

The Family of God

The church is God's world-changing social experiment of bringing unlikes and differentials to the table to share life with one another as a new kind of family.

Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents*ⁱ

READ EPHESIANS 1:1-14

The Family of God

Paul introduces himself as an apostle of Christ, one of Jesus' select followers who was chosen to spread the gospel to the world. He addresses this letter to the church at Ephesus. He calls them the saints who were "faithful in Christ Jesus." The word "saint" reminds these Christians that to be a child of God means to live a special life, set apart for God's purpose. They live a shared life in God's family.

Paul greets them with the words "grace" and "peace" (v. 2). The church in Ephesus had two kinds of people. Some of them were Jewish people, descendants of Abraham, and they greeted each other by saying "peace" (*shalom*) like we say "hello." The other people were called Gentiles (non-Jewish people), and they would often greet each other by saying "grace" (*charis*). Paul is using these two words to greet all the Christians at Ephesus together, and it clues us into one of the purposes of the letter. From here on, Paul will spend a lot of time trying to get the Jews and Gentiles to live together as one family in Christ.

Paul begins the teaching part of this letter by talking about our blessings. Spiritual blessings come to us through Jesus Christ (v. 3). God is the source of all good things (James 1:17), and he has put all good in the hands of his Son, Jesus. We should be thankful to God, both for these blessings and for Jesus who makes those blessings available to us.

To explain this more, Paul begins to talk about God's plan to bless his creation and invite them into his family. Before the universe began, God had a purpose for all that he would create. He had chosen to bless people who come to know him through Jesus, and God had also chosen the way that he would bring those people into Christ (v. 4). This "choosing before it happens" is called predestination. It means that God is not making it up as he goes. He had a purpose and a plan for carrying out that purpose. That plan includes Jesus and everyone who follows Jesus.

God's plan was that those who believed in Jesus would be adopted into his family (v. 5-6). In ancient times, a Roman citizen could adopt someone who was not as wealthy or powerful as he was. This made the adopted person part of the family and heir to the family's wealth. In exchange, the adopted person became like a son to his new father and honored him accordingly. Paul is telling us that this is what happens to us when we are brought into God's family (compare Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:1-7). God makes us one of his own children and shares with us all that he has. Only in this new family can we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (v. 7).

This adoption plan was God's long-awaited purpose. Now, God has carried out the predestined plan with both wisdom and insight (v. 8). However, this incredible plan that Paul is telling us about was a "mystery" in the years before Christ came and the gospel was preached (v. 9). God revealed only pieces to the prophets. Even the angels of Heaven wanted to know more (1 Peter 1:10-12), but the whole creation had to wait to see how God would take sinners and make them his children.

Finally, the plan was brought to perfection in what is called the "fullness of time" (v. 10). God, the author and architect of history, waited for just the right moment to bring about his purpose. This plan was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and so in Christ, we find God's purpose for us. We, as adopted children, now have an inheritance (v. 11-12). Paul describes this master plan as God working "all things after the counsel of his own will." The adoption was God's work and no one else's.

God's way of revealing this new relationship in our lives is the "word of truth, the gospel of your salvation" (v. 13). The Word of God is the connection between God's eternal purpose and our daily lives. It is a guide that shows us a way to live in harmony with what God wants for his family. It shows us the life of

his Son, Jesus, and the lives of people trying to know God better. This is our family history.

This word of truth was received by the early church and confirmed by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's great work continues today as a "guarantee" of this inheritance promised by God (v. 14). What is a guarantee? When you buy a home, sometimes the seller will ask the buyer for "earnest money." This is money that is given to show that the person who wants to buy the house is serious about his plan. For us, the Holy Spirit's work in us is a guarantee from God, the proof that he is serious about his purpose for us. The promise stands until his will is completed and we live with him eternally, one reunited family forever.

Church as Family

When we think of God's people, we often think of the word "church," but the word "family" is no less apt a description. John writes that it is an expression of the Father's magnificent love that "we should be called the children of God; and so we are" (1 John 3:1).

I appreciate the sentiments of Scot McKnight in this regard: "The church is God's world-changing social experiment of bringing unlikes and differenters to the table to share life with one another as a new kind of family." McKnight contends that the church is a family of people united in their differences. His own preferred analogy is to say that the church is a salad, full of various bits that add through diversity.

The importance of family is in its power to create relationships, convey identity, and bestow worth.

In a (healthy) family, no person is isolated or alone. To be in a family is to be connected to others. The relationship exists both when we share the same space in a home and when we move on to live apart from each other as adults. However, as McKnight points out, in church life, too often, "After two hours, we go home and 'church' is over." The church is merely an organization for worshipping together, then the relationship dissolves as soon as we leave the space of worship. But if the church is the family of God, the relationship, love, and fellowship continue even across space and time.

A family also conveys identity. It tells stories and history. A family knows its ancestors and the places they have lived. I, for example, happen to know that my family has a Dutch heritage. I have never been to the Netherlands, and I sometimes have to look up the Dutch just to remember which ones they are. (There's something about windmills and wooden shoes I think.) But regardless of my ignorance, I am apparently Dutch. That is our story, conveyed to me by family.

Likewise, the church as family conveys to us a story – the story – of creation, fall, redemption, and life through Jesus our Lord. We are cross-bearers and resurrection people. It is our heritage. Our ancestors are Paul, Peter, and James, as well as Augustine and Francis of Assisi. We are Christians – baptized believers, communion takers, hymn singers, and prayer chanters.

From the relationship and the story comes a sense of worth. I may not matter to you, but I matter to my mother and she matters to me. All people have common human dignity and value, but with family there is something more. It is to this concept that Paul alludes when he writes, "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). My family are my "especially people."

The church, to use McKnight's phrase, is "a new kind of family." We are not bound by the blood running in our veins but rather by the blood spilled from the Lord's veins. The family status bestowed on us by Jesus Christ is not a birthright or an entitlement. We are the adopted heirs, purchased at a price and costly to our Father.

In a typical family, you notice common traits like hair color, height, or complexion. In God's family, we recognize each other despite these characteristics, no two of us looking alike or even thinking alike. Across the globe and through history Christians are as unlike as we can be, except for our shared faith in Jesus and his shared love for us.

The challenge then is to live out church life as family life. Our task is to create and honor the bond of common faith and to cherish every soul who shares it. There must be no invisible member in our family. Each must be part of the same family, marked by the same identity.

Who Am I?

Based on all these observations, let us return to a basic question and let Paul answer it.

I am a person created by the Father and chosen before the foundation of the world (v. 2-4). The same can be said of “all who did receive him, who believed in his name.” We are created things, meaning that from the start, we are defined but by our inner monologue or a our outward tribe, but by our upward relationship to the person who created us.

I am a person who is saved through the Son. I was lost, but he gave me “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (v. 5-10). As soon as I acknowledge that, I am forced to realize that I am not the captain of my fate or the author of my own destiny. I am one in need, and I defined by my relationship to the one whose grace met that need.

I am a person who is indwelt by the Spirit (v. 11-14). Neither my Creator nor my Redeemer intended for our relationship together to be distant. The Spirit pours out the love of God into our hearts and continually maintains the relationship (Romans 5:5). Our identity is forever shaped by his nearness.

In sum, my identity is defined by my relationship to God. I am a member of a family, not an isolated object floating through space. I am created, saved, and loved. This is who I am before I can ever consider defining myself any other way.

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13).

Discussion Questions

1. How has your identity been shaped by your family?
2. Family is an example of a situation where a person is defined by their relationships with other people. What are some other relationships that shape our identity?
3. What do you think about Scot McKnight's view of the church as a family of “unlikes and different”?
4. What would change in your view of yourself if you began to think of your identity as just your relationship with God?

ⁱ Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God's Design for Life Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015).