any church gathering – for the sake of her grandkids and their activities. Conflicting loyalties seemed to be a core part of the discussion.

Other considerations

One other observation is worth pointing out from the focus group discussion. Theological differences did not seem to play a key role in the fostering or dismantling of family identity in the local church. Certainly, members agreed they needed to choose a local church, and sometimes ideology was built into that decision. But the ideological differences within the local church in Redstone were masked. One member said they were masked by love. Another said "a larger sense of unity" covered over those differences. Another said those differences rarely were discussed. This perhaps goes to show that theology does not have to facture churches, so long as a family environment remains in place – or actively is being built into the culture of the church. Indeed, the focus group was more conflicted by how their biological and church families fit into their loyalties than with any ideological differences among church members.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Most American Christians likely don't consider the church to be a family. For them, church likely is something else – like a Sunday morning event or a gathering of like-minded but socially distant people. We might have "church friends," but they may be no more special to us than our workplace friends or our neighborhood friends. To call the church a "family" may seem a nice idea but not a reality. My hope is this project at least makes a competent argument Jesus intended the church to be a "family" in the ancient Mediterranean sense of that word. This family was to be tightly bounded by the affection members have for one another and by the unity of the entire group. Members willingly share of themselves with the whole group, and they are intensely loyal to one another. If one agrees the church is supposed to be fashioned in this way, the next step is to move the church actually to live that out, which I have endeavored to do through this project.

I was trying to answer the following question: "Can a greater understanding and experience of the ancient church's strong-group family model motivate greater engagement among a church's members?" After leading this project – and studying the data resulting from it – I must say the answer is resoundingly "yes." The purpose of this chapter is to draw some conclusions and recommendations from the study for those who would like to move their churches toward a strong-group family orientation.

I've organized my conclusions around the four themes drawn out of the focus group discussion – closeness, comfort, choice, and conflict. These concepts were part of the participants' journey toward "greater engagement" in the life of the church as a family. I would say these four themes accompanied the study group along the way and were never far from view.

With each of these themes, I briefly will highlight ways in which churches can alter their practices and cultures in order to facilitate life as a strong-group family.

A close church family

Participants reported feeling a greater sense of closeness as they engaged in this study. Several reasons emerged for this feeling. The study by its nature brought together participants as a small group and invited members to share with one another. Every member was encouraged and given time to share their thoughts and feelings with the group. The group also engaged in times of remembering the former days of the church, conjuring up memories both good and bad from the life of the church. Like an ancient Mediterranean family, they bonded over their common experiences. And as each person was invited to share – and then did so – the group began to produce memories and conversations and feelings on its own. Again, like an ancient Mediterranean family, it became a producing unit rather than simply a consuming unit as every member shared with the group.

It became clear that the size of a church is greatly important to its experience as a family. Churches, quite simply, can become too big to foster a strong-group environment. People cannot grow deeply affectionate and desirous toward one another, or the whole church, if they do not know each other well. I think of the member of my church who also attends an out-of-state mega-church. His experience of his brothers and sisters in Christ in that church was hampered by the church's sheer size. At the same time, just being a smaller congregation is not enough. The practices the church engages in must lead it forward toward life as a family. People must be invited to share. They ought not to be allowed to settle for simply consuming the worship and preaching. The Lord's Supper must draw out the communal nature of the church body. And

communal prayer ought to lead members into deeper reflection about the church as the body of Christ.

A comfortable church

Participants also reported experiencing a greater sense of comfort as they gathered together with one another. One of the drivers of this study was my own experience with reluctant musicians within the church – fearful of the perceptions of those who would listen to them during church services. A church family should, over time, shed those feelings of discomfort with one another. Again, the size of the gathering plays a role in this feeling of comfort. And the common sharing by church members assists in helping them get to know one another.

As we saw in Chapter 2, ancient writers remarked how siblings knew each other very well and operated almost as the same being, even though they lived in different bodies. This can be facilitated in modern churches with mindful attention to the practices of the church. Pastors must be attentive to how well church members know each other. Asking the church regularly to dine together can be an important, and biblical, tool in building a comfortable environment in which the church can operate as a family. In addition to that, the church cannot expect to build deep relationships among members if it only gathers one hour a week. Ancient Mediterranean families lived and worked together. A church trying to live its life as a family must spend significant time together.

A church of choice

Participants experienced an emerging sense they had to choose whether to be engaged in the life of the church as a family. Of course, ancient Mediterranean families had no choice but to

accept they were part of one another, and their economic and social viability relied on their cohesiveness and commitment to the group. But the church is a kind of surrogate family that members must choose to join – just as they choose whether to accept the salvific claims of Christ. A person may lay claim to his or her status as a Christ-follower but still dismiss the idea of fully engaging in church life.

Here is where teaching is required. Pastors and elders must be intentional in demonstrating the benefits of life in a church family – of having "brothers" and "sisters" who care for each other's needs and who are deeply affectionate toward one another. Too often, church members want Jesus but not his church. But the family nature of the church precludes this as a viable option for Christ-followers. Like it or not, as soon as a person becomes a Christian, he or she becomes a part of the household of God, which is full of other "siblings" in Christ who now rely on one another for encouragement and mutual sharing.

A non-conflicted church

Participants in this study experienced various levels of conflict as they considered the idea of the church as a strong-group family and as they tested their loyalty to the Church at Redstone as that kind of family. The group meeting during this study that was hampered by a snowstorm yielded plenty of discussion about just how loyal a person should be to his or her church family compared to his or her biological family. The conflict is reasonable but not altogether necessary.

Rather than thinking an individual member must be loyal to the group, the group ought to commit itself to being loyal to its individual members. Loyalty, in this way, starts with the group. A member who may be overburdened at home ought first to experience loyal church "brothers"

and “sisters” coming to his or her side with material or emotional help. That member, in turn, should seek to consider how he or she can express loyalty toward other members of the church. Siblings in ancient Mediterranean families were fiercely loyal to one another. But this loyalty does not have to become a burden to any one member of the church family. Members ought to recognize one another’s needs and meet them, freeing each other to share further with others in the “family.”

Finally …

Our individual culture in the modern West has caused us to have a faulty view of the church and how it ought to operate. The church is not merely a collection of like-minded individuals who meet to consume a performance each Sunday that is led by a CEO. It is a family made up of siblings who are affectionate toward one another, unified in their beliefs and desires, quick to share with each other, and fiercely loyal. If a church is mindful about its practices, it can help its members begin to see and experience the church in this light.

APPENDIX A

GATHERING SCHEDULE

Sunday morning, Oct. 4, 2020	"What does 'Church as Family' mean today?"
Monday evening, Oct. 5, 2020	"Sibling affection in the ancient, strong-group family"
Sunday morning, Oct. 11, 2020	"Sibling affection in the church"
Tuesday evening, Oct. 13, 2020	"Unity in the ancient, strong-group family"
Sunday morning, Oct. 18, 2020	"Unity in the church"
Tuesday evening, Oct. 20, 2020	"Material solidarity in the ancient, strong-group family"
Sunday morning, Oct. 25, 2020	"Material solidarity in the church"
Sunday evening, Oct. 25, 2020	"Loyalty in the ancient, strong-group family"
Sunday morning, Nov. 1, 2020	"Loyalty in the church"

APPENDIX B

PROJECT SURVEY
Distributed 9/27/20 and 11/1/20

Instructions: Please mark the answer that corresponds best to your response to each statement. There are no wrong answers, so please be honest. Thank you for participating!

1. I feel a close emotional connection to three or more members of this church.
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly disagree

2. There are several church members for whom I would feel emotional distress should they have a serious physical ailment.
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly disagree

3. If there was a serious disagreement within the church or between members of the church, I would be very bothered by that.
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly disagree

4. When the church gathers, I know there will be encouraging people with whom I will be able to interact.
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly disagree

5. When I am forced to miss our church gathering, I feel a strong sense of disappointment.
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly disagree

6. I feel as if unity within the church is strong.
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

7. When I think about my own identity as a person, my membership or participation in this local church is a major part of what I think about.
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

8. I have a strong sense that other members of the church are my “brothers” and “sisters.”
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

9. If another person within the church were to wrong me in some way, I would not respond in kind.
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

10. I am willing to set aside my own preferences about church practice for the sake of unity in the church.
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

11. I have no problem sharing my thoughts and feelings with the church about most topics, including spiritual ones.
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

12. If the church needed money for a special project, there is a good chance I would say “yes” and help out.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

13. I don’t mind when the teaching in the church focuses on the topic of tithes and offerings.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

14. I am comfortable using my spiritual gifts for the benefit of the church, whether during our Sunday gatherings or at other times.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

15. If another church member had a legitimate financial need, I am certain I would help out, even if it required a sacrifice on my part.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

16. I consider the needs of the church as more important than my own personal needs.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

17. I am glad that I am a part of this church.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

18. I consider the needs of the church as more important than the needs of my own biological family.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

19. Before making a major life decision, I am likely to consider how it may affect the church.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

20. There are very few reasons why I would miss a church gathering.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

APPENDIX C

THE GATHERINGS

Using the background material presented in chapters 2 and 3, this appendix proposes a model course of study a church can use to move itself toward better understanding the church as a family. Below are nine "gatherings" that occurred from October 4 to November 1, 2020, within the Church at Redstone in Redstone, Colo. Each gathering was centered on a lesson that described, in various ways, the "family" Jesus and the New Testament writers envisioned when they used the family metaphor in talking about the make-up and operation of the church. Each gathering also included a series of communal exercises, or practices, whereby participants and church members could put into practice what they were learning.

The first gathering included an overview that drew out some of the biblical data connecting the church to the ancient Mediterranean model of family. That lesson was taught to the entire church during a Sunday morning service at the church building in Redstone. The next eight gatherings included four pairs of lessons that deal with the following four subjects – affection, unity, sharing, and loyalty within the ancient Mediterranean family and the church.

The first gathering in each pair – gatherings 2, 4, 6, and 8 – occurred during a mid-week small group that met in the home of a church member. These gatherings were comprised only of the official lesson participants, and the lessons focused on life within the ancient Mediterranean family. Major sources used in these lessons were ancient texts and scholarly works describing family life in the ancient Mediterranean world.

The second gathering in each pair – gatherings 3, 5, 7, 9 – occurred on Sunday mornings with the entire church. These gatherings took the subject matter of the previous mid-week lessons and demonstrated how they may apply in the life of the church. Foundational to these lessons were biblical texts and scholarly works pertaining to the ancient church as a family.

Alongside these lessons, the church and study group participants also engaged in four communal practices – meals, a communal prayer or examen, multiple times for sharing, and a re-considered Lord's Supper – that are described in Chapter 3 of this study. The basic outline, or order, for each gathering had five parts – communal prayer and sharing, the Lord's Supper, a lesson, discussion questions, and a brief homily about one of the four communal practices. The home group meetings and the final Sunday morning church service included potluck meals. Interspersed within each gathering were times of singing and the gathering of prayer requests and praises from the group.

The gatherings were small. Each church service totaled no more than about 40 people, including children. Each home group meeting totaled no more than about 20 people, including children.

Each participant in this study was surveyed before this series of gatherings about his or her thoughts and feelings about the church as a family. Participants were surveyed again at the conclusion of the study. The goal was to see whether participants, after the completion of the study, showed a greater or lesser inclination to view the church as a family and to engage with the church and its members as such. The results were tallied and formed the basis of the questions for a focus group discussion about the church as a family. A narrative summary of these findings can be found in Chapter 4.

Included in this appendix are the complete guides for each of the nine gatherings that comprised this study. These guides were followed closely, but not perfectly, during the study.

Gathering #1: Sunday morning worship service
Topic: The church is a family

Communal prayer

[This follows a time of gathering prayer requests and praise reports, and it immediately precedes the celebration of the Lord's Supper.]

During the next five Sundays, we are going to talk about how the church of Jesus Christ was designed to be a family. That is, we view each other as brothers and sisters. We may even recognize we have mothers and fathers in the faith as part of this family. And, perhaps, we may have children and grandchildren in the faith. We will talk about this more as we move through these series of lessons.

But for now, we are going to practice.[179]

> Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

I would like you to close your eyes and imagine something. I would like you to think back on all the people who have been part of the church over the years. For some of you, especially those of you who have been part of the church since the very beginning, you are going to have a lot of people come to mind. For others of you, if you are relatively new to the church, there might not be many other people coming to mind. That's OK. You know who is in this room right now, and there are others of our current church body who are not here this morning. But imagine all of those people of our church, both its past and its present – people from today, people from yesterday, people who have moved away, people who have passed away. You should have names and faces and personalities coming to your mind. Let them enter your mind one by one.

[Give the group a moment to remember.]

Now, imagine all of those people standing in this room right now, packed into this sanctuary. Where would those people be sitting? How would they be sitting? Who would be toward the front? Who would be toward the back? Who would be chatting? Who would be silent? Who would be dressed up, and who would be dressed down? Who would have a job to do right now? Who would be carrying their Bibles? Who might be carrying other things? Think about this room full of its members – members from the time of its founding until now. Let your imagination roam as you think about this collection of saints.

[Give the group a few minutes to imagine.]

Now, pay attention to what you are feeling – to any particular emotion – as you think about this collection of saints, the past and present members of this church. What emotions have

[179] The following exercise is based loosely on English (1992), 69-71.

arisen for you? Ask God what it is he would have you to know today about this church – which is His church – and your place within it.

[Give the group a few minutes to pray.]

Amen. We will talk for a few moments now about what people and ideas came to mind for you. What kinds of emotions did you feel as you remembered and prayed? [Allow people to share with the group.]

The Lord's Supper

[Offer a prayer for the Lord's Supper. The prayer begins with the intercessions that were gathered earlier in the service and concludes by recognizing the passion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. The prayer also should include thanksgivings for the existence and history of the church and the believers who populated that history.]

[Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-34.] The church is to discern the body in its celebration of the Lord's Supper. We understand this to mean we discern the physical body of Christ, nailed to a cross and then freed from the tomb. We also understand this to mean the "body" of Christ that is real among us in the form of the church, both those who surround us right now as well as that great "cloud of witnesses" that has preceded us.

[Give instructions for the Lord's Supper. Elders serve bread rolls and juice as members come forward. Members return to their seats and consume the bread and cup as they feel led.]

Lesson 1: The church is a family

A Christian in America can say several things about what "church" is. Some may say church is a building. Church is a place a person can go: "We were at the church today." Others may say the church is a meeting of like-minded individuals. Church is something a person attends: "We went to church today." These definitions for church aren't necessarily wrong. At least, they aren't necessarily wrong in the modern use of the word "church."

But what did the word "church" mean when Jesus used this term, or when Paul or John or the other New Testament writers used it? When they used the word "church," they intended it to mean a community of individuals who have put their faith in Jesus Christ. It is not, "We were at the church today," or, "We went to church today." Rather, it is, "We *are* the church." The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, which means "assembly" – as in an assembly of people. In the first century, the word *ekklesia* was kind of a generic term. It particularly referred to a gathering of citizens to decide matters related to the public welfare. The apostle Paul frequently used *ekklesia* as a way to describe the communities to which he wrote.[180]

So it is safe to say that rather than being a building or a meeting, the church is a people – an "assembly." The next question is how this assembly of people should operate. That is, what kind of relations should members of this assembly have with one another? How should members view one another and what, if any, obligations do members of this assembly have toward one another and the group as a whole? This is the driving theme of this series of lessons.

[180] Banks (1994), 27.

These are important questions because of the nature of church in America. For some of us, church may be something we attend when it is convenient. A football game or a hiking trip might be more important on any given Sunday. Church also may be something we attend in order to receive some spiritual benefit for ourselves – like peace or reassurance or motivation for another week of work. We also may go to church to get our "spiritual fix" for the week. That spiritual fix might be an emotional high or a compelling thought. In that vein, we may go to church like we would attend school, pen in hand and ready to learn. And we also may go to church simply to socialize. There are people here whom we like, and we want to spend time with them. We may be in church out of a deep need to connect with other human beings. In all of this, church can become something that primarily benefits ourselves – like going to a restaurant when we're hungry and in need of a meal. And so we might be tempted to be consumers in our church practices. What we do here might mostly be about us – what we can get out of it for ourselves. And, of course, when we aren't hungry, we don't go to the restaurant! And so it might be that when we don't feel as if we will personally benefit on any given Sunday, we stay home.

But is this all that church is – something that primarily benefits me as an individual? The rather pessimistic view of American Christians that I just presented you isn't to be judgmental. There is, indeed, a spiritual hunger that drives all of us. And a church service certainly is a place to have that spiritual hunger satisfied. And there are friendship here that are good and helpful. But is this all that Jesus intended for his church to be? Could it be Jesus wanted his church to be more than simply a place to go or an event to attend where our spiritual itch can be scratched? Could it be that when we come to church with a consumer attitude, we're really only reaching the "appetizer" page on the menu without diving any deeper to where meals of real sustenance are found?

Jesus' view of the church

The idea being laid out here is this: Based on the testimony of Scripture, a church is a family. Its members are brothers and sisters under the common name of Christ. Any perusal of Scripture shows the family metaphor is perhaps the most popular one the New Testament writers put to use in describing the church. When describing the church, the New Testament writers liked to describe it as a family. The church was to be a community of brothers and sisters who cared deeply for one another and who worshipped God and served those in need.

We can start with Jesus. When Jesus described the church, he described it as a family. All three of the Synoptic gospels record the story of Jesus' mother and brothers coming to fetch him. It appears they were concerned he might have been out of his mind as he began his ministry in Galilee. Mark told us the story in this way:

> And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:31-35; par. Matthew 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21).

Jesus in this episode described the church as a family. And his description is instructive for two reasons. First, it clearly identifies the church as the family of God, closely related to Jesus Christ. We need to understand – and we will understand in the coming weeks – that the family Jesus was describing was not the modern concept of family, where divorce is easy and siblings might rarely speak or see each other. No, the "family" in the ancient Mediterranean world was everything. A

person's very identity emerged from his or her family. Brothers and sisters were bound to be gracious to one another, to care for each others' needs, and to be fiercely loyal in adverse circumstances.

Second, Jesus' description of the church as a family elevated loyalty to the family of God even beyond the loyalty one has to his or her own blood relatives.[181] We see Jesus described the church as a family and then declared the church family took precedence over the biological family. In not responding to his mother and brothers' call, and in declaring those around him to be his actual mother and brothers and sisters, Jesus was re-prioritizing the whole world of relationships that were available to an ancient Mediterranean person. This new "family" Jesus was creating took precedence. In the ancient world, this was mind-bending stuff, as we will see in our upcoming lessons. But to Jesus, the family of God came first.

But this is not the only time Jesus described his followers as a family. When Peter noted the disciples had left their own families and possessions for the gospel, Peter was promised by Jesus that he would have no shortage of family members – or necessary possessions. Jesus said,

> "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life" (Mark 10:29-30; par. Matthew 19:27-29).

Jesus said church members would treat each other like siblings, and these siblings would provide for one another's material and relational needs.[182] In other words, even those who must leave their biological family members behind in order to pursue the way of Christ won't be left without families. They actually are joining a new family – the family of God.

The view of Paul and the apostles

Jesus' first followers took this image of the church as a family, and they ran with it. It immediately became the basis of how they interacted with one another and the expectations members of the church had of one another and of the church as a collection of people. This was a family.

The apostle Paul loved to use this metaphor for the church. He frequently addressed the congregations to which he wrote as "brothers" – or "brothers and sisters." In fact, he used the term nineteen times in 1 Thessalonians, twenty-one times in Romans, eleven times in Galatians, nine times in Philippians, and five times in Philemon.[183] Paul would frankly declare the church was a new kind of family, where people were bound together as brothers and sisters. And these brothers and sisters had a common Father. To the Ephesians, Paul explained God "predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:5, emphasis added). And so the members of the church are bound to God, just as they are to one another. They are brought into God's very own family by a process of adoption. Paul told the Romans, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Romans 8:14-15, emphasis added). Again, the picture of a family – with sons and daughters and a Father – comes into view, as does the picture of adoption and a new kind of family. Using even broader terminology, Paul wrote about the "household of God." To the Ephesian church, he

[181] Hellerman (2001), 65.
[182] Ibid., 66.
[183] Bartchy (1999), 70.

wrote, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19, emphasis added). Similarly, to Timothy, Paul wrote about the "household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15, emphasis added).

Other New Testament writers wrote along the same lines. The disciple John also was fond of using familial language in describing the church. John wrote, "Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling" (1 John 2:9-10, emphasis added). The disciple Peter called Christians "obedient children" (1 Peter 1:14, emphasis added). And the writer of Hebrews admonished the church, "Let brotherly love continue" (Hebrews 13:1, emphasis added). So it is becoming clear the early Christians were following Jesus' lead in understanding the church as a kind of family. The people in the family were to treat each other like brothers and sisters, and they were to consider themselves to be adopted children of God.

A different kind of family

There is much that could be said at this point. But perhaps the most important question for Christians today is what this means for us – especially in a culture that is far removed from that of Jesus and the first Christian church. The question we must start with is this: Exactly what kind of family is this? That is, when Jesus and the New Testament writers said the church was a family, what kind of a "family" did they have in mind? We've already begun to answer this question, and this will be the topic of the remaining lessons in this study. What we are going to discover is the "family" or "household" of Jesus' day is far removed from what we know to be a "family" or "household" today. What we will find, unfortunately, is the family Jesus had in mind is not something the American church today has fully embraced. We'll discover areas where we could do better at being the "household of God."

But at the same time, as we discover the intricacies of Jesus' family, some church members may feel a wave of welcome relief – especially for those who have emerged from broken homes or who have witnessed first-hand the fractured parent-child and sibling-sibling relationships that are so common in our Western culture. For some people, the idea of a church being a family is not a welcome one! But that modern kind of "family" is nothing like Jesus' vision for the church family. It is nothing like the ancient Mediterranean family that Jesus knew.

We will learn more about this in the coming weeks. But a short example is in order here. One of the most famous Greek philosophers of the first century, a man named Plutarch, wrote a book about brotherly love. In fact, that's the title of his book. It's called "On Brotherly Love" or "On Fraternal Affection." In it, Plutarch described the many facets of life in the ancient Mediterranean family. Forgiveness, reconciliation, and patience were key aspects of this family life. Brothers and sisters had a responsibility to one another. Here's one excerpt from his book where Plutarch described how brothers and sisters were expected to treat one another:

> We should make the utmost use of these virtues in our relations with our families and relatives. And our asking and receiving forgiveness for our own errors reveals goodwill and affection quite as much as granting it to others when they err. For this reason we should neither overlook the anger of others, nor be stubborn with them when they ask forgiveness, but, on the contrary, should try to forestall their anger, when we ourselves are time and again at fault, by begging forgiveness, and again, when we have been

> wronged, in our turn should forestall their request for forgiveness by granting it before being asked ("On Fraternal Affection" 18).[184]

Forgiveness and asking for forgiveness were part of the expected give-and-take within an ancient family. In fact, according to Plutarch, brothers and sisters were to grant forgiveness to their siblings before their siblings even said they were sorry!

This is quite unlike some of our own biological families, but it is so required within the family of God. Jesus taught, "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24, emphasis added). The "brother" Jesus is talking about is a member of the family of God, the church. According to Jesus, forgiveness between siblings also is part of the expected give-and-take within the church family. How we treat one another is a mark of who we are – members of the family of God. Jesus' first listeners understood exactly what it meant to be a family in this sense because this what they knew a family to be.

The apostle Paul, in the same letter he called the Ephesian church the "household of God," also wrote the following. While he didn't specifically mention the church as a family, his words here fit well with the family metaphor that already was key to his letter:

> "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 4:31-5:2).

Application

As we begin to see the biblical description of the church as a family, we ought to stop and take stock of some possible applications for our own life as a church.

First, the church is more than a building or a weekly event. It is a people who are in a special relationship with God and each other. This seems obvious when we say it out loud, but it is a truth we ought to bear in mind both when we are together and when we are apart. Because we have a special relationship with each other, we ought to allow the reality of that relationship take on more force in our lives, especially when it comes to how we think about our fellow church members.

Second, if the church is a family, we're obligated to one another in ways we perhaps don't normally think about. If this is the case, we have a duty to care for one another's needs and to be loyal to each other in times of crisis. We will talk more about this in the coming lessons.

Third, if the church is a family, then we are home. These are our people. When we come together, this is a reunion. We know we can find safety here. We can find unconditional love here. We can find joy and support here. When push comes to shove in life, we know where to go. We know who will support us.

Discussion questions

1) When people think about the concept of "church," what ideas come to mind? What drives people's own idea about what a church should be and do?

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[184] Quoted in David A. deSilva (2000), 172.

2) If Jesus really intended for the church to operate like a family, what obligations might believers have toward one another that we don't normally think about?

3) What hesitation might a person have to joining a church if this family metaphor for church were made clear to that person from the outset? Conversely, how might this kind of church be appealing to someone?

A homily on communal prayer

One of our Scripture readings for this weekend comes from 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20. It says this,

> But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you – I, Paul, again and again – but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.

The love of the apostle Paul for the church in Thessalonica is clear. His writing drips with affection for his "brothers and sisters." He was torn away from the church, and he longed to return. What a joyous reunion it would be!

One of the long-standing practices of the church, which dates back to ancient times, is the practice of praying together. It is one thing to pray alone. But it is entirely another thing to pray together. When we pray together as a church and when we share the results of those prayers with each other, something powerful begins to happen. Sometimes we don't realize the shared history we have as a church. Sometimes we forget the way in which God has moved in the past within our congregation. And sometimes we fail to see the way in which God is moving among us today. But in praying together and sharing the results of those prayers with each other, we bring that history and those movements of God to light. We begin better to see who we are as a church. Our communal identity becomes clear. In fact, we become aware again that we are, indeed, a community.[185]

And if we do this long enough, we might be able to put into words something concrete about our communal identity. We might be able to say meaningful things about who we are right now and where God is leading us. The apostle Paul, so adept at prayer and at sharing the results of his prayers, was able to find those words for his beloved Thessalonians – "glory and joy." The church was the glory and joy of the apostles. More fully, it was the glory and joy of the gospel. Paul could see, and he wanted the church to see, the events of its communal past – with all its moments of desolation and consolation. Paul also wanted the church to get a glimpse of its future. This, too, was communal. "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy."

Perhaps as we continue to pray together, and to freely share the results of those prayers with each other, we'll also find ourselves more tightly bound together as a community, as the family of God. And perhaps we'll be able to find the words for how God also is moving among us right now and what God has in store for us in the future.

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[185] English (1992), 61.

Gathering #2: Home group
Topic: Family affection in the ancient Mediterranean world

Communal prayer

[This follows a time of gathering prayer requests and praise reports, and it immediately precedes the celebration of the Lord's Supper.]

During this study, we are considering what it might look like for the church to live its life like a family. Part of being a family is recognizing our identity as a family and that each of us is a part of the family. The one thing that makes us a family, of course, is Jesus Christ. It is his grace-filled sacrifice on the cross and our common faith in him that makes us a family. We will consider this as we move into our time of Communion.[186]

> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:9-11)

Please close your eyes and picture that moment when Jesus was baptized – the cold water, the presence of John, the scene in heaven. "For Jesus the experience at his baptism gave him an awareness of who he was in relation to God, the Father. It contained his sense of identity and vocation, the base from which he could live out the rest of his life."[187] The voice was addressed to Jesus – "You are my beloved Son." Imagine that scene.

[Give the group a moment to imagine.]

Now, think about your own life. Think back on experiences when you, too, knew you were the "beloved" of God. Spend some time dwelling on one of those experiences. Recognize that Jesus is with you even now. Remember that time with him. Where were you? What were you doing? What were you feeling? What was the result of that moment when you knew you were the "beloved" of God?

[Give the group a moment to remember.]

Pay attention to the small details of that moment and how it impacted you in your future walk with Christ. Ask God to show you what that moment meant for you then and what it means for you or for this church today. Listen for God's response.

[Give the group a moment to pray.]

Amen. What did you find yourself thinking about, and what did you sense from God as you were remembering and praying? [Have people share with the group. After everyone has shared who wants to do so, ask the following question.] When listening to the others in this room, who did you find yourself connecting with, based on that other person's story and

[186] The following exercise is based loosely on English (1992), 21-22.
[187] Ibid., 21-22.

experiences? What impressed you in that other person's story? What does all of this mean for our future as a church? [Invite sharing.]

The Lord's Supper

[Offer a prayer for the Lord's Supper. The prayer begins with the intercessions that were gathered earlier in the service and concludes by recognizing the passion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. The prayer also should include thanksgivings for God's presence with the members of the group in their own personal histories, as well as his presence with the group right now.]

[Read 1 Corinthians 11:33-34.] The church is exhorted to wait for one another. We do not rush ahead of one another, some seeking a lot while others experience little. No, we recognize other people are part of this body, too, and, like us, these other people have their own stories with God they also are bringing to the table. Together, with us, there is one body. This is another way in which we can be "discerning the body" as we eat and as we drink.

[Give instructions for the Lord's Supper. Elders or other church leaders serve the bread and the cup as members come forward. Members return to their seats and consume the bread and cup as they feel led.]

Lesson 2: Family affection in the ancient Mediterranean world

We ended our last lesson by giving a little taste of what life was like in an ancient Mediterranean family. It was expected in those families that members would practice forgiveness and reconciliation with one another, and Jesus' expectations for the church were no different. Love and forgiveness are part and parcel with life in the church. After all, Jesus and the New Testament writers considered the church to be a new kind of family, one in which people were made members by adoption. Every member of the church is a child of God. We have a Father in heaven, and to look around us is to look at our "brothers and sisters." If this is so, and if the church is a family, it is helpful to take a closer look at what the New Testament writers would have meant when they used the family metaphor for the church. To do that, we first need to take a closer look at what life was like in the ancient Mediterranean family. Specifically in this lesson, we will consider the emotional bonds that were inherent within those families.

<u>Togetherness in the ancient Mediterranean family</u>

The first factor of life in the ancient Mediterranean family that we must understand is that the family spent time together – a lot of time together. Families in the ancient world lived in multi-generational households. It was not uncommon for more than two generations – parents and children – to share a home together. The mixing of these generations, and the care they had for one another, is clear throughout the ancient texts, and not less so in the Bible. Notice the disciple Peter lived (presumably) with his wife as well as with his mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14). And it seems clear Peter's brother, Andrew, also lived in that home (Mark 1:19).

The concept of the "household" was even broader, however, than what we might consider to be a household today. A household in the ancient world consisted of blood relatives along with servants and slaves together. The household would have extended even beyond those who

lived under the same roof – probably a welcome relief if we want to consider the church as the "household" of God but don't want to try to fit the whole church into the same living quarters! These ancient households, especially those of the wealthy, would have included guests and clients of the family.[188] As such, a quite diverse group of people might be considered part of a single household – people of multiple generations, including owners, servants, slaves, and clients.

Now think about what a "household" is today. The picture is very different, which is why the concept of the household or the family needs to be defined so we can understand what Jesus meant for the church. Today, many of our siblings live far from us, and our parents likely never have lived under our roof. And all of us parents would be quite happy if our kids someday would actually move out of our homes! But the ancient Mediterranean family was marked by the closeness of these relationships. Quite literally, many family members were together virtually every day of their lives.

But the differences between the ancient Mediterranean family and today's family are even greater still. Ancient families didn't just live together. They also worked together. Families typically worked a common trade together, such as leather-working or pottery. Many homes would have a room dedicated to this work that would face the street and where families could sell their wares. The home also was a place of meeting with clients and customers, making it a central location for the furthering of the family's business and welfare. Wealthy families may have had a home in the city, along with an estate in the country where agricultural products such as grain or wine would be produced. The family members and servants at those distant estates also were considered part of the family's "household."[189] And so not only did ancient households share common space, they shared many of the same common interests – both in occupation and in economic status. The family lived together, and it worked together.

My brother's keeper

With that domestic, vocational, and economic connectedness came an emotional connectedness. Ancient writers noted the strong bonds that existed between members of a kinship or household group. There were marked differences between how someone treated a member of his or her own family and how that person treated someone outside the family. You were never to treat a family member like an outsider!

The Greco-Roman and Jewish world of ancient times was marked by competition. It wasn't uncommon to view those outside your household as potential rivals, or at least as people who potentially could bring shame upon the family. You were likely to keep your guard around such people. These were outsiders, after all. But this was not the case when dealing with other members of your family. Competition within the family was not acceptable because it would have meant tearing down family members and fracturing the family bond. This kind of behavior would have broken down the strength, unity, and viability of the family group.[190] The Jewish scribe Ben Sira, who lived about 150 years before the time of Christ said this about relations between family members: "Do not glorify yourself by dishonoring your father, for your father's dishonor is no glory to you."[191]

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[188] deSilva (2000), 174.
[189] Ibid., 179.
[190] Ibid., 166.
[191] Quoted in deSilva (2000), 166.

This attitude was especially true among siblings, who maintained the closest relationships of any in the ancient world. Siblings did not compete with one another. They did not tear each other down. Rather, they loved one another with deep affection – almost to the point they considered each other to be the same person. The Greek philosopher Aristotle, who lived 300 years before the time of Christ, wrote, "Brothers love each other as being born of the same parents; for their identity with them makes them identical with each other (which is the reason why people talk of 'the same blood', 'the same stock', and so on). They are, therefore, in a sense the same thing, though separate individuals."[192] How many of us can say that about our biological brothers and sisters – that we are, "in a sense the same thing, though separate individuals"? As you can imagine, this has implications for life in the church, if it indeed is a family – implications we will explore in this study.

One thing we might notice at this point is the relationships within the ancient family were not at all divergent from what we see in Scripture. In the history of the Hebrew people, we see brothers were expected to love and protect one another. One modern scholar noted the first major sin after Adam and Eve wasn't the murder or betrayal of a spouse, which our American context might consider the worst of all sins. Rather, the first significant sin was the murder of a brother.[193] It seems God had a plan for siblings from the very beginning. Who can forget Cain's haunting reply to God regarding the whereabouts of his brother, Abel? "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9). The simple reading of this text, perhaps driven by a natural knowledge deep within us, leads the reader to react by saying, "Yes, Cain was indeed to be his brother's keeper. Siblings are to care for one another!"

Honor and affection

But there's more to look at as it relates to love and affection between members of the ancient Mediterranean family. The idea of a "common upbringing" loomed large in these ancient families. You can imagine why, as families lived and worked together from the time of birth until the day of their deaths. These family members – particularly siblings – shared many of the same experiences in their formative years. They lived in the same home under the same parents, doing the same chores, learning perhaps from the same teachers, having the same playmates in the neighborhood, exploring the same hang-outs in the city and in the countryside. The Greek philosopher Plutarch, who lived shortly after the time of Christ, wrote, "In so far as Nature has made [siblings] separate in their bodies, so far do they become united in their emotions and actions, and share with each other their studies and recreations and games."[194] Notice the idea of unity between siblings.

Of course, brothers and sisters aren't equals in all things – even if they try to be united in their emotions and actions. Some siblings simply have superior talents and abilities compared to others. Some are smarter. Some are stronger. Some have developed certain skills, such as for cooking or for carpentry. And so in every family, some family members are going to stand out among the rest, either within the family itself or within society. Plutarch had something to say about this, as well. The superior sibling, he argued, should defer to the inferior sibling: "One would therefore advise a brother, in the first place, to make his brothers partners in those respects in which he is considered to be superior, adorning them with a portion of his repute and adopting them into his friendships, and if he is a cleverer speaker than they, to make his eloquence

[192] Quoted in deSilva (2000), 166.
[193] Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 49.
[194] Quoted in deSilva (2000), 166.

available for their use as though it were no less theirs than his."[195] We can notice the whole notion of "sibling rivalry" is not tolerated here. Not only were siblings not to "one-up" each other, but brothers or sisters also were to bring their siblings along in their successes, making it appear as if the successes of one family member really were the successes of the whole family.

There is one final note we can make about the bond between siblings in the ancient world. Relatively well-known is the fact these ancient homes were "patrilocal" in make-up – that is, the sons remained within their father's household with their wives and children while the daughters left to become part of their husbands' households.[196] In our American context, we might see the love and loyalty of those daughters suddenly to shift to their new households. But this was not necessarily the case. Ancient texts are riddled with stories about the sibling love and allegiance remaining in place – and even taking precedence over the marriage relationship.[197] In fact, wives even today in some cultures prefer the companionship of their brothers over that of their husbands. Brothers may still retain their roles offering friendship, advice, and defense to their married sisters.[198] Scholars have noted one modern family in Turkey, as an example, where married sisters regularly returned home from their husbands' families to spend time with their brothers. Brother-sister relationships in that culture regularly have "an almost romantic quality" while the relationships between husbands and wives never become one of a major source of companionship.[199]

Application

So what can we make of this description of affection within the ancient Mediterranean family? As we begin to think about life in the church under this rubric, several applications come to mind.

First, families oftentimes both lived and worked together. They spent a lot of time together in the house and on the job. They would have known each other very well. Moreover, they shared common interests. Their economic condition was tied together. And so they would have considered the well-being of each member of the family as important as their own. After all, if one suffered, the rest of the family would suffer.

Second, a difference existed in the ancient world between how someone treated a family member – especially a sibling – and how someone treated a non-family member. Family members, quite simply, got favored treatment. Brothers and sisters never were to tear one another down or to compete against each other. Rather, they were to bring their siblings along with them in their successes.

Third, the relationship between siblings was one of such closeness that they almost took on the same identity. The idea in antiquity was siblings were in different bodies but were of the "same stock." That is, nothing really separated them other than physical location. Siblings often shared close emotional bonds. A sense of unity existed within the ancient Mediterranean family, something we will continue to explore in this study.

Discussion questions

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[195] Quoted in Hellerman, "Brothers and Friends in Philippi" (2009), 21-22.
[196] Hellerman, (2001), 32.
[197] Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 41-45.
[198] Ibid., 46.
[199] Ibid., 37.

1) Ancient families often lived and worked together from birth until death. How do you suppose that affected the relationships between family members, and how might this be instructive to us as a church?

2) What do you make of the idea that ancient Mediterranean families had sharp boundaries between insiders and outsiders – and that competition was not culturally acceptable between members of the same family? How does our modern culture handle these issues?

3) What are the closest relationships a person has in his or her life today, and where do sibling relationships fit into that picture? What might this picture of the ancient Mediterranean family tell us about "brothers and sisters" in Christ today?

A homily on sharing

A reading from the past week came from 1 Thessalonians 1, which is the opening of Paul's letter to a church he helped start – but a church he was separated from due to persecution:

> We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. (1 Thessalonians 1:2-7)

In a family, we share things. And one of the things we share is a history. Every family has a history, and Paul was sharing the history of the little church in Thessalonica when he called these believers his "brothers and sisters." Paul talked about their history.

A family history can be a dangerous thing. We have to be careful in dredging up stories about the past. There might be some unpleasant ones that get pulled out of the closet from time to time. But Paul opened his letter with the history. It was the family history of this church in Thessalonica.

Paul had been chased out of town. There were some in the community who wanted no church there. And some rabble-rousers came in, and they mobbed the leader of the church, and they dragged some of the brothers through the streets. And there was a demand for money, and it was paid (Acts 17:1-10). It wasn't a pleasant history. Things were tense.

For some, these were probably painful memories. For some, there likely was sadness involved. Any time we look back on hard times, we might see some things we wish we'd done differently. Maybe some of the members of the church were cowardly in those dangerous early days. Maybe some looked back with regret, wishing they'd handled things with more courage or resolve. You know all about those things you wish you'd said in that critical moment – a moment you can't have back.

It was the family history. And Paul knew it well. And this is how he described those days. "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." These brothers, these church members, were "loved by God." Paul told the family history maybe a little

differently than they remembered it. There was “full conviction” in those early days of the church in Thessalonica.

What was Paul doing? What was his purpose in opening his letter in this way? Again, he was sharing. This is what families do. Families share. We share a history, certainly. We share with one another our time. We share with one another our possessions. We share with one another our talents and gifts. And we share with one another our words. We share ourselves. This is what families do.

You might wonder why we keep asking questions when we gather. You are being challenged to share. There is something to be said, when living in a family, about sharing our thoughts with each other. This is how we share ourselves, after all. We speak our minds. And Paul was sharing his thoughts about the early days of life in the church in Thessalonica. It was a church that knew suffering and persecution and, even, death. And Paul wasn’t one of the quiet ones in the church, who slipped in the back and said nothing to anyone, except maybe a “good morning” here and there. Paul shared his thoughts. He had something to say. He said, “This is what ‘we know’ about you. This is your history. This is our history. And it is good. You are brothers loved by God.”

So we, too, ought to share with one another. We talk sometimes about sharing things in the church, and it is often material things we talk about sharing. This isn’t bad. But there’s more to share. Some things need to be said.

Gathering #3: Sunday morning service
Topic: Family affection in the church

Communal prayer

[This follows a time of gathering prayer requests and praise reports, and it immediately precedes the celebration of the Lord's Supper.]

We are in the midst of a five-Sunday look at how Jesus Christ designed his church to live as a family. In this family, we are brothers and sisters, and we have a Father in heaven. But we also recognize we aren't the only members of this family. We have an "extended family" that exists beyond the walls of this building.

We are going to spend some time thinking and praying about this great household of God.[200]

> Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

I would like you to close your eyes and imagine something. I would like you to think back on all those Christians whom you have known through the years, people from your own personal past, people who are not here with us today. Consider those people who were formative in your faith life – parents and grandparents, Sunday School teachers, small group leaders, mentors, disciple-makers. Think about those people who have been part of the churches you have attended over the years. Some of them may be long gone now. Some may be soldiering on in some other place in the world. Who are these people? What are they like? Allow them to move through your mind. Try to recall as many of them as you can – people who walked in the faith with you.

[Give the group a moment to remember.]

Now, let your mind settle on one of those people whom you have remembered – a person who was especially meaningful in your faith walk. Picture that person in your mind. Recall the things that person taught you, or the experiences you had with that person. Think about what was important to that person. Imagine having that person with you here today. What would it be like to have that person here with you? What would he or she be doing during the worship service? What would that person appreciate about what you are doing here today? Consider this person for a moment.

[Give the group a few minutes to imagine.]

Now that you have remembered and imagined, I'd like you to pray. In the great cloud of witnesses, you are thinking about one who was especially meaningful to you. Pay attention to any recurring thought or emotion you had as you remembered and imagined this person. What is

[200] The following exercise is based loosely on English (1992), 69-71.

that central thought or emotion? Why has it arisen? Take it to God. Ask God what it is he would have you to know today about yourself and about your place within this church family, which is His church family.

[Give the group a few minutes to pray.]

Amen. What types of people came to mind as you remembered the "saints" from your own personal past, and what were the ideas or emotions that came to you as you remembered those people? [Allow people to share with the group.] What does all of this say about us as a church family? What has God done in bringing all of us – who come from different backgrounds and who have been influenced by all these different people – together into one family? [Allow people to share with the group.]

The Lord's Supper

[Offer a prayer for the Lord's Supper. The prayer begins with the intercessions that were gathered earlier in the service and concludes by recognizing the passion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. The prayer also should include thanksgivings for God's presence with the members of the group in their own personal histories, as well as his presence with the group right now.]

[Read 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3.] We are told that in the Lord's Supper we are to "discern" the body of Christ. This means to perceive or to recognize the body of Christ, which is the church. And we recognize the church is bigger than what we see here. There were other saints who came before us in this place, and there are other saints who exist "out there" – far beyond this place. It is the body of Christ. And it is one body. And so we discern the body of Christ as we eat and as we drink.

[Give instructions for the Lord's Supper. Elders or other church leaders serve the bread and the cup as members come forward. Members return to their seats and consume the bread and cup as they feel led.]

Lesson 3: Church is not a place to go. It's a people to love.

One of the driving questions in my life as I've been a pastor has emerged out of a short teaching by Jesus. It is one of those teachings that, obviously, is very important. And it's one of those teachings that should give every Christian pause. It comes from John 13:34-35, during Jesus' last night with his disciples before his betrayal. Jesus said this: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. by this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." This is a very important teaching because Jesus prefaces it with the fact that it is a "new commandment." To this point, the disciples had seen Jesus care for them, feed them, lead them, teach them, and wash their feet. Within the following twenty-four hours, they would see him die for them. So it's an important teaching. It's also a teaching that should give us pause, as it has given me great amounts of pause during my time as a minister. I pause and ask: Do we actually love each other like this? Do we really love each other as Jesus has loved us? When I look

around this room, when you look around this room, do you see people whom you love in *that* way – with an unconditional, sacrificial kind of love? Do we love each other more than we love anyone else?

In the ancient Mediterranean world, the closest bond that existed in society was the bond of love between siblings. The Greek philosopher Aristotle, who lived 300 years before the time of Christ, wrote, "Brothers love each other as being born of the same parents; for their identity with them makes them identical with each other (which is the reason why people talk of 'the same blood', 'the same stock', and so on). They are, therefore, in a sense the same thing, though separate individuals."[201] According to ancient writers, brothers and sisters would treat each other with the utmost respect and honor. They would protect each other from shame. They would bring each other into their own individual successes. Oftentimes they worked together and lived together. They were in many ways, like Aristotle said, "the same thing." In short, they loved each other. Considering how Jesus fashioned his church after the concept of an ancient Mediterranean family – and the other New Testament writers followed suit – should it surprise us then that a similar kind of love and solidarity immediately began to show itself in the early church?

Affection in the church family in Galatia

The apostle Paul came to the churches in Galatia as a sick man. It isn't clear whether he had planned to go somewhere else to preach the gospel and was just passing through Galatia when he suddenly was laid up with an illness. Or perhaps Paul was carried into a Galatian town because he'd become sick out on the road. Whatever the case, Paul gives us a picture of a sick man preaching the word of God to the people who were caring for him. And Paul recognized that even as he gave something to the Galatians, they gave something to him.

> Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus (Galatians 4:12-14).

And so in our imaginations, we can see Paul covered in sweat from a fever, being cared for by people who at first were strangers. And yet they weren't strangers for long. Hospitality was a major social expectation for people who lived in the ancient world. You were to treat your guests as if they were your closest relatives – as if they were your siblings. And we might envision the Galatians hustling around, preparing soup for Paul, or getting cool water for him, or hoisting his bed and carrying it outside on a nice day so he could get some fresh air as he recovered.

Paul said it was a trial for them. Perhaps some of them put their money together to call for the doctor. Or maybe some took off work to be home during the day to nurse the ill apostle. It takes a lot of time and energy to care for someone who is ill. But the Galatians treated the apostle not by scorning or despising him. No, they treated him as if he were an angel. "What does Paul need? Oh, we'll stop by the market on the way home and pick that up. And will you prepare the broth for tonight. I know Paul really likes that." They treated him as if he were an angel. Certainly, we can picture Paul preaching. We can picture this headstrong servant of God making sure those Galatians knew the good news of Jesus Christ. But Paul makes sure we don't lose sight of the tender care of the Galatians. But this was not all.

> And though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What then has become of your

[201] Quoted in deSilva (2000), 166.

> blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me (Galatians 4:14-15).

If this is not love in the sense of the sacrificial example of Jesus Christ, then we never will know what that kind of love is. Perhaps Paul suffered the sudden onset of an eye ailment, or perhaps this was just a figure of speech in Galatia. Regardless, Paul knew the Galatians loved him to the point of being willing to make a physical sacrifice on his behalf.

In Thessalonica

This is something we see in the Bible. Something we ought to remember is the apostle Paul's letters – so full of the theology that has formed the foundation of the church's doctrine for two thousand years – also were personal letters. That is, they were letters to churches and individuals with whom Paul had a connection. And in these letters, we see Paul's heart for the people to whom he was writing, and we see their heart for him. In any analysis, we see the formation – or at least the start of the formation – of sibling-like relationships.

We see this kind of relationship hinted at in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian church. Paul helped launch that congregation in the Macedonian region of the Roman empire, but he was forced to leave, according to the Book of Acts, when opposition was stirred up against him by the Jewish religious leaders of the city (Acts 17:1-10). But Paul kept looking back over his shoulder. He was eager to know how his new friends in Thessalonica were doing. Paul eventually sent Timothy back to find out. The report was a good one, and it spurred the writing of 1 Thessalonians. Here is how Paul described his relationship with the church there:

> But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. ... For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8, 11-12).

Paul uses familial language in describing his relationship to the Thessalonian believers. Paul was both like a nursing mother taking care of her children and like a father exhorting and encouraging his children. Paul said, "You had become very dear to us." This was so much so the apostle desired to share not only the gospel but his own vulnerable self with the church.[202] The affectionate language comes out loud and clear in this passage. One scholar said this image makes clear the "innocent love that is given and shared amongst close family members. That sense of intimacy is reinforced by the language of her *own* children – that is, *the children she holds most dear, those closest to her, the ones she nurtures and cherishes and feeds from her own body."*[203] Paul went on to describe his last moments in the city:

> But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you – I, Paul, again and again – but Satan hindered us. (1 Thessalonians 2:17-18)

The Greek term for "torn away" in this passage – *aporphanizo* – brings to mind the image of a child being separated from one's parents. Our English word "orphaned" comes from this word.[204] Again, here we have the language of family, emerging from the New Testament. The

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[202] Gupta (2016), 57.
[203] Ibid., 56.
[204] Ibid., 66.

emotional pain that was involved in Paul's departure from Thessalonica is clear in this passage. And so is his desire to get back to the church there. Paul eventually sent Timothy to check on the church, but not before repeated failed efforts to travel back to it himself.

In Philippi and Corinth

We see this same kind of language in Paul's letter to the Philippian church. Again, the story involved a sickness and the emotions that resulted. Epaphroditus had been sent to Paul with a financial gift from the Philippian church and to serve Paul's needs as he languished as a prisoner in Rome. Epaphroditus, however, became ill when he was with Paul, and the Philippian church learned of Epaphroditus' illness. And here's what Paul wrote:

> I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me. (Philippians 2:25-30)

Again, one can see the longing Epaphroditus had for the church in Philippi, and how he was distressed the church even had learned of his illness and, presumably, was worried about him. The expectation was the church would rejoice in seeing Epaphroditus again, alive and well. And Paul said his own anxiety would be reduced if Epaphroditus was safely back home with the church. This was a family matter – of the ancient Mediterranean kind.

We also see this kind of love and affection in Paul's relationship with his co-worker Titus and with the church in Corinth. Titus had gone to the Corinthians to see how the church was doing with its moral and spiritual problems, outlined in Paul's first letter to the church. Paul had been waiting for Titus' return, waiting anxiously for news. Here's how Paul described it:

> When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. ... For when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn – fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more." (2 Corinthians 2:12-13; 7:5-7)

In this case, Paul longed to hear news from the Corinthians. He was restless until he could hear some news from them. In fact, he even turned away from an "open door" to preach the gospel in Troas because he was so concerned about the Corinthians. And then Paul was overjoyed when he learned the church longed in return for Paul. Paul also, as he did so frequently, referred to another member of the church as a "brother." Paul obviously was tied emotionally to the church and to his fellow Christians, and he was happy to call them his siblings in Christ. A new family was being formed here.

Application

So what are we to make of these strong emotional bonds – this love – that existed among the members of the church? Several things come to mind.

First, it is clear that church was NOT the furthest thing from the minds of these early Christians. The believers in Galatia who were willing to tear out their own eyes and give them to Paul didn't consider "church" simply to be an event to attend on Sunday to get their spiritual fix. No, church was a people to love. The believers there loved Paul, and they were willing to take on a burden in order to care for his needs.

Second, this top-of-mind concern for fellow believers means church members can be rightly justified in seeking to care for one another's well-being, spiritual or otherwise. Paul was like a parent to the believers in Thessalonica, and it was no small thing when he was "orphaned" from the church during the social unrest in that city. And Paul, Epaphroditus, and the Philippian church were mutually concerned for one another's well-being, for their emotional states, and for any perception that something was amiss in any of their lives. American Christians, of course, tend to be more hands-off in their relationships with one another. We don't want to meddle in another believer's business. But this wasn't the case in the early church, which operated like an ancient Mediterranean family. Perhaps modern church members ought to take a more hands-on approach in their care for one another.

Third, the priority of church relationships clearly emerges in these texts as pre-eminent in the life of these early believers. Healthy relationships among church members – the state of the affection and love between them – took priority even over evangelism. Ancient Mediterranean siblings valued the relationships they had with one another more than they valued any other relationships they had with others. Paul actually quit preaching the gospel in one city – and halted his mission of creating new believers there – because he was so concerned about his existing relationship with people already converted. When it comes to balancing church harmony and evangelism, harmony won out. Modern churches are rightly concerned with evangelism and bringing the good news to more people. But we perhaps ought not forget about the life of the existing church.

Discussion questions

1) What kind of priority do most Christians put on their relationships with other members of their churches? Are these relationships the most important relationships Christians have in their lives? Why or why not?

2) What would you say should be more important in the life of a church – reaching new people with the message of the gospel or nurturing relationships among existing church members? Why is harmony in the existing church family important?

3) What are some practical ways to develop stronger relationships between members of the church? What obstacles might stand in the way, and how might those obstacles be removed?

A homily on the Lord's Supper

Several of last week's Bible readings came from 1 Thessalonians, which is a book that is full of familial language, from beginning to end. Here is one passage from the apostle Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica:

> Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are

> doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more. (1 Thessalonians 4:9-10).

There is some indication Paul wrote this first letter to the Thessalonian church in response to a crisis: Some of its members had died. It may have been something rather sudden, perhaps an accident or an outbreak of persecution. The trouble could have been that these Thessalonian believers thought incorrectly that every Christian would remain alive until the return of Christ.[205] And so the apostle Paul was writing to the church to encourage its members in the faith. The answer, in moving forward, was to love each other as brothers and sisters in the family of God – which they knew full well how to do.[206] They were to pay attention to the family of God, to the body of Christ.

The tradition given to us from Jesus is to celebrate the Lord's Supper together as a church. And in doing this, we are not to be arrogant and rude. We are not to run ahead of each other for the first place in line. Instead, we are to take the bread and the cup in a way that enables us to see and understand the "body" – that is, the body of Christ, or the church. In another place, Paul wrote, "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Corinthians 11:29). And so we discern the church, we see each other as brothers and sisters, as we take the bread and the cup.

But the "body" is more than what we see around us on a Sunday morning. Yes, for the Thessalonian believers, the body included those members who had passed away. They, too, remained part of the body of Christ – guaranteed to be raised first (1 Thessalonians 4:15-16). And the body of Christ also included believers who extended out beyond the church walls in Thessalonica. There were brothers in other towns in Macedonia, and brotherly love was due to them as well.

I am sure you have noticed we aren't using tiny bits of bread and juice during our Communion. In fact, what we are serving may seem sometimes like a little too much. You take a bread roll for communion and before you are finished with it, we all may be standing up to sing – and you have to figure out what to do with your bread! That's OK. Let that much-ness be a reminder of two things. First, god's grace is enormous – more abundant than we even can imagine. Second, the church is a grand thing. there is more to it than the tiny bit we see here in this room. Remember those things as you eat and as you drink. The grace of God – and his church – is bigger than one bite!

And so as we discern the body of Christ as a church, we gather all of these into our thoughts – our brothers and sisters who have gone before and our brothers and sisters who are distant from us. We take time to remember them, wherever we are, and to thank God for their role in building the body of Christ. In this way, we re-member the church. We bring to together its distant parts, and we do this in remembrance of him.

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[205] Ibid., 14.
[206] Ibid., 86.

Gathering #4: Home group meeting
Topic: Family unity in the ancient Mediterranean world

Communal prayer

[This follows a time of gathering prayer requests and praise reports, and it immediately precedes the celebration of the Lord's Supper.]

During this study, we are considering what it might look like for the church to live its life like a family. Part of being a family is recognizing our identity as a family – a family that has its own history, complete with mountaintop and valley experiences. We will consider this as we move into our time of Communion.[207]

> We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3)

Please close your eyes and begin to recall events in the history of the church where you felt the presence of God in our midst. Think in particular about times when there was a sense of togetherness, unity, love, beauty, truth, goodness, peace, joy, or even sorrow within the church community. Think about when and where this occurred. Think about the circumstances that formed the backdrop of this sensing of God's presence – like a worship service or a camp-out or a wedding or a funeral. Or perhaps this moment came during a home group meeting, or a music practice, or some other informal gathering of church members. Think about the people who were involved in that moment. Who were they? Where were they? What brought about that sense of God's presence?

[Give the group a moment to remember.]

Now, pay attention to the emotions you felt in that moment, the images that remain in your memory from that moment, and the words or phrases that you recall from that moment. What are the things that stick most in your mind from that particular moment when you felt the presence of God in our church family?

[Give the group a moment to think.]

Now take that moment to God. Ask God what it is he would have you to know today about this church as a result of that moment. Listen for his response.

[Give the group a moment to pray.]

Amen. We will talk for a few moments now about what events in the life of the church came to mind where you felt the presence of God in our midst. [Have people share with the group.] What were the emotions, images, and phrases that stand out from that moment, and what might God have us to know about ourselves from those moments? [Invite sharing.]

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[207] The following exercise is based loosely on English (1992), 56-58.

The Lord's Supper

[Offer a prayer for the Lord's Supper. The prayer begins with the intercessions that were gathered earlier in the service and concludes by recognizing the passion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. The prayer also should include thanksgivings for God's presence in the church during its history, as well as his presence with the group right now.]

[Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.] We take this communion "in remembrance" of Jesus Christ. We remember his body and blood. We remember the cross, the tomb, and the resurrection. And we remember that Jesus is coming back again. And we discern the body of Christ. Until his return, as we look around this room, we are looking at the body.

[Give instructions for the Lord's Supper. Elders or other church leaders serve the bread and the cup as members come forward. Members return to their seats and consume the bread and cup as they feel led.]

Lesson 4: Family unity in the ancient Mediterranean world

One of the more striking passages in the New Testament – especially to our modern American ears – comes from 1 Corinthians 6 as the apostle Paul was dealing with one of the many problems within the church at Corinth.

> When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not suffer wrong? Why not be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud – even your own brothers! (1 Corinthians 6:1-8)

In this case, the problem was church members suing one another. No one likes to suffer injustice. It bothers us, and there's something deep within us that wants to make sure things are set right. A lawsuit is a good way to try to accomplish this. We know this well in our American culture, where civil attorneys are kept busy taking matters to the courtroom on behalf of clients who believe their rights have been violated. Members of the Corinthian church took this approach, too. Apparently, some church members felt wronged by their fellow church members. And they may actually have been wronged. And they were suing for justice.

Paul said this should not be happening within the church, and he brought at least three arguments to bear on the subject. He first argued the church, in some way, transcends the world. That is, the saints were endowed with wisdom to judge angels. Surely, they could solve these worldly issues on their own. Paul then argued plenty of competent and wise people existed in the church who could judge these matters without going to the secular and unbelieving courts, where less informed judgements would be made. Couldn't those people be consulted? Finally, Paul used his trump card. "To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud –

even your own brothers!" (1 Corinthians 6:7-8). This is a striking passage because it runs exactly counter to the way in which our world would have us to live. To be wronged and then not to go to court to make it right? To allow your rights to be violated and do nothing – at least legally – about it? This is not the way of our world. But it was precisely what Paul was advising. "Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?"

Where did Paul get this idea? In some sense, we might say, he received it from Christ. The crucifixion was a grievous wrong. An innocent man was put to death. He suffered wrong. Jesus was, in some sense, defrauded. But Paul also was in the process of establishing churches across the Mediterranean world, and these churches were to be modeled after something that already was near and dear to those early Christians – that is, it was modeled after the ancient family. The church was designed to be a family. Notice how Paul used familial language even in this passage. "Can it be there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?" (1 Corinthians 6:5-6). In short, these lawsuits never would have happened within the confines of an ancient Mediterranean family. It would have shamed the entire family if they had. And God was creating a new kind of family as he was building up the church.

Group identity in the ancient Mediterranean world

During the last two lessons, we considered the love and affection that existed within ancient Mediterranean families and how the New Testament writers affirmed those emotional bonds within the church. In this lesson, we will consider the topic of unity within ancient Mediterranean families and begin to consider what that might mean for the church. Ancient families are sometimes described as "strong-group" families. That is, the members of these families viewed themselves first and foremost as members of their household, clans, or tribes. They understood their identities not as isolated individuals but as members embedded within a group. In this world, which is so different from our own, groups competed against each other. A household or a tribe, therefore, would attempt to expand and defend its holdings against other households or tribes.[208] If competition and division occurred, it did so between families, not within them.

We might think here about a tribe or clan expanding its territory for grazing animals or the raising of crops, pushing against the land claims of other tribes. And we might remember also that families in these cultures were producing units, rather than simply consuming units. They worked together just as they lived together, and as the family fortunes rose, so did that of every individual. Family unity was crucial because of that fact. The scholar Carol Meyers, in describing family life in early Israel, explained family members in ancient times had a "profound interdependence" that created "an atmosphere of corporate family identity."[209] Meyers wrote,

> As is widely recognized by anyone looking at premodern societies, the concept of the individual and of individual identity as we know it today did not yet exist in the biblical world. This was especially true on family farms – and is even to this day, under certain circumstances. Whatever sense of individual agency a person may have had derived from his or her contribution to household survival rather than from individual accomplishment.[210]

[208] Malina (1986), 38.
[209] Meyers, (1997), 21.
[210] Ibid., 21.

Family unity in the Greco-Roman world

When we look at texts that describe family life in the ancient Mediterranean world – both from the Hebrew world and the Greco-Roman world, we see sibling unity is a crucial part of life in those families. The ancient philosopher Plutarch, who lived shortly after the time of Christ, described sibling life in the following way: "Nature from one seed and one source has created two brothers, or three, or more, not for difference and opposition to each other, but that by being separate they might the more readily co-operate with one another." It is similar, Plutarch wrote, to multiple fingers on a single hand working together.[211] It is easy to see why this should be the case if families were, as we have noted, both consuming and producing units. The household economics bound siblings together. It would have been counter-productive, therefore, to work against one's brother or sister or, worse, to compete against a sibling for honor or any other reward.

On the topic of competition, in fact, Plutarch said brothers didn't compete against each other in things like athletic events. Instead, one brother "yields in his turn and reveals that his brother is better and more useful in many respects."[212] And so competition had no place in the life of siblings. Instead, brothers were to defer to one another and make sure honor was bestowed on the other instead of himself. This kind of sibling unity, to Plutarch, was an honor to one's parents, who would desire nothing more than to see their children giving honor to one another. "Fathers do not find such pleasure in seeing their sons gaining a reputation as orators, acquiring wealth, or holding office as in seeing that they love one another." In fact, loving one's siblings is "a proof of [one's] love for both mother and father."[213]

Sibling solidarity also had a rather harsh side in the ancient Mediterranean world, depending on how you looked at it. Brothers, for instance, were bound to defend and avenge one another against outsiders. The unwarranted death of a sibling was bound to bring vengeance from his or her relatives. It was part of maintaining the family honor. We can look again to the ancient writings to see but one example of the seriousness of avenging one's brother. During the early years of the reign of the Roman emperor Tiberius, who reigned during Jesus' life on earth, an attempted mutiny of an entire Roman legion occurred on the northeast frontier of the empire. A common soldier named Vibulenus claimed his legionary commander had unjustly put his brother to death and "flung aside his corpse." If true, this would have been a striking moment of dishonor for Vibulenus' family. A brother had a duty to avenge his kin. This sparked a dramatic uprising. Vibulenus was able to use the story to agitate the soldiers. In the process, a centurion was killed, and two legions of Roman soldiers were prepared to go to war against each other. All of this was the result of news that a brother had been killed and a family had been shamed. Interestingly enough, the whole controversy was put to rest after Vibulenus was found to have had no brother at all.[214] In some ways, the deception goes to show how deep the solidarity between siblings ran in ancient Greco-Roman culture.

Family unity in the Hebrew world

Readers of the Bible are familiar with this mentality because the ancient Hebrews had the same attitude about family solidarity. An entire psalm was dedicated to the blessedness of sibling unity:

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[211] Quoted in deSilva (2000), 167.
[212] Quoted in deSilva (2000), 167.
[213] Quoted in deSilva (2000), 169.
[214] Hellerman (2001), 45.

"Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!
It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the Lord has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore (Psalm 133:1-3).

In the ancient Hebrew world, even when a sibling was wronged by another sibling, no license existed for retribution or for bringing shame onto a sibling. The *Testament of Joseph* – part of the second-century *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, an extra-biblical document that supposedly records the last words of the twelve tribal leaders of Israel – paints a picture of what was expected of siblings in the ancient Mediterranean world. The *Testament of Joseph* tells a fictitious account of Joseph's life after being betrayed by his brothers and thrown into a dry well. Joseph, the *Testament* states, could have freed himself from slavery if he had outed his brothers and made known he was a son of Jacob. Instead, in this story, Joseph remained silent and even twice denied his relationship to Jacob. He did this so as not to bring dishonor to his brothers for selling one of their own flesh and blood into slavery. The account is fictitious, but the ideals fit well within ancient family ethics. In the story, Joseph told his own children on his deathbed, "My children, look at what I endured in order to keep my brothers from shame. You, too, must love one another and patiently hide one another's faults."[215] The apostle Paul's rhetorical question might be ringing in our ears at this point – "Why not rather suffer wrong?" (1 Corinthians 6:19).

Application

So what are we to make of this strong unity that existed among members of ancient Mediterranean families? Several ideas emerge.

First, ancient families didn't think of themselves as individuals who operated on their own in the world. Rather, they took their identity from the household or family to which they belonged. Their chief goal in life was not to further their own personal best interests. It's not clear that such a perspective ever would have been in view. Instead, they worked for the welfare of their kin or tribe. Because they were bound together in so many ways, their very survival depended on the forward movement of their family. If the church is a family, then Christians should be seizing their identity from Christ – the patriarch – rather than from their own pursuits as individuals. This might mark quite a shift in perspective for believers today.

Second, siblings in ancient Mediterranean families worked to honor each other rather than compete with one another. Family members would defer to one another, even if they were stronger or more skilled at a given task. There was no place in the life of the family for sibling rivalries because if one family member was shamed, then the whole family was as well. The weak spots and mistakes of family members were covered over by their siblings. It was as if families were duty bound to protect one another. This too might mark a shift in perspective for believers today. Opinions sometimes differ within the church, and mistakes sometimes are made. Brothers and sisters in Christ – under the ancient, strong-group model – would be duty bound to

[215] Quoted in deSilva (2000), 171.

elevate and protect their fellow church members rather than exploit their mistakes in order to gain control.

Third, the solidarity was such in ancient families that brothers were driven to avenge dishonor brought upon the family by outsiders. While relations inside of a family were marked by love and deference, relations outside the family often would be marked by competition and vengeance. Family members were elevated, and outsiders were suspect. The application here deserves plenty of thought and prayer, but it would be fair to say the relationship between church members is a unique one – one that cannot necessarily be matched outside the church. There will be more to say about this topic in our next lesson, which will examine the special unity that was normative within ancient Mediterranean families and that is to be normative within the church.

Discussion questions

1) When you think about your identity, what are the key factors that play into your perspective? In what way does your local church fit into your identity? Is it a prominent factor or a minor one?

2) How important are personal opinions by church members compared to the overall unity of the church? Which factor is more important to most church members? Why?

3) How important might it be, if the church is to operate like an ancient Mediterranean family, for church members to overlook wrongs committed against them by other members of the church? How might we do better at this?

A homily on meals

This study is putting us in touch with several church practices aimed at building up the family of God – of steering us in the direction of understanding our church as a close-knit and loving family, much like what might have been found in ancient Mediterranean families. One of the practices we are engaging in is the practice of eating together.

> And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:15-17)

A scholar named Thomas O'Loughlin has written the aim of church rituals is to keep "the world that ought to be" in front of us.[216] That is, one might say Christian rituals ought to put in front of the church a picture of what the kingdom of God looks like – a kingdom without sin and brokenness and where the reign of God has come in its completion. It is the world as it "should be" in Christ. O'Loughlin noted the Queen of England's official birthday celebration each June includes the Trooping of Colour in London, when the British army carries out an elaborate ceremony near St. James' Park. Anyone watching the spectacle "does not simply see a display of military marching skills," O'Loughlin wrote. Rather,

[216] O'Loughlin (2006), 30.

> This ritual is about an idea of an ordered society where everyone knows her or his place in society and can carry it out in harmony with everyone else; it is about power, prestige, what values the society would officially want to headline, and about a place for Britain in the world based on its past achievements and present good order. This is one of the official statements about Britain "as it should be."[217]

Applying this principle to congregational life means if the church is a family in the New Testament and gospel sense – and if that family means something more than what we understand family to be in our modern Western culture – then its rituals ought to provide the church a picture of that family and to contribute to the establishment of that family.

To be in the church means to be invited to the church potluck meal. There is almost no getting around it. At some point during the year, and likely even many points during the year, the church will sit down to eat together. Some consider this a frivolous and antiquated part of church life. Some balk at food prepared in kitchens of unknown sanitation. And yet, the potluck meal (or at least the common meal) may be the church's oldest practice – pre-dating baptism, the Eucharist, Pentecost, communal prayer, and any other sacrament or ordinance a person might imagine.

Just as ancient Mediterranean families regularly would gather for meals, so Jesus gathered his followers together for meals. But mark this: This was a family meal – not a community or public gathering (a Greek *symposia* or a Roman *convivia*) where some people were seated according to social rank and others were excluded altogether. No, brothers and sisters ate together as one.

"Many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples." Here is a ritual that dates back to the earliest days of the church. Men and women and children from different backgrounds gathered together to eat – as one. It is because this gathering of people seemed so "random" that the authorities found it so strange.[218] And yet this randomness of who is gathered here – with our different backgrounds and our different problems and gifts – points us to the picture of the church "as it should be." We are looking at the kingdom of God – a seemingly random group of people gathered together by grace.

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[217] Ibid., 31.
[218] Quoted in Johnson (2007), 3.

Gathering #5: Sunday morning worship service
Topic: Family unity in the church

Communal prayer

[This follows a time of gathering prayer requests and praise reports, and it immediately precedes the celebration of the Lord's Supper.]

During this study, we are considering what it might look like for the church to live its life like a family. Part of being a family means recognizing our identity as a family – a family that has its own history. We will take some time now to recall our history as we move into our time of Communion.[219]

> "The Lord your God who goes before you will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes, and in the wilderness, where you have seen how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you went until you came to this place." (Deuteronomy 1:30-31)

Please close your eyes and think back on the most significant events in the life of the Church at Redstone. For some of you, your history with the church is rather brief. But what is the most significant event or events in the life of this church during that time? For others of you, your history with the church goes all the way back to the beginning – more than 40 years. What is the most significant event or events in the life of this church during that time? Let those things come to your minds. Some of the events are positive. Others aren't. Think about these historically decisive events. What were they, and what did they mean for the church?

[Give the group a moment to remember.]

Now, pay attention to the emotional impact of these events on the life of the church. Think about the significance of these events for the identity of the church. Think about what these events mean for the future of the church.

[Give the group a moment to think.]

Now take these things to God. Ask God what it is he would have you to know today about this church as a result of these things. Listen for his response.

[Give the group a moment to pray.]

Amen. [Using a large sheet of paper, create a "history line" for the church. On a horizontal line, place decisive events in the life of the congregation – with the name of the event above the line and the event's emotional impact and significance to the group's identity and future below the line. Have people share their events with the group.] What did this exercise arouse in you? What impressed you as others shared? What are the spiritual consequences of this "history line"? [Invite sharing.]

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[219] The following exercise is based loosely on English (1992), 85-87.

The Lord's Supper

[Offer a prayer for the Lord's Supper. The prayer begins with the intercessions that were gathered earlier in the service and concludes by recognizing the passion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. The prayer also should include thanksgivings for God's presence in the church during its history, as well as his presence with the group right now.]

[Read Ephesians 4:1-6.] In taking the Lord's Supper, we recognize the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace. We recognize we are walking together, and there is one body and one Spirit. The body and the Spirit belong to Christ. We discern the body as we take the bread and the cup.

[Give instructions for the Lord's Supper. Elders or other church leaders serve the bread and the cup as members come forward. Members return to their seats and consume the bread and cup as they feel led.]

Lesson 5: 'One of them'

The disciple Peter was sitting by the fire, warming himself. There were some people milling around outside – some servants and some soldiers. It had been an eventful evening, and Peter was anxious. Inside the house, Jesus was in chains, and he was being interrogated by the Jewish high council. Things were taking a dark turn inside. Peter may have known this. He had followed the mob down from the Garden of Gethsemane and into the courtyard of the high priest. Peter probably knew it wasn't going well inside. So, he sat there, warming himself by the fire. All four of the gospel accounts record what happened next (Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-18, 25-27). Peter denied Jesus three times. Peter denied he even knew Jesus. And here's the central claim people made to one another about Peter – "This man is one of them." Peter denied it. By the end of this episode, Peter was weeping.

If you were to read through the Bible, and were to pay attention, you would notice a very specific emphasis on the idea of "family." The notion of family, of people being members first and foremost of families, is embedded in the stories of the Bible. One of the least favorite parts of daily Bible reading, at least for many Christians, are those days when we encounter the genealogies. They seem to us only as long, boring lists of names. But to the people of the ancient world, those genealogies were more than that. To the people in the ancient world, those genealogies were not just a list of names. No, they formed the very essence of a person's identity. This is because in those genealogies, we learn about that person's family. And in the ancient world, family was everything. In the ancient world, your identity was not based necessarily on who you were as an individual but instead on what group to which you belonged. The group you belonged to made up a core part of your identity. Those inside the group were your people, and those outside the group were not your people. A firm boundary was set in place. You wouldn't have been just "you" – an individual with certain talents and skills. No, you would have been a member of a group – a family. You would have felt responsible to your family – to bring it honor and not shame – and the good of the whole group had primacy in your life.[220]

And so we think about Peter running away into the night, weeping violently. What had happened? Well, someone made a claim that Peter was a member of Jesus' group. "This man is

[220] Malina (1986), 19.

one of them." And Peter was, indeed, a member of Jesus' group. What we can see as we read Scripture is that Jesus was creating a new kind of family as he was putting together his followers. It maintained all the same expectations that any biological family would have maintained. And Peter was a member of this new family. He, indeed, was "one of them." And yet, this was a voluntary family. No one is required to join. And Peter in that moment denied he was a member of Jesus' new family. In doing so, he brought shame on the family and shame on himself. And he wept because of the disgrace.

During our past two Sunday morning services, we have talked about how the church was designed by God to operate as a family – as a "family" in the ancient Mediterranean sense of the word. That means it's a family that is bound closely by the affection members have for one another. We saw last week the love that was shared between the members of the churches of Paul. Today, we will consider the unity that is to exist within this new "family" of God.

The household of God

It is worth pointing out again the testimony of Scripture as it relates to this new group to which every Christian becomes a part. The apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians that we all, as Christians, have been adopted into the family of God. Paul wrote, "he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:5). We are adopted through Jesus Christ – that is, through faith in him. Paul later wrote to the Ephesians, "you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:18). Again, here is the idea of being an insider or an outsider – members of the household or "strangers and aliens." There is a clear distinction. Within the family, there is a unity of identity. The servant girl declared about Peter, "This man is one of them," and neither she nor Peter knew the import of what she was saying. Peter was a member of the budding household of God. He was one of them.

The common kinship believers have in the household of God – if we were to look at it from an ancient Mediterranean perspective – would help us to understand some of the scriptures we read in the New Testament that point to the unity of the church. In ancient New Testament families, siblings did not bring shame on one another. In fact, they would go to great lengths to cover over anything that might be shameful within the household. Also, siblings would refuse to compete with one another. If faced with a public competition or comparison against a sibling, the stronger sibling would always defer – so as not to bring dishonor onto any member of the family. This was because to dishonor one member of the family was to dishonor the whole family. The ancient philosopher Plutarch, who lived just after the time of Christ, wrote, "it is ... of no slight importance to resist the spirit of contentiousness and jealousy among brothers when it first creeps in over trivial matters, practicing the art of making mutual concessions, of learning to take defeat, and of taking pleasure in indulging brothers rather than in winning victories over them."[221]

If Plutarch was describing ideal family relations in the ancient Mediterranean world, then the church was set up to mimic those as it brought together the believing community. The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called ... eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians

[221] Quoted in deSilva (2000), 167.

4:1-6). The church family was to walk in unity. There was to be a bond of peace between members of the church, and there was one Father in this family.

The apostle Paul says much the same in his letter to the Philippians. Members of the church were to be united, "standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel" (Philippians 1:27). Still more, the church was to be "of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves" (Philippians 2:2-3). And even more, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:14-15). Here we see more family language – the "children of God" – but we also see a deference to one another. Members were to be humble in their relations with their siblings in Christ. They were not to grumble or dispute. They were to elevate their brothers and sisters at their own expense. There's also a hint of the common ancient Mediterranean dichotomy between family insiders and outsiders – a family maintains its internal honor despite living in a "crooked and twisted generation." But above all, the church was to be united.

Unity, even when we disagree

And yet, it can be hard to maintain unity, as the early church discovered and as we still discover today. After all, people sometimes do things we don't like or things that bring us harm. This is tough business in our current culture, which highly values personal "rights." In our justice system, we have the right to sue others when we are aggrieved about something. But something like this never would have happened in an ancient Mediterranean family. If a brother were to sue another brother, the whole family would have been brought to shame. This makes sense of texts like 1 Corinthians 6, where Paul criticized the church in Corinth because members were suing one another in the secular courts. Paul wrote, "I say this to your shame" (1 Corinthians 6:5). The Corinthians were shaming the entire household of God by their selfish behavior – because they could not live in unity. Paul wrote, "Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?" He said it was better for church members to be cheated than to bring shame on the entire family of God.

Many Christians today can relate to a believer who thinks his or her rights have been violated by another member of the church. Certainly, there are some instances where there ought to be no tolerance of harm by one believer against another – like in the case of sexual or physical abuse. But most of the time, the offenses – like what Plutarch pointed out above – are about "trivial matters." No division ought to exist between brothers and sisters in Christ over such things. This teaching has echoes of Jesus' own exhortation to his followers: "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). The household of God is to live in unity. Jesus went even further in Matthew 18:15-35. Forgiveness and reconciliation within the church family are paramount. And we can notice how many times in that passage Jesus uses the term "brother." The passage begins and ends with that term.[222] Siblings in Christ were to live in unity.

What about our rights?

[222] Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 66-67.

And so members of the church are to let go of perceived offenses levied against them by their fellow members. They also are to curb their own so-called "rights" in order to maintain unity in the church. Also in 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul said church members were not to use their "freedom" in Christ if it might harm the consciences of their fellow church members. At the time, this applied to numerous aspects of the Old Testament law that no longer held sway over Christian behavior. Paul wrote he would be sensitive to the law if that would help his brothers and sisters: "therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble" (1 Corinthians 8:13). Paul later would write to the Romans, "For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. ... It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble" (Romans 14:15, 21). Pulling back from hurting a brother or sister takes a higher priority than a believer's own "freedom" in Christ.[223]

This, too, can be a hard sell in the modern church - like allowing oneself to be wronged by a fellow church member rather than retaliating in a secular courtroom. Americans enjoy their rights and their freedoms. To hold back from exercising those might be considered a form of oppression. But, nevertheless, this was the way of ancient Mediterranean families, and it is the way of the church. We might find it interesting that the same Peter who denied his place in the family of Jesus followers later came to expect others in the church family to walk in lockstep with one another. Perhaps he did not want them to make the same mistake he did. "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (1 Peter 3:8).

Application

Much more could be said about unity within the ancient Mediterranean family and this new family of the church. But several applications emerge here.

First, a Christian must learn to take his or her identity first from the church, rather than from anything else. Like an ancient Mediterranean man or woman, our identity comes from the family to whom we belong – and our Father is God and our household is Christ's. This is a completely different way of looking at ourselves – contrary to the ways of this world, which prizes individualism and human merit over community connection. But Paul did write, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). This speaks of a new identity that is no longer ours – but his.

Second, church members must learn to overlook offenses that come at them from their fellow church members. Certainly, we cannot allow major forms of abuse to run rampant in the church. But trivial things ought to remain trivial. We ought to consider the needs of the overall church family to be more important than those of ourselves personally.

Third, Christians should carefully consider how to build up so-called weaker brothers and sisters rather than run roughshod over them. We might want to make matters of our rights and freedoms in Christ paramount in our spiritual lives. But when our rights run up against the consciences of our brothers and sisters in the church, we must learn to pump the brakes. We want to cherish and protect our siblings in Christ rather than harm them.

Discussion questions

[223] deSilva (2000), 214.

1) What kind of changes might an average American Christian – who grew up in a world of radical individualism – need to make so that his or her identity is better connected to his or her church family? Is it simply a matter of attending church meetings, or is there more to it than that?

2) Considering Paul's discouragement of lawsuits among believers – and an ancient family's concern for protecting the honor of its members and itself as a whole – how might a church handle major hurts among its members? What is the solution, if secular courts are discouraged? And when might the use of secular courts be unavoidable?

3) What kinds of things – such as rights, freedoms, or opinions about political or scriptural issues – might we need to give up in order to bolster unity in our church family?

A homily about communal prayer

One of the practices in which we are engaging this month is the practice of communal prayer. I have been giving you a series of things to remember, to consider, and to pray about. This is not an exercise simply to stimulate sentimentalism about our church. It is more than that. Our end desire is to look for ways in which God has worked in the life of our church in the past, and how he may be working in the life of our church in the present.

Moses reminded the Israelites about their history. They were cowering at the edge of the Promised Land, afraid of the giants they thought they would encounter there. And Moses said,

> "The Lord your God who goes before you will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes, and in the wilderness, where you have seen how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you went until you came to this place." (Deuteronomy 1:30-31)

Prayer need not only be about bringing our requests to God. Prayer also can be about looking for the ways in which God has moved in our lives as individuals and – even more importantly – as a church family. Moses could see the way in which God fought for Israel and the way in which God carried them. God was with them, as we know God has been with us all these years as a church.

It was important to Moses to see those movements of God among the people and then to proclaim them. In our times of communal prayer, we ask God to show us how he has moved among us. We recall events, both good and bad, in our history, and we look for God in those moments. And then we share the results of our prayers. We talk it out. And in the praying and the talking, perhaps we can begin to understand God's plan for us.

All of this helps us chart our future. After we look back, we can look forward. God WILL himself fight for us.

Gathering #6: Home group meeting
Topic: Family sharing in the ancient Mediterranean world

Communal prayer

[This follows a time of gathering prayer requests and praise reports, and it immediately precedes the celebration of the Lord's Supper.]

During this study, we are considering what it might look like for the church to live its life like a family. Part of being a family is recognizing our identity as a family – a family that has its own history, that has its own strengths, and that has its own weaknesses as well. Today, as we move toward our time of Communion, we will consider our "sin history."[224]

Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? (Luke 14:34)

He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

Please close your eyes and begin to recall events in the life of our church where sin was present. For example, consider times when we – as a church – have been proud, envious, unjust, uncommunicative, greedy, or resentful. When have we been faithless toward God or unloving toward people? Recall the circumstances surrounding those episodes in the life of the church. What was going on in the church and around the church during these times. This is our sin history, and a healthy look at our own missteps is a valuable way to move forward. Let God lead you as you think. Pay close attention to what moments of sin come into focus for you.

[Give the group a moment to remember.]

Now, pay attention to what impresses you the most about one of the events that has come to your mind. Where do we need to be vigilant as a church? In what ways could the "salt" lose its saltiness?

[Give the group a moment to think.]

Now take that moment to God. Ask God what it is he would have you to know today about us as a church family as a result of the things you've been pondering. Listen for his response.

[Give the group a moment to pray.]

Amen. We will talk for a few moments now about what events in the life of the church came to mind as you considered our "sin history." [Have people share with the group.] What were the emotions, images, and phrases that stand out from those times, and what might God have us to know about ourselves from those moments? [Invite sharing.]

[224] The following exercise is based loosely on English (1992), 104-108.

The Lord's Supper

[Offer a prayer for the Lord's Supper. The prayer begins with the intercessions that were gathered earlier in the service and concludes by recognizing the passion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. The prayer also should include thanksgivings for God's presence in the church during its history, as well as his presence with the group right now.]

[Read 2 Corinthians 7:8-9.] When the apostle Paul wrote to any church, he wrote to one body. And that body can experience all the emotions any individual can feel – longing, mourning, zeal, grief, or repentance. We take this Communion "in remembrance" of Jesus Christ. We remember his body and blood. We remember the cross, the tomb, and the resurrection. And we remember that Jesus is coming back again. And we discern the body of Christ as it exists on earth today. We recall our own sin, both as individuals and as the church – as the bride of Christ.

[Give instructions for the Lord's Supper. Elders or other church leaders serve the bread and the cup as members come forward. Members return to their seats and consume the bread and cup as they feel led.]

Lesson 6: Family sharing in the ancient Mediterranean world

One of the earliest evaluations of Christianity and the church by a non-Christian author came in the second century by a Greek writer of satire named Lucian. In his *The Passing of Peregrinus*, Lucian wrote about a man who lived a dishonest life in order to take advantage of the generosity of Christians by pretending to be one of them. Of course, the huckster eventually wound up in prison because the authorities saw him as a Christian. So it went in the ancient world! Below is what happened to Peregrinus, according to Lucian. Remember, this is a fictional account, but it gives us a good look at a common public perception of the church in its first two centuries:

> They [Christians] show incredible speed whenever any such public action is taken; for in no time they lavish their all. So it was then in the case of Peregrinus; much money came to him from them by reason of his imprisonment, and he procured not a little revenue from it. The poor wretches have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody; most of them. Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they all are brothers of one another. ... Therefore they despise all things indiscriminately and consider them common property.[225]

In this cynical account of Christianity from the second century, we see how the religion was perceived as one in which believers freely gave of their material possessions to one another. They would sacrifice their wealth and their time to help one of their own who was in need. This isn't particularly surprising to us, as we read in Scripture of the early church, "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:34-35).

Knowing what we know about ancient Mediterranean families, we should not be surprised that this, too – the sharing of material possessions – was a key component in family life

[225] Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus,* 13.

in the ancient world. That is, in setting up the church, Jesus had just this kind of thing in mind for the church to be – family members who were bound in all things to each other. And what Lucian was cynically describing of the church, he could easily have straight-forwardly described of any family in his culture. Some of the ancient sources will show us more about the sharing that existed in an ancient family.

Wanting nothing in return

When it comes to generosity, it is helpful to define our terms. It is one thing to give something away to another person. But the question that we must ask ourselves is what, exactly, do we expect that other person to do in return for us? For instance, it is not uncommon for us to see a company or a wealthy individual give a large donation to a school or a university – only to watch later as that company or individual's name is hoisted up on the side of a building. In our culture, honor and some very clear benefits are bestowed on those who give public gifts.

The notion of "reciprocity" has been discussed by scholars. Reciprocity deals with the exchanging of resources with others in order to gain a mutual benefit. You get something out of it, and I get something out of it. "Balanced reciprocity" carries the idea of meeting the interests of both people in the exchange. I get something, and you get something – at the same time.[226] Nothing is forgotten. I know exactly what I gave you, and when I gave it. And I'm going to expect – with balanced reciprocity – that you give me the equivalent in return. There are other forms of reciprocity, however. "Generalized reciprocity" is when I give something to you, and I do not expect anything back. We don't keep score about what's given, when it's given, or how much is given. The key factor here is that you get what you need. There is no obligation on your part to return something to the giver.[227] Now, a third type of reciprocity is "negative reciprocity." This is where I try to get something from someone else but try to orchestrate it so that I don't have to give anything back at all.[228] In other words, it costs you something and me nothing.

Now, which of these three forms of reciprocity might be at play in an ancient Mediterranean family? By now, we are coming to understand these families operated as a cohesive unit, and so generalized reciprocity would be common within the family. Members would give without expecting anything in return.

Sharing with family members

I've provided you with that theoretical overview of reciprocity so you can consider the sharing you do in your own life and with whom you do that sharing. Certainly, even for a modern American, we have different expectations of reciprocity when we extend some gift or product or service to another person. In some cases, we want something equal in return. I'll help you with your yard work this weekend. But you and I both know that if I need something done in the coming months, you'll be there to help. In other cases, we're hoping to get something for nothing – like a direct payment in the government's next economic stimulus plan. But in our closest relationships, like with our children or our parents or perhaps with our biological siblings or extended families, we'll give without expecting anything back. There is no obligation on the recipient to respond in kind.

For ancient Mediterranean families, there was only one way to give – and that was through generalized reciprocity of all of a person's resources. This included material goods like

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[226] Malina (1986), 102.
[227] Ibid., 102.
[228] Ibid., 103.

food, clothing, and shelter, and it extended to other forms of "resources" like military power and strength, such as to avenge one's relatives.[229] Family members would willingly share their possessions with one another. Children would regularly provide for the needs of their parents. If a sibling found himself or herself in need, additional siblings would come to assist. In fact, all a sibling had to do was make a need known and his or her siblings would be there in support. Part of this came from the shared understanding that everything in a family's possession belonged to all the members.

Plutarch, a philosopher who lived just after the time of Christ, wrote brothers are " to use in common a father's wealth and friends and slaves" in the same way "one soul makes use of the hands and feet and eyes of two bodies."[230] We can see here the mindset of holding things in common with one another within a family, even if some possessions technically were "mine" and others "yours." The dividing of an inheritance likewise was to be done with generalized reciprocity between siblings. Plutarch said siblings were to defer to each other to allow each family member to receive what was preferable and suitable to each. Siblings were not to try to outmaneuver each other because then they would lose "the greatest and most valuable part of their inheritance, a brother's friendship and confidence."[231]

Family giving in the ancient Jewish world

The famous Jewish historian Josephus, who lived just after the time of Christ, lived a very eventful life. Among his professions – before he was captured by the Romans – was that of a commander of Jewish forces in Galilee. Josephus experienced success in this role, and one of his chief concerns was keeping peace in Galilee among the factions that operated there. As it happened, Josephus on multiple occasions could have accepted bribes from the people over whom he had authority, but he confessed to never having abused his power – even to the point of not putting his enemies to death. But Josephus did say this in his autobiography:

> I was now about the thirtieth year of my age; in which time of life it is a hard thing for any one to escape the calumnies of the envious, although he restrain himself from fulfilling any unlawful desires, especially where a person is in great authority. Yet did I preserve every woman free from injuries; and as to what presents were offered me, I despised them, as not standing in need of them. Nor indeed would I take those tithes, which were due to me as a priest, from those that brought them. Yet do I confess, that I took part of the spoils of those Syrians which inhabited the cities that adjoined to us, when I had conquered them, and that I sent them to my kindred at Jerusalem.[232]

You may notice how Josephus refused to admit to any sort of abuse of power, and he didn't even accept material goods given to him in relation to his role as a priest, which was part of his lineage. But Jospehus did "confess" to sending some of the spoils of his military victories to his family in Jerusalem.

We can find more of this kind of generalized reciprocity – or unconditional generosity between family members – occurring in the ancient world. The Book of Tobit, an ancient Jewish narrative that dates to the late third or early second century BC and that is part of the Catholic Bible, records multiple episodes of reciprocity between family members. The story's main character, Tobit, noted his own care for his family, especially his siblings. "In the days of

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[229] Hellerman (2001), 47.
[230] deSilva (2000), 170.
[231] Ibid., 170-171.
[232] Josephus, *The Life of Flavius Josephus,* Chapter 15.

Shalmaneser I performed many acts of charity to my brethren. I would give my bread to the hungry and my clothing to the naked; and if I saw any one of my people dead ... I would bury him."[233]

In another story of the sharing of material possessions in ancient Mediterranean families, two ancient sources – Josephus and 1 Maccabees – tell the tale of the treaty between Sparta and Judah about three centuries before the time of Christ. The two sides envisioned a blood relationship between the nations. Josephus recorded the king of Sparta saying, "The Jews and the Lacedaemonians are of one race and are related by descent from Abraham. It is right, therefore, that you as our brothers should send to us to make known whatever you may wish. We also shall do this, and shall consider what is yours as our own, and what is ours we shall also share with you."[234] The writer of 1 Maccabees recorded the king as saying, "We on our part write to you that your cattle and your property belong to us, and ours belong to you."[235]

Application

So what can we make of these texts as they relate to the sharing of material possessions within an ancient Mediterranean family? Several take-aways rise to the top:

First, family members in the ancient world did not give to their kin with an eye toward getting something in return. Rather, they gave simply because a family member had a special status in a person's life, and there was a special compulsion to share with him or her. In these giving relationships, no score was kept, and there was no obligation on the part of the recipient to return the favor in kind. Of course, if the tables eventually were turned, and the giver found himself or herself in a financial bind, aid was almost certain to come from a family member – again without an obligation to repay.

Second, ancient family members kept a special eye on their kin. They were aware of the needs of their family and took measures of their own accord to make sure their relatives were adequately supplied. Josephus, for instance, didn't record a special need of his family members in Jerusalem. He didn't indicate they asked him for help. Rather, he just sent some of the spoils of war home to them – because that's simply what family members did for each other. They were mindful of their families' needs.

Third, ancient family members tended to view their possessions as something held in common. The concept of personal property didn't seem to have been abandoned. However, the closeness of kin enabled one family member to see – like the Spartan king – possessions of another relative as something that were available to him or her should the need arise. Private property did not have the rigid boundaries around it that it does today. It wasn't, "It's mine, not yours." Rather, an ancient man or woman might say to a relative, "It's mine, and yours."

Discussion questions

[233] Quoted in Hellerman (2001), 49.
[234] Hellerman (2001), 49.
[235] Ibid., 49.

1) What is the modern American instinct when a person receives something from another person? In what ways does this depend on where the gift originates – a family member, a neighbor, an acquaintance, or a stranger?

2) How in tune are Christians to the material needs of their fellow church members? In what ways is "generalized reciprocity" difficult to do – for the giver or receiver – in the modern church family?

3) How might the acts of giving and receiving – and of sharing things in common – be affected by the high value our culture places on individualism?

A homily about communal prayer

In leading off the apostle Paul's last instructions to the Colossian church, he gave the congregation this instruction:

"Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving." (Colossians 4:2)

We know the apostle Paul was writing to the church. This was a communal command. And the church's corporate tradition – still young in those days – always was to pray.[236]

Of the early days after the ascension, Luke wrote, "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (Acts 1:14). Later, the apostles told the church they had a sacred duty that could not be put aside: "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). And Paul wrote to the Roman church about what it means to be a church: "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer" (Romans 12:12). The idea is straight-forward: The church is to be a corporate prayer warrior. It is to dedicate itself to the practice of prayer, and to persist in it no matter what.

But the church also was to be "watchful in it." There's a sense here of being wary of danger. And there's a sense of being spiritually alert. And when we pray as a community, we must practice this watchfulness. We gather together knowing Satan would rather we didn't. We gather together wanting to maintain our "saltiness." We enter into prayer with our spirits attune to our communal risks. Where have we entered into a funk as a church? Where has Satan or our weak-wills gotten the upper hand? Where have we yielded victory to the flesh? This is being watchful and spiritually aware as a community. And as we pray, and as we share the results of our prayer with each other, we can begin to discern where we've been and where God would like to lead us. And so as a church – as the family of God – we will pray with watchfulness.

And we will pray with thanksgiving. In everything, for the church, there is thanksgiving. It perhaps is the ultimate shield of protection for the saints of God – to remember the blessings of being his children. Our thanksgiving – the same thanksgiving that opens the Lord's Supper in prayer – pushes back against the forces of evil that would cause us to despair.

And so there is a lot bound up in this one command of Paul, closing out the Colossian correspondence: "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving." May we follow through.

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[236] Michael F. Bird, *Colossians/Philemon* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 120.

Gathering #7: Sunday morning worship service
Topic: Family sharing in the church

Communal prayer

[This follows a time of gathering prayer requests and praise reports, and it immediately precedes the celebration of the Lord's Supper.]

During this study, we are considering what it might look like for the church to live its life like a family. Part of being a family is recognizing our identity as a family – a family with its own history, its own strengths, and its own weaknesses. Today, as we move toward our time of Communion, we will consider significant events in the life of our church. And we will do this in the presence of Christ.[237]

> And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Please close your eyes and begin to recall the history of our church. Pick an event – a single event – in the history of our church that had a significant impact on the church family. You may use our church's "history line" as your guide, or you may think of another event in the life of our church that is not on our history line. We've each been members of this church for varying lengths of time, so your event could come from the distant past or it could come from within the past few months. It doesn't matter. Just pick an event and dwell on it. The first event that comes to mind is likely the one you need to consider. Ponder the emotional and spiritual impact of that event on our church. And as you contemplate this event, recognize that you are not alone. Do this with an acknowledgment of the presence of Christ, who is with us.

[Give the group a moment to remember.]

With that event in mind, now picture this church – the family of God – as an extension of the risen Lord in the world. The apostle Paul said we all, as a church, are being transformed into the same image, the image of Christ, from one degree of glory to another. What is it about that event in the life of our church that demonstrates "glory of the Lord" – that is, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? Use your imagination, and prayerfully consider this question. Some events are a mark of life, while some indicate in some way the death of something. And still others demonstrate resurrection. What about the event you have remembered?

[Give the group a moment to imagine.]

Now take to God that significant moment in the history of our church. Ask God what it is he would have you to know today about us as a church family as a result of the things you've been pondering. Listen for his response.

[Give the group a moment to pray.]

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[237] The following exercise is adapted from English (1992), 123-125.

Amen. What events came to your minds during this time of prayer, and how do they demonstrate to us the glory of the Lord? [Invite sharing.]

The Lord's Supper

[Offer a prayer for the Lord's Supper. The prayer begins with the intercessions that were gathered earlier in the service and concludes by recognizing the passion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. The prayer also should include thanksgivings for God's presence in the church during its history, as well as his presence with the group right now.]

[Read Ephesians 4:15-16.] The apostle Paul pictured life in the church as a family – and as a body. This is a body that is supposed to "grow up in every way into ... Christ." We might want to say we are a collection of individuals who put our faith in Jesus Christ. But we are more than that. We are joined and held together. And we are "growing up." As we take the Lord's Supper, we discern the body of Christ.

[Give instructions for the Lord's Supper. Elders or other church leaders serve the bread and the cup as members come forward. Members return to their seats and consume the bread and cup as they feel led.]

Lesson 7: In the church family, my stuff is mine. And it's yours.

The disciple Peter listened to Jesus tell a wealthy young man what he must do to inherit eternal life (Mark 10:17-31). The young man had done a good job with his life, following the commandments of the law since he was a child. But then Jesus said the young man lacked something. He needed to sell everything he owned and give it to the poor. And then the young man needed to follow Jesus. Peter watched the man's reaction to this shocking instruction. I suppose it was evident in his facial expression, in his demeanor. The man was disheartened. We can picture his shoulders drooping as he turned to walk away. Jesus then offered a strange teaching about wealth and entering the kingdom of God. Quite simply, it is hard to enter the kingdom of God if you have wealth. Jesus reset human expectations about wealth. It seems not much good comes from the accumulation of wealth. It puts one on the wrong side of the eye of the needle. Peter responded by noting the disciples had left all they had to follow Jesus – "See, we have left everything and followed you." They no longer had any semblance of wealth. Everything had been abandoned. At this point, Jesus made a promise.

> Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29-30)

Jesus promised Peter that everyone who left his or her family or material possessions in order to follow Jesus would have a hundred times more of each – family and material possessions – as a result.[238] And the reality of those new, hundredfold houses and lands and family members comes "now in this time." In other words, Jesus was establishing a new family here on earth that would operate as an ancient Mediterranean family, where brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers

[238] Hellerman (2001), 66-67.

cared for each others' material needs. Mutual sharing was the norm in such families, and the church was created to be just such a family.

In this lesson, we will take a look at how Jesus and the New Testament writers described the mutual sharing that ought to go on within the church – and how that sharing took after the household dynamics within an ancient Mediterranean family.

The ancient family that shared

We already have studied together the way in which Jesus has described the church as a family, and the above passage is a key text pointing to this truth. And we've taken a look at how the church modeled itself after the ancient Mediterranean family in the sense that the "brothers and sisters" shared mutual affection for one another – they loved each other – and how they lived in unity together. We would probably find it unsurprising that these ancient family members – out of that sense of affection and unity – made a practice of sharing their material possessions with one another. We can recall how the very identity of these ancient people was rooted in their family identity. Simon Peter, you might know, was the "son of John" (John 1:42), and James and John were the sons of Zebedee (Mark 1:19), and Levi was the son of Alphaeus (Mark 2:14). The Bible records these men in this way because that's just the way you recognized someone in those days – by their family name. Even characters from the Bible who were passersby, relatively speaking, were recognized based on their lineage – like blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus (Mark 10:46).

And so we need not be surprised the mutual sharing of material possessions among family members – among those with whom a person shared an identity – was the norm. Family members shared everything with each other, like food, clothing, and shelter, as well as physical or military strength in the midst of confrontation. And this giving wasn't a tit-for-tat kind of giving, where I scratch your back with the expectation that next week you will scratch mine. Rather, it was a giving that was based on nothing other than the desire to support a family member. According to one scholar of the ancient Mediterranean world, this was an "other-centered" kind of giving, where a family member "shares resources without specification of some return obligation in terms of time, quantity, or quality."[239]

The ancient church that shared

Because of this, we ought not to be surprised by Jesus' declaration that those who leave their biological families behind should expect to come into contact with a new kind of family that provides for the needs of every one of its members. In the church, Jesus seemed to be saying, no one will go without the necessary material goods – houses and lands – and no one will go without the necessary familial support of brothers, sisters, or mothers. All of that is provided for a Christian when he or she joins the church because a church operates with the mutual sharing that was normative in the ancient Mediterranean family.

We see this very early in the life of the church. In the book of Acts, Luke describes life in the church:

> And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belonging and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all

[239] Ibid., 47.

> the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44-47)

We see here the mutual sharing that was part of the church from its very earliest days. "As any had need," Luke said, people would give to meet those needs. There is no sense of compulsion here or a total loss of private property in some communist sense. Notice, how people continued to own their own private homes – a theme that continues through the New Testament. But we begin to get the idea that the "brothers and sisters" of the church were looking out for each other like biological brothers and sisters would have looked out for each other. No need went unmet. Luke added to this picture just a couple of chapters later in Acts:

> Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

Again, the picture is the same. Even houses – yes, houses – were sold for the benefit of the brothers and sisters in Christ. The mutual sharing was so pervasive and thorough that there weren't any "needy people" within the family of the church. Everyone's needs were met.

Relief to the "brothers"

The church maintained this kind of sharing even as it expanded outside the walls of Jerusalem. And when that sharing didn't occur, it was duly noted by the writers of the New Testament. In Corinth, we can remember the apostle Paul's sharp criticism of church members because they were suing each other in secular court (1 Corinthians 6:1-10). Paul essentially was saying brothers don't sue brothers! One of the core features of an ancient Mediterranean family was siblings did not try to avenge wrongs that were committed against them by other family members.[240] Part of the mutual sharing in these families was not just the sharing of possessions, but also the sharing of honor, forgiveness, and grace.

But the sharing of possessions and wealth never fell out of view for the early church. The apostle Paul seemed obsessed with collecting funds for the poor Christians in Jerusalem, and he made his appeal in a way that brought out the family ideals that undergirded it. If you recall from Acts, the prophet Agabus warned of a famine that would bring harm to the church in Judea. "So the disciples determined, every one according to his own ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 11:29-30, emphasis added). Notice the word "brothers" in this passage. The church was a family.

Paul is seen at various points in his letters working to support this ongoing collection. In 2 Corinthians, the idea of mutual support for one another in the church comes to the forefront: "For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness" (2 Corinthians 8:12-14). Here, we see the idea of the church not only viewing itself in its local sense as the family of God but also viewing Christians in other parts of the world as the extended "family" of God.

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[240] Ibid., 105.

New Testament scholar David deSilva wrote, "No single group of Christians was permitted to lose sight of the fact that it was part of the vastly extended and ever-growing global family of God."[241] We can see this over and over again in the New Testament. Paul told the Roman church, "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality" (Romans 12:13). Paul told the Galatian church, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10, emphasis added). James wrote, "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?" (James 2:15-16, emphasis added). And John wrote, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" (1 John 3:16-17, emphasis added).

The early church and all things in common

This attitude – that the church is a family of the ancient Mediterranean variety – lingered for well more than 100 years after the time of Christ. In about the year 200 AD, a theologian named Tertullian, who lived in Carthage in the African province of the Roman empire, wrote this: "We call ourselves brothers. ... So, we who are united in mind and soul have no hesitation about sharing what we have. Everything is in common among us – except our wives."[242] Tertullian also wrote about a common fund used for the support and burial of the poor, for children who had no parents, for older men who were confined to their homes – and for extreme benevolence cases, like shipwrecked sailors and those in prison.[243]

Another theologian from about the same time period, Clement of Alexandria, took a similar approach. We may recall the story that began this lesson, as Peter and the disciples were learning from Jesus about the dangers of wealth. Clement advised against the wealthy members of the church giving away all their possessions, although some Christians had done that very thing. Instead, Clement argued it would be impossible to meet needs of members of the church if all its members already were in need. He argued Jesus' admonition to the rich man – something that fits well in the church-as-family model – was for those with material resources to use them with this stipulation: "that He commands them to be shared, to give drink to the thirsty and bread to the hungry, to receive the homeless, to clothe the naked." Clement wrote that those with wealth ought to understand their wealth as given to them from God and ought to be used for the ministry of the gospel. Further, if the rich man, "knows that he possesses them for his brothers' sakes rather than his own ... [he is] a ready inheritor of the kingdom of heaven." Wrote Clement, "But if we owe our lives to the brethren, and admit such a reciprocal compact with the Saviour, shall we still husband and hoard up the things of the world which are beggarly and alien to us and ever slipping away? Shall we shut out from one another that which in a short time the fire will have?"[244]

Some fifty years earlier, a Christian writer named Justin Martyr wrote, "We who once took most pleasure in the means of increasing our wealth and property now bring what we have into a common fund and share with everyone in need; we who hated and killed one another and

[241] deSilva (2000), 216.
[242] Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 108.
[243] Ibid., 108-109.
[244] Quoted in Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 107-108.

would not associate with men of different tribes because of their different customs, now ... live together."[245]

Application

Much can be said about the mutual sharing of possessions and honor – and forgiveness – within the church. And a lot of questions can be asked about how best to do this. But several applications emerge here:

First, Christians ought to be able to expect to find financial security within the confines of the church – the family of God. This is not a license for laziness or entitlement. However, those so-called "needy" persons among the church are the responsibility of the church. And ancient Mediterranean family – and the early church – would not have let such people, their brothers and sisters in Christ, twist in the wind while waiting for a solution from the government or some other social group, even their own biological families. The testimony of Scripture and early church writings are those people would be cared for, fully, by the church.

Second, this means every member of the church has an obligation to look out for the needs of their brothers and sisters in Christ and, when necessary, to part with his or her own financial resources in order to help. We must ask ourselves if we are like that early church that Tertullian described – a people with "no hesitation" about sharing what we have. There are, indeed, stakes to joining the church. It does obligate us to something.

Third, church members have a different view of wealth. It is not to be hoarded, and it isn't necessarily to be blindly given away. Rather, it is to be used to further the kingdom of God. And it is to be removed, if necessary, as a barrier between a person and full discipleship with Christ. All things are given by God, including wealth. And God calls his people to use their resources, whatever they may be, to build up and expand the body of Christ.

Discussion questions

1) What barriers – either intellectual or practical – block the church today from being a secure safety net for its members who may find themselves in need?

2) What obligation do church members have for one another when it comes to material needs that arise in each member's life? Is this something an average church member recognizes when he or she joins a local church?

3) How does the Christian's view of wealth differ from the non-Christian's view of wealth? In what ways does the latter view find its way into the church?

A homily on sharing

As you know, I continue to ask you questions. I continue to push you to share with one another. I keep asking you to share your prayer requests, and I keep asking you to share the results of your own prayers. And I want you to share your thoughts on the things we've been learning and on the Word of God. The apostle Paul said,

> Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it

[245] Quoted in Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 108.

is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:15-16)

We know the body of Christ, joined and held together by every joint, is supposed to grow up into Christ. We understand that the body of Christ is a corporate body. It is a community. Yes, we say it is a family. And growth is something we do together. A hand doesn't grow without the aid of the rest of the body. A foot doesn't grow if it's not connected to the leg. We grow together or, I suppose, we don't grow at all.

And there is a place for sharing in all of this. Paul said we speak as we grow. "Speaking the truth in love," he said, "we are to grow up." To speak the truth can be a hard thing. The truth can wound our sensitive hearts. The truth can bruise our spirits. The truth reveals sin, and it reveals righteousness. The truth turns on the light in our life as a church. And so we grow up by speaking the truth.

But we never forget, because we are a family, that we speak this truth in love. We are humbly transparent, and we are considerate of each others' needs and feelings. Hard truths can be gently put. We can nurse one another along so the burden doesn't become to great. We don't demand. We ask. We speak the truth in love.

And so I will keep asking, keep prodding, keep coaxing you to share – because as we share in truth and love, we grow.

Gathering #8: Home group meeting
Topic: Family loyalty in the ancient Mediterranean world

Communal prayer

[This follows a time of gathering prayer requests and praise reports, and it immediately precedes the celebration of the Lord's Supper.]

During this study, we are considering what it might look like for the church to live its life like a family. Part of being a family is recognizing our identity as a family – a family with its own history, its own strengths, and its own weaknesses. And as a family, filled with the Holy Spirit, we have everything we need to discern who we are and where we ought to be headed. As we move toward our time of Communion, we will consider these things.[246]

Close your eyes and imagine ourselves being with the disciples and listening to the following interchange between Jesus and Peter.

> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.
>
> From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."
>
> Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?" (Matthew 16:13-26)

Keep this episode in your mind. It is possible for a church be deceived. It can get caught in a pattern of deception whereby it unknowingly pursues the things of the world rather than the things of Christ. We can get an inflated view of our gifts, talents and virtues. We can be content with being nice rather than, when needed, confronting sin. We can place too much emphasis on seeking perfection and brilliance in our worship or our group discussions. What patterns of deception do I sense in our community? Where might we be unknowingly pursuing the ways of

[246] The following exercise is adapted from English (1992), 138, 152-153.

the world rather than the things of God? Where might a seemingly positive statement or idea actually be something belonging to Satan?

[Give the group a moment to imagine.]

Jesus drew his disciples toward God, and Peter recognized him as the Christ, the Son of the living God. In what ways in our own history have we as a church family been drawn beyond ourselves and toward Christ? Where might we, like Peter, feel some insecurities about where Christ might be leading us? Where might we be saying, "Far be it from you, Lord!"

[Give the group a moment to remember and to think.]

Now take these things to God. Ask God what he would have you to know today about this church family. Listen for his response.

[Give the group a moment to pray.]

Amen. What patterns of deception came to your mind? What insecurities might we be experiencing as a church as we follow the leading of Christ? [Invite sharing.]

The Lord's Supper

[Offer a prayer for the Lord's Supper. The prayer begins with the intercessions that were gathered earlier in the service and concludes by recognizing the passion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. The prayer also should include thanksgivings for God's presence in the church during its history, as well as his presence with the group right now.]

[Read Matthew 16:24-25.] Jesus told his disciples clearly what their life would entail – a cross and a lost life. As we take the bread and the cup, we do this in remembrance of Jesus and of his cross and his lost life. We proclaim his death. And we proclaim our solidarity with Jesus Christ, our Messiah. We proclaim our solidarity as his church, the body of Christ, a people with crosses taken up and old lives left behind.

[Give instructions for the Lord's Supper. Elders or other church leaders serve the bread and the cup as members come forward. Members return to their seats and consume the bread and cup as they feel led.]

Lesson 8: Family loyalty in the ancient Mediterranean world

Tucked away in the Book of Romans is a fascinating statement by the apostle Paul that touches on the idea of family – and the loyalty a member of an ancient Mediterranean family had toward his or her family. As you may have discerned by now, a serious internal conflict may have arisen for any ancient person considering the claims of Christ. The conflict is this: If a person's first allegiance is supposed to be to Christ, then that person, at least to some extent, must turn aside from his or her biological family. That person must reject the cultural mandate to *first* pledge allegiance to one's own biological family, and especially to one's own biological

siblings. In the ancient world – and in many cultures today – biological families and family members came *first*. Knowing what we know now about ancient Mediterranean families, it was no small thing for Jesus not to respond to the calling of his mother and brothers (Mark 3:31-35). And it was no small thing for Jesus to tell a potential disciple not to return home to bury his father (Matthew 8:21-22; Luke 9:59-60). Jesus even said it was too much for a disciple to return home to say goodbye to his family members (Luke 9:61-62). And so that's the crisis: Jesus is creating a new family to which we must pledge our allegiance *first.* It would be reasonable for a first-century person to ask, "But what about my biological family?" We know these were no small things because family loyalty, which is the topic of this lesson, was a critical part of the cultural expectations within an ancient Mediterranean family. A person was first loyal to his family. Period. To forsake that loyalty for something else was counter-cultural, radical, and even shameful.

And so that brings us back to this fascinating statement by the apostle Paul. The pull to express allegiance to one's family was huge in the ancient world. To be willing to sacrifice oneself for the sake of his or her siblings was quite natural. Even Christians, those who had switched allegiances to the family of God, could feel that pull back to their biological families. If you grow up in a culture that tells you to do one thing, no matter what, it's hard to break free from that. Here's what Paul said to the Romans as he wrote about his fellow Jews, who had rejected the good news of Jesus Christ as their Messiah:

> I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit – that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. (Romans 9:1-3)

The loyalty to one's biological family – and Paul understood the entirety of the Jewish nation, rightfully so, as his biological family – was ingrained in the psyche of ancient men and women. And Paul, the same Paul who understood himself as saved by the grace of Christ – and the same Paul who had been shamed and persecuted and stoned by some of his fellow Jews – could not easily shake that allegiance to his family and nation. He had great sorrow and unceasing anguish because his Jewish brethren had rejected the Messiah. This fact pained Paul – because they were his family! Family loyalty ran deep in the ancient world. And even if Paul had a new family of Jewish and Gentile "brothers and sisters," he still had an emotional pull toward his "old" family. This helps us keep in mind how strong this sense of family loyalty was to people in the ancient Mediterranean world. It is to this topic we now turn.

Family loyalty in ancient Judaism

Paul's expressed willingness to be "cut off" for the sake of his Jewish brothers and sisters was not an uncommon sentiment in ancient writings. To be willing to sacrifice oneself for one's family was quite natural. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, found himself outside the walls of Jerusalem in 70 AD as the Roman legions were putting the city under siege. Certain destruction was coming to the city and the temple. But the Jewish zealots inside those walls were resolute in their determination to resist. Josephus was a Roman prisoner at the time, and all he could think about were his kinsfolk in the city. And so he sent them a message, urging them to surrender.

> I know that I have a mother, a wife, a not ignoble family, and an ancient and illustrious house involved in these perils; and maybe you think that it is on their account that my

> advice is offered. Slay them, take my blood as the price of your own salvation! I too am prepared to die, if my death will lead to your learning wisdom.[247]

Here, Josephus takes the unusual step of offering up his own close kinship group, along with his own life, for the sake of the larger family of the Jewish nation. This is instructive. The ancient Mediterranean mindset put priority first on the group rather than the individual. And based on this anecdote from Josephus, it's clear that the larger the group, the more important it was on the scale of loyalties. So the Jewish nation took priority over the individual family, and the family took priority over the individual person. In the ancient Mediterranean world, family came first.

Ben Sira, a Hellenistic Jewish scribe who was born about 200 years before Christ, wrote about the priorities in ancient life. And he likely wrote about them in a particular order – "agreement between brothers, friendship between neighbors, and a wife and husband who live in harmony."[248] Loyalty to siblings came before friends – and spouses. Again, family came first. Siblings also came before wealth. Ben Sira wrote, "Do not exchange a friend for money, or a real brother for the gold of Ophir."[249]

<u>The Greco-Roman view</u>

Another ancient writer named Plutarch – this one from a Greco-Roman context dating just after the time of Christ – said much the same thing. Brotherhood in the ancient Mediterranean world also took precedence over friendships. Plutarch wrote, "For most friendships are in reality shadows and imitations and images of that first friendship which Nature implanted in children toward parents and in brothers towards brothers."[250] For Plutarch, it was one thing to have a friendship with someone, but the bonds of biology were another thing altogether. There's a bond that is primal within a person that adheres him to his family. Again, family comes first.

In our own culture, we might think of having a good friend, someone with whom we have a tighter emotional bond that with our own siblings. This is fairly common. But there might come a time when a person would have to choose between a friend and a brother if, for instance, a dispute arose between them. In our modern context, with our weaker family bonds, it isn't culturally clear which side a person would choose. It is very possible that the fact a sibling was involved would be something we would try to take out of the equation, and we would try to judge the dispute on its merits – like a literal judge in a court of law. But this is not how it would have worked in the ancient world. Plutarch wrote that in public settings, a sibling would give honor to a fellow sibling.

> But even if we feel an equal affection for a friend, we should always be careful to reserve for a brother the first place in public offices and administrations, and in invitations and introductions to distinguished men, and in general, whenever we deal with occasions which in the eyes of the public give distinction and tend to confer honour, rending thus to Nature the appropriate dignity and prerogative.[251]

Again, a deeper connection than mere affection or friendship is at play between siblings. It is connected to nature itself and is a reason why family came first in the ancient Mediterranean world.

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[247] Quoted in Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 17.
[248] Quoted in Hellerman (2001), 36.
[249] Quoted in Hellerman (2001), 36.
[250] Quoted in Aasgaard (1997), 170.
[251] Quoted in Aasgaard (1997), 170.

Family loyalty today

This family-first mentality exists today in other parts of the world. Just because our modern American culture is strongly individualist does not mean the world as a whole maintains this perspective. Scholar Joseph Hellerman tells the story of Juan Jose Espiritu who moved to the city of Tijuana as a 13-year-old with his divorced mother and five younger siblings.[252] Juan dropped out of school in order to work during his teenage years to support his family. He sacrificed his education and childhood in order to provide education and opportunities to his siblings. For Juan, family came first. In a Los Angeles Times story, Juan was quoted as saying, "Perhaps one of them will become a doctor. ... That is my desire."[253] Family loyalty was critical to Juan. Sacrificing himself was simply the way to care for his family, because the family came first. It was probably as natural for Juan to do this as it was for the apostle Paul to say of his own kinsfolk, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Romans 9:3).

Application

So what are we to make of the way in which members of ancient Mediterranean families – and families in many places today – were loyal to one another? Several applications come to mind.

First, family members put each other first. If a family member had a need, that need came before the need of the individual person. This is quite counter-cultural for modern Americans who tend to look out for their own needs first.

Second, family members in the ancient Mediterranean world were willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their kinsfolk. We saw this in the examples of Paul and of Josephus and of Juan Espiritu. It was natural for family members to sacrifice themselves for their kin. And in some cases, the definition of "family" was quite broad – including not just their immediate family but their entire ethnic group.

Third, the loyalty between kinsfolk in ancient families rested on something deeper than simply their relationship with one another. Nature dictated that there was something different and unique in a relation between siblings or family members. The "likability" question wasn't really a factor. Because brothers and sisters were bound by a blood relationship, their loyalties to each other were much stronger than their loyalties to anyone else. Some good food for thought exists here when it comes to the "blood" relationship between members of the family of God.

Discussion questions

1) In what ways have you seen family loyalty, or disloyalty, play out in our own culture? What motivates our loyalties today, if it is not biological relationships?

2) In what circumstances is a person today going to put the needs of any particular group above his or her own individual needs? How common is this today?

3) What are the deepest loyalties a person has in modern American culture? How easily might these loyalties be changed?

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[252] Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 20.
[253] Quoted in Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 20.

A homily on the Lord's Supper

What do we have in common with Jesus Christ? He is divine – the maker of heaven and earth. And yet we do have something in common with him. The writer of Hebrews tells us in chapter 2:

> For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise." (Hebrews 2:10-12)

Here is something we have in common with Christ: We are of the same family as Him. He is not ashamed to call us "brothers and sisters." The one who binds creation together was made perfect through suffering. He entered into our world, a world wracked by sin and death, and he suffered crucifixion in order to give us salvation. And he calls us brothers and sisters with him.

We know that in ancient Mediterranean families a great solidarity existed among siblings. The sibling bond was unbreakable, the strongest of all social bonds available to people living in the first century. And we know it was common among the stronger sibling to defer to the weaker, to never compete with or bring shame on his or her siblings. Rather, the stronger sibling was to invite the weaker siblings into his or her own honor. There was to be commonality.

I have been urging you as we've taken Communion this month to consider the "body" of Christ. We want to "discern" the body as we take the bread and the cup. And so we take the bread and we take the cup and we think about this family, which is bound together in love and loyalty. And we know we have a "brother" who left heaven behind for a little while to dwell among us. And he won't leave us or forsake us. We are now his family. And he invites us into his glory if we would but follow.

And so, as we take Communion, we remember this. We remember Him.

Gathering #9: Sunday morning worship service
Topic: Loyalty in the church family

Communal prayer

[This follows a time of gathering prayer requests and praise reports, and it immediately precedes the celebration of the Lord's Supper.]

During this study, we are considering what it might look like for the church to live its life like a family. Part of being a family is recognizing our identity as a family – a family with its own history, its own strengths, and its own weaknesses. And as a family, filled with the Holy Spirit, we have everything we need to discern who we are and where we ought to be headed. Our desire as a church family is to draw closer to God and to each other. As we move toward our time of Communion, we will consider these things.[254]

Close your eyes and imagine being with Jesus and the disciples and the great crowd of people. Put your self there.

> The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." And they said to him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men. (Mark 6:30-44)

Please use your imaginations. Who do you see in this scene – Jesus, the disciples, the great crowd, this church? As they came back and told Jesus all they had done and taught, what was that exchange with Jesus like? What was the tone of the conversation with the disciples?

[Give the group a moment to imagine.]

Please continue using your imaginations. How does Jesus speak to the crowd? How does he call on the disciples to help him? How does Jesus speak to us on this occasion?

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[254] The following exercise is adapted from English (1992), 125-128.

[Give the group a moment to imagine.]

Now, how do we speak to each other in this event? What would we like to do, and how do we carry on our mission as a church family? How do we, as a community of disciples, listen to the Lord? Consider this prayerfully.

[Give the group a moment to contemplate.]

Amen. What were the chief images or feelings that came to your mind? What might God be saying to us about our own mission and about how we are listening to the Lord? [Invite sharing.]

The Lord's Supper

[Offer a prayer for the Lord's Supper. The prayer begins with the intercessions that were gathered earlier in the service and concludes by recognizing the passion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. The prayer also should include thanksgivings for God's presence in the church during its history, as well as his presence with the group right now.]

[Read John 5:35-40.] Jesus is the bread of life. Those who come to him will neither hunger nor thirst. Those who believe will have eternal life. We take the bread and the cup today in faith in Jesus Christ – in his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and eventual return. He will lose nothing of all that has been given to him. That includes us – this church. His promises are true. Like a loyal brother, he will come for us. Do this in remembrance of him.

[Give instructions for the Lord's Supper. Elders or other church leaders serve the bread and the cup as members come forward. Members return to their seats and consume the bread and cup as they feel led.]

Lesson 9: Loyalty in the church family

I hope it has become clear in this series of lessons – because we now are in our last lesson – that Jesus spent his time on earth proclaiming the good news and establishing the church. And in establishing the church, Jesus was creating a new family where people were bonded together in a "blood" relationship. That is, they were bonded together by the blood of Christ. This family had a Father in heaven. And its members were the adopted children of God. Further, this household of God was to operate *not* like a modern American family, where the break-up of the family seems just as common as its unity. No, the household of God was to operate like an ancient Mediterranean family, where members were deeply affectionate toward one another, where members lived in unity with one another, and where members shared freely of their possessions with one another. Today, we are going to close out this series of lessons by considering how the members of this new family of God, like good ancient Mediterranean family members, were to live lives that were fiercely loyal to their family. The family of God, for the Christian, was to come first.

First, here's a brief story to demonstrate the loyalty that people in the ancient Mediterranean world were to devote to their families. A Samarian king in the Old Testament

named Ahab could look out of his palace on a vineyard. We get the impression that it was an impressive vineyard, maybe stretching as far as the eye could see. And King Ahab decided that he wanted it. And so the king went to the vineyard's owner and asked to buy it. Ahab told the owner, whose name was Naboth, that he wanted the vineyard for a vegetable garden, and the king pledged to give him an even better vineyard for it in return – or at least its value in money. For us, this was a simple contract offer on a piece of real estate. Naboth's response was this: "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers" (1 Kings 21:3). That was it. Ahab went away upset, and the story ended with some vile treachery. But Naboth's answer dictates to us the extent to which ancient people were loyal to their families. Naboth refused an offer of a better vineyard. In our capitalistic and individualistic culture, we might say Naboth was a fool. But more was at work here than finances. This was a matter of kinship and inheritance and the future welfare of his family.[255] Naboth could not agree to such a deal. Such is the family loyalty that pervaded the ancient Mediterranean world. Individual desires and the prospect of wealth always took a backseat to the needs of the family. People were loyal to their families. The family came first.

Loyalty to the family of God

With this kind of loyalty in mind, we can turn to explore the loyalty that was to exist within the church, according to Jesus and the New Testament writers. We ought not to be surprised that loyalty to the family of God was to come before a person's loyalty to any other group. And interestingly enough, the best way Scripture demonstrates this is by showing how a Christian's loyalty to the church was to supersede the loyalty to an ancient person's most prized allegiance: Loyalty to the church was even more important than loyalty to one's own biological family!

We can get a taste of this by looking at what Jesus told people who wanted to join his fellowship. The community of Jesus followers demanded the utmost allegiance, and it was an allegiance that was to come before any other allegiance a person may have. Jesus' family was to come first. On one occasion a man said he would follow Jesus but,

> "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead." (Matthew 8:21-22)

On another occasion, a man approached Jesus and was ready to follow, but,

> "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:61-62)

And yet another time – a time that really is foundational to what we've been studying these past few weeks – Jesus' mother and brothers came seeking him. They thought he was out of his mind, and they wanted to bring him home.

> And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:32-35)

I highlight these three passages because they tell us two things. First, they demonstrate the loyalty ancient Mediterranean people had toward their families. They were to take care of their dead. They were to give honor to their families by offering a proper farewell. And they

[255] Hellerman (2001), 57-58.

were to shelter weaker members of their families – even Jesus! – who might bring the family shame. And even we modern Americans, who often hail from families that are broken, can sympathize with these ancient people, because their desires were reasonable and good. But these passages tell us something else. The second thing they demonstrate to us was Jesus was demanding loyalty within the new family of God – a loyalty that superseded any other loyalty a person may have toward any other group, including that person's family.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright wrote, "the only explanation for Jesus' astonishing command is that he envisaged loyalty to himself and his kingdom-movement as creating an alternative family."[256] And the group dynamics are important here. Ancient people were not radical individualists like modern Americans. A person in first-century Galilee only would leave one group in order to join another group. And so the man who was told by Jesus to leave his dead father – or to depart from his living father who was near death – was being exhorted to leave his old group behind and join the new family of God.[257] Group allegiance was important.

We see this concept again in Jesus' teaching in Luke 14:26. There, Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." The language here is stark, but hate is a word that likely could mean "sever one's relationship" or "leave aside" or "abandon." It's not a matter of intensely disliking a person's biological family. It's a matter of turning to the new family of God.[258] A quick note of clarification is in order here: Jesus was not telling his disciples to abandon their families and never to care for them again. Peter clearly had a relationship with his own biological family after he began following Jesus (Luke 4:38-39). Rather, it is more an issue of degrees of loyalty. The family of God comes first. Then a person's biological family is second. Our relationships with others come third.[259]

New priorities in the family of God

One final example of family loyalty within the church comes from 1 Corinthians 7. As we read this chapter, we understand it – from our modern American perspective – to be primarily about marriage. But instead this chapter primarily is about how a person can keep himself or herself focused on "the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:32). Those things, it turns out, take priority over even the marriage relationship. And we already know that one of the "things of the Lord" is his church![260] A person's relationship with God and his church takes priority even over a person's marriage, although we know these two things can work in concert with each other. The point for Paul is God's "things," God's family, comes first.

More fuel is added to this point when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 7:10-15. Here, Paul discussed marriages between believers and nonbelievers. Very quickly, we see sibling language enter into the picture.

> "To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ... But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved" (1 Corinthians 7:12, 15).

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[256] Quoted in Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (2009), 71.
[257] Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family (2009)*, 71.
[258] Ibid., 69.
[259] Ibid., 69, 74.
[260] Ibid., 91.

The notion of family loyalty in the household of God ought to creep into our minds as we read this text. A first-century reader of this letter would have noticed the contrast between "brother" and "wife." Those relationships call for different loyalties.[261] Certainly, there would have been many cases in the early church where one spouse converted to Christianity while the other spouse remained outside the family of God.[262] These two spouses would have had divided loyalties. One would have been loyal to his or her biological family. The other spouse would have been loyal to the family of God, the church – to his or her brothers and sisters in Christ. And when Paul allowed for divorce, and presumably remarriage, for a "brother or sister" who had been in a marriage to an unbeliever, we can see again the elevation of the family of God, even over the marriage relationship.[263] We must remember here the closest relationship in the ancient world was between siblings, not spouses. Joseph Hellerman notes, "In his discussion of 'mixed marriages,' Paul landed precisely where our studies of Mediterranean family values would lead us to expect him to land. He affirmed the priority of sibling loyalty over spousal loyalty. God's family must come first."[264]

Application

So what should we make of this final aspect of ancient Mediterranean family life and its impact on the establishment of the church? Several points come to mind.

First, if the church was created to be a new kind of family in the mold of these ancient biological families, then the church ought to come first in the life of every believer. Our top priority ought to be for the betterment of the church rather than our own individual needs – like Naboth and his refusal to sell his ancestral vineyard to the king. The consumer mentality that drives so many Christians into and out of local churches ought to come to an end. We aren't in a church to consume spiritual things for ourselves. We are in a church to be part of it, to serve and protect our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to jointly pursue the "family" mission – the sharing of the gospel.

Second, there's really no allowance for fence-sitting in the family of God. We're either loyal to our brothers and sisters in Christ or we are not. Those fellow children of God either have a priority in our lives or they don't. And if they do have priority – and if my loyalty first and foremost is to them – then I ought to be willing to sacrifice my time and resources for them. I don't miss meetings or other opportunities to share with them. Nothing comes before my family.

Third, we must careful re-evaluate all our other loyalties when we decide to become part of God's family – when we decide to become Christians. This includes an evaluation of our loyalties to our own biological families. Jesus promised there would be divisions in biological families because of him (Luke 12:51-53). It's not that we forsake our biological families completely, but our allegiances should shift definitively toward the family of God, the church.

Discussion questions

1) When you think of the idea of being "loyal" to the family of God – of putting it first – what ideas, positive or negative, come to mind? How does disloyalty by members of God's family harm the church?

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[261] Ibid., 93.
[262] Ibid., 92.
[263] Ibid., 93-94.
[264] Ibid., 93.

2) What are some concrete expressions of loyalty to the church family that a person can make? What keeps a person from expressing this kind of loyalty to the church?

3) What other loyalties do modern Americans have that prevents them from fully committing to the family of God?

A homily on eating together

At the end of the Book of Luke, the resurrected Jesus met two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They were talking between themselves about all the things that had happened in recent days – Jesus' crucifixion and the subsequent stories that he had risen from the tomb. For some reason, the disciples did not recognize Jesus as they were walking and talking. The risen one was right there with them. Later, they urged Jesus to have dinner with them. Here's how Luke described it:

> So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread. (Luke 24:29-35).

One of the very first rituals of the church – perhaps *the* very first ritual – is a ritual that is common to all humanity. It is the ritual of eating together. Jesus constantly incorporated meals into the life of the new family he was creating. He ate with tax collectors and sinners. He dined with his disciples. He spread a meal of bread and fish in front of gathered thousands. After his resurrection, he sat by the sea preparing breakfast for his disciples. And, of course, there was the Last Supper, where he broke the bread and share the wine – after dinner. And in the story that started on the road to Emmaus, Jesus revealed himself in the breaking of the bread. Jesus was "at table" with his disciples. That is, they were eating together.

I believe there is something holy about a church that dines together. Yes, there is something holy about a church potluck! A church potluck can symbolize a lot of things. It can symbolize the many-ness and oneness of the church as we each bring our unique gift into this one singular meal. It can symbolize the generosity of God, who provides for all of our needs as we eat together. And it can point us toward the kingdom of God, where all people regardless of their backgrounds can sit together "at table."

And, of course, in the meal, as the church family sits down together to eat, we might just recognize Him. As we look around while we dine and share and laugh, we might "discern" the body.

APPENDIX D

SURVEY RESULTS
Compiled 11/2/20

Below are numerical indicators showing how respondents answered, on average, the pre- and post-study surveys. Each answer was given a numerical value, ranging from 1 for "strongly disagree" to 5 for "strongly agree." All of the answers were tallied and averaged.

Average response to all questions:
Pre – 3.80
Post – 4.20
Change – 0.40

Affection

1. I feel a close emotional connection to three or more members of this church.
Pre – 4.14
Post – 4.64
Change – 0.50

2. There are several church members for whom I would feel emotional distress should they have a serious physical ailment.
Pre – 3.93
Post – 4.71
Change – 0.78

3. If there was a serious disagreement within the church or between members of the church, I would be very bothered by that.
Pre – 4.29
Post – 4.5
Change – 0.21

4. When the church gathers, I know there will be encouraging people with whom I will be able to interact.
Pre – 4.29
Post – 4.79
Change – 0.50

5. When I am forced to miss our church gathering, I feel a strong sense of disappointment.
Pre – 3.64
Post – 4.00
Change – 0.36

Average response to affection questions:
Pre – 4.06
Post – 4.53
Change – 0.47

Unity

6. I feel as if unity within the church is strong.
Pre – 3.79
Post – 4.36
Change – 0.57

7. When I think about my own identity as a person, my membership or participation in this local church is a major part of what I think about.
Pre – 3.79
Post – 4.29
Change – 0.50

8. I have a strong sense that other members of the church are my "brothers" and "sisters."
Pre – 3.71
Post – 4.29
Change – 0.58

9. If another person within the church were to wrong me in some way, I would not respond in kind.
Pre – 3.43
Post – 3.43
Change – 0.00

10. I am willing to set aside my own preferences about church practice for the sake of unity in the church.
Pre – 3.79
Post – 4.07
Change – 0.28

Average response to unity questions:
Pre – 3.70
Post – 4.09
Change – 0.39

Sharing

11. I have no problem sharing my thoughts and feelings with the church about most topics, including spiritual ones.

Pre – 3.43
Post – 4.14
Change – 0.71

12. If the church needed money for a special project, there is a good chance I would say "yes" and help out.
Pre – 3.93
Post – 4.29
Change – 0.36

13. I don't mind when the teaching in the church focuses on the topic of tithes and offerings.
Pre – 4.07
Post – 4.43
Change – 0.36

14. I am comfortable using my spiritual gifts for the benefit of the church, whether during our Sunday gatherings or at other times.
Pre – 4.14
Post – 4.14
Change – 0.00

15. If another church member had a legitimate financial need, I am certain I would help out, even if it required a sacrifice on my part.
Pre – 3.86
Post – 4.14
Change – 0.28

Average response to sharing questions:
Pre – 3.89
Post – 4.23
Change – 0.34

Loyalty

16. I consider the needs of the church as more important than my own personal needs.
Pre – 3.36
Post – 3.43
Change – 0.07

17. I am glad that I am a part of this church.
Pre – 4.50
Post – 4.86
Change – 0.36

18. I consider the needs of the church as more important than the needs of my own biological family.
Pre – 2.71
Post – 3.57
Change – 0.86

19. Before making a major life decision, I am likely to consider how it may affect the church.
Pre – 3.00
Post – 3.79
Change – 0.79

20. There are very few reasons why I would miss a church gathering.
Pre – 4.14
Post – 4.14
Change – 0.00

Average response to loyalty questions:
Pre – 3.54
Post – 3.96
Change – 0.42

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