



**Lee
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How Rediscovering
the Church as Family
Changes Everything

**Feels Like
Home**

Foreword by
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Brothers and Sisters

As a child in California in the 1970s, Jeff wondered who he was. “I never looked like anybody growing up,” he said. “Everybody looked like somebody, but I was the odd man out.” Finally, a few years ago he and his brother took a DNA test and, sure enough, they didn’t have the same father.

As it happened, a couple of years later a woman named Julie, an amateur genealogist, was trying to learn more about her roots and had her DNA analyzed. There were no matches with anyone in the genealogy company’s database so she put the whole business aside. Some months later, she checked the database again and this time there was a match. She was apparently closely related to a guy who’d also had his DNA tested. She looked at his photo and remembers thinking, “He looked exactly like my father.” She sent the man an email and five minutes later she had Jeff’s reply.

The DNA database also showed that Jeff had another unknown sister, Beth, whose birth father was the same as his. The three of them arranged a reunion. Julie remembers, “It is

kind of weird finding a brother when you're in your fifties and he's just a dead ringer for our father—the way he walks and his laugh and some of the expressions on his face.”

More time passed. A San Diego man, Brandon, who knew he'd been adopted, decided to get a DNA test, too. Lo and behold, he also matched Jeff as well as Julie and Beth. “‘It's really wonderful,’ [Brandon] said of rediscovering his birth family. ‘My adoptive parents had passed on, my adoptive brother had passed on. I thought I was a party of one and now I'm a party of 110.’”¹

That's our kind of story.

The Brother from Madagascar and Other Kin

What is it that can bind four perfect strangers together like that? They didn't just want to meet for curiosity's sake. They wanted to be together, to be the family they had never been before.

I've seen the same phenomenon among Christians. I heard the couple in the booth behind us at a restaurant visiting with the waitress, asking her all about her life. Then I heard the woman ask the waitress, “Could I pray for you?” and I knew I had spiritual kin in that booth.

A few years ago my wife and I attended a small international church in Limassol, Cyprus. Among the congregation were several Filipino domestic workers who led the singing, a couple who were refugees from Syria, about twenty Cypriots, and four pastors! The pastor of the church was of Indian background and British citizenship. A visiting missionary was from Ireland. A French navy chaplain, who spoke no English,

was from Madagascar. And then there was me. We all took pictures together. Brothers and sisters who'd never met and yet were kin in Christ.

How is that possible? Paul explained to the Ephesians how they had been bound together with Jewish believers, despite “the dividing wall of hostility” that long guarded the Jews from Gentiles. Christ Jesus, said Paul, “has made the two groups one. . . . His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two. . . . Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of his household” (Eph. 2:14–19). I remember looking at that brother from Madagascar. He was small and dark and didn’t understand a word we were saying; yet we each knew that we shared Christ. Somewhere he had learned the gospel as I had. He sang and prayed as I do. He treasured the same Scriptures that I treasure, and holds citizenship in the same kingdom as I.

Our First Family

Those four reunited siblings shared family resemblances. Among Christians our distinguishing family feature is this: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:15).

Christians are referred to as brothers 139 times in the New Testament. (Some Bible translations translate the Greek *adelphoi* as *brothers* because it is a masculine form, but it is clear in most cases that both men and women are being addressed, whether or not the translation expresses both.) Regarding one another as brothers and sisters was far more radical than

we realize. In our culture, we're used to speaking of people outside our family as brothers and sisters. A "band of brothers" describes a tight-knit military unit. Sometimes athletic teams will use the terms, as do good friends. But that almost *never* happened in the language of New Testament times. No one called someone a brother or sister who wasn't a blood relative. In fact, the entire perspective on family in that culture was dramatically different from ours.

In his book, *When the Church Was a Family*, Joseph Hellerman explains three principles:

Principle #1: "In the New Testament world the group took priority over the individual."

Principle #2: "In the New Testament world a person's most important group was his blood family."

Principle #3: "In the New Testament world the closest family bond was not the bond of marriage. It was the bond between siblings."

Hellerman concludes, "I trust that you are beginning to see why we cannot simply import our American idea of what it means to be a brother or sister into our interpretation of the New Testament. 'Brother' meant immeasurably more to the strong-group authors of the Bible than the word means to you and me—it was their most important family relationship. At this point you are now prepared, perhaps for the first time ever, to properly appreciate what the early Christians meant when they referred to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ."²

Maybe you should read that last paragraph again to be sure it registered.

Likewise, there is the startling New Testament usage of the Greek word *philadelphian*, as in 2 Peter 1:7 where believers are admonished to add to their “godliness, *mutual affection*; and to mutual affection, love.” *Philadelphian* is also translated *brotherly love*. In their commentary on 2 Peter and Jude, Dick Lucas and Christopher Green wrote, “The New Testament is the only place where the word has been found outside the context of a home. A first-century reader would therefore come across it here with a sense of shock; Peter really does mean that Christians should have a quality of relationships which is demonstrably different and satisfying, demanding a high and new loyalty.”³

So with that in mind, try to wrap your head around how radical it was when Jesus said this in Mark 3:31–35:

Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.”

“Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked.

Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”

Once, according to Mark 10:28–30, Peter said to Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you!” To which Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children

and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.”

A brother in our congregation who is from a Muslim-dominated country described the threats on his life when he became a Christian. Among other things, his uncle pressed a knife to his side, demanding he turn away from his faith in Christ. Our brother told us, “Before Christ I didn’t like my family. But when I saw Christ and Christ transformed my heart, Christ give me big love for my family, for my parents. I was really a good son. I obeyed my parents and I love them with Jesus’ love, but even though I loved them they hated me . . . I love my family, my brother and sisters, but they beat me, they hate me and it was hard to understand. I said, ‘Oh God, I

“I said, ‘Oh God, I am losing my family.’ But God said, ‘I will give you a new family.’”

am losing one valuable thing—my family—and it was very hard to understand.’ But God said, ‘I will give you a new family.’”

This is not only true for those rejected by their blood relatives, but for all believers. If you’re a Christian, your first family is your fellow believers—those who “do God’s will.” Let that sink in. *Your Christian brothers and sisters are your first family in Christ.*

Where Does That Leave My Spouse and Kids?

Thinking of the church as our *first family* sounds dangerous because we all know how families have suffered, sometimes irreparably, from neglect in the name of church. Some pastors go whole weeks without a night at home. Too many Christians have hidden at church from their family responsibilities

at home. Scripture certainly does not advocate that!

The Bible tells us how to have strong marriages and families, how to honor our parents, and how to care for our extended families. The pastoral epistles of 1 Timothy and Titus give qualifications for elders that include the wise and proper care of their families. In fact, our homes are a sort of seminary preparing us for church leadership. (More on that in chapter 11.) Paul teaches us the demanding commitments of submission and love in marriage and parenting. Seeing God's people as our first family must never be an excuse to neglect our spouse and kids.

That said—and said strongly—I've seen too many Christian families who are not anchored in the relationships of God's first family, the church. Christians are raising children who, like them, see church as an event, not a family; who see being with God's people as an optional weekend activity. They skip church for all manner of activities, and do not regularly connect their families with others in the congregation.

Some children's and youth ministries have virtually no link to the rest of the church body, leaving the kids with no sense of being in a big family with other believers. Is it any wonder that Barna Group research shows that "Millennials are leaving the church. Nearly six in ten (59%) young people who grow up in Christian churches end up walking away, and the unchurched segment among Millennials has increased in the last decade from 44% to 52%, mirroring a larger cultural trend away from churchgoing in America. When asked what has helped their faith grow, 'church' does not make even the top 10 factors."⁴

Good news comes in another Barna article quoting a study

by David Kinnaman: “Those [Millennials] who stay were twice as likely to have a close personal friendship with an adult inside the church. . . . This stands true from the inverse angle as well: Seven out of 10 Millennials who dropped out of church did not have a close friendship with an adult and nearly nine out of ten never had a mentor at the church.”⁵

We all know the dangers of parents who spend too little time with their kids, but what of the dangers of Christian kids and their parents who have no sense that our Lord Jesus expects them deeply engaged in loving relationships with other believers? Remember, Jesus said there are no marriage bonds in heaven, only the bonds of God’s people with one another and the Lord.

Our church friends, Kelvin and Anne Tohme, live and serve on a Christian university campus near us. Along with their two children, Landon (ten) and Lauryn (eight), they live in a small two-bedroom campus apartment. Anne is a gifted communicator and was one of the people I asked to speak to our congregation about the church as our first family. She said,

In our family there are often times when Kelvin or I are gone because of our campus duties and ministries. When we talk with our kids about this—about why mom or dad are gone—we explain to them that it’s because we are a part of two families. We have our family of the four of us, but we are also part of a bigger family—the family of God—and we have a role in both families and we need to care for both families. And yes, we may miss that person when they are gone, but we know how important it is that they go. Ultimately, our role as parents and the church is to raise up our children to advance the kingdom—shouldn’t they see us modeling that? Shouldn’t they see us (and participate

with us) in loving the family of God and not just our own little family?

Anne tells about a season when their young son, Landon, was going through a rough time at school. “One day, we were just walking along and he says to me, ‘Mom, my safe places are home and at church.’ Well, you can imagine as a mother what that did to me, but that told me something that Landon didn’t even know how to articulate. He knew that at home and with the people of God he was loved. He knew that he was a part of two families.”

Anne told me they relate to the example of Ryan Kwon, who pastors Resonate Church in Fremont, California. He uses the phrase “family win.”

Ryan, the son of Korean immigrants, described how his well-educated father “worked a maintenance job cleaning bathrooms at LAX Airport. Why? For the family win—so that his kids could have a better education and, ultimately, a better life than if he had stayed in Korea. Even as a child, however, Ryan was also expected to make sacrifices for his family, because ‘if the family didn’t win, no one won.’”⁶

As a Christian, a family win brings an advantage to our heavenly Father and our brothers and sisters in Christ. That’s what Ryan means when he says, “Learn to fight not only for your first name, but for your last name.” So Anne says, “Our first name: Tohme. Our last name: Christian.”

My dear friend, Bill, grew up as an only child of non-Christian parents in a rather cold home in Boston. When he was about eight, two women, one who worked with Bill’s mom at a factory, came around the neighborhood, inviting kids to

a new Sunday school they were starting in Bill's elementary school building. So Bill went and kept going. Sometimes one of the women would invite him to dinner. When the weather was bad, one of them picked him up. Often they would invite Bill home for Sunday dinner with their families. When he was fourteen Bill accepted Christ at Bible camp. As the Sunday school kids got older, these women took them to special events like youth rallies and to the symphony in Boston. Bill says, "It was like having a bunch of brothers and sisters."

That's exactly what it's like. I've realized that it rattles people a little to tell them their church is their first family. They're afraid I'm downplaying our responsibilities at home. But it is just the opposite. A healthy church home is God's gift to any family. When our son was very young we lived more than a thousand miles from his only grandparent and we were seldom able to make that trip. So we asked the Holts if they'd be substitute grandparents for him, a task they embraced wholeheartedly. A church is a big family of grandparents, parents, brothers, and sisters, all working with Jesus to make each and all of us more like Him.

To consider:

Can you restate (for memory's sake) the significance of the New Testament calling Christians "brothers and sisters"?

How would your church change if people thought of it as their "first family"?

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