

Church Matters

Week 2: God's Design for the Church

1 Corinthians 13

The first time I heard Tim share that story, it gave me goosebumps. In the 5+ years I've known that guy, Tim has become more than a friend and co-laborer for Christ, Tim is family.

And, by that, I mean he's like that crazy uncle who lost his filter years ago and you never know what he's going to say, or what mess you'll have to clean up after he visits! But, we love him anyways, because that's what you do with family. You love them, sometimes in spite of them, but you love them because of the bond you share.

When we read through Scripture, there are several metaphors used to describe the Church. It's called the **Temple of God**. The place and people in which he dwells and is worshiped. We are the **Bride of Christ**, set apart by Jesus and for Jesus, eagerly awaiting his arrival and the culmination of the wedding day when Heaven is ushered in. We are the **Body of Christ**, members that partner together to love and serve those around us as Jesus loved and served.

Each of these metaphors provide a powerful illustration of what the Church is like and how God designed it to function and operate. They shape the Church's identity and practices. But, of all the word pictures used to describe the church, my favorite, and the one that stands out above the rest, is **Family**.

In fact, family is so essential to the identity of the local Church that it really can't even be called a metaphor. **The Church is not *like* family; it *is* family.** In Biblical terms, if you are in Christ and have placed your faith in Jesus, the people in the pews around you are your family. And, like members of our own family, we didn't choose them, we may not even be sure we like them, but they're our family, and you're their family. And we're bound to each other through Christ. God designed His Church to be a family.

And, Jesus actually introduces this concept early on in his ministry. In Matthew 12, Jesus is teaching a group of people when his mom and brothers come looking for him. They finally find out where he is and the disciples let Jesus know they were there to see him. But look at what happens in verse 49 **...(READ Matt. 12:49-50)**

When it says that he pointed to his disciples, it doesn't just mean that he pointed to the twelve. He's pointing to the people who were following him. Learning from him. Watching his ways. Jesus says that anyone who does the will of the Father is a part of His family. And, I don't think he means for this to just be an intellectual exercise of regarding fellow believers as family members. I think Jesus means for this truth to stir deep emotions that overflow into tangible expressions.

Fast forward to the crucifixion. Jesus is hanging on the cross. He knows that his life on earth is rapidly coming to an end. And, with some of his last bits of energy, Jesus once again emphasizes the family bond between those who follow Him. This is what we read in **John 19:26-27...(READ)**

Notice, Jesus doesn't say, "Okay, mom. John is now like your son and John, Mary is now like your mom." The language is actually much stronger than that. And we see in this verse and Church history that John didn't just regard Mary as a motherly figure. When she was in need, he actually took her into his home and cared for her. Because sometimes, family requires above and beyond sacrifice and commitment. Family requires giving of yourself so that another may flourish and feel cared for. That's all part of being a Church family.

And, we see this language continue to catch on throughout the rest of the New Testament. When Paul wants the church in Rome to welcome and help a Deaconess named Phoebe, he calls her "sister." When Peter commends Silvanus for his Kingdom work, he calls him a "faithful brother."

In fact, I find it interesting that, over the 40-50 year span of the New Testament letters, we actually see the family language grow. We see the terms "brothers and sisters" used more often in later letters. So, as we read through the New Testament, we literally see the Church transform into a family.

And, this relational bond that followers of Jesus experienced, and others were invited into, it was so strong that it led Paul to write in **Ephesians 2:19, "You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household."**

At its best, the church is a family. It's how God designed it. And, like any family, the Church is not always at its best. At its worst, the Church is an institution that seeks self-preservation and control, and there are plenty of examples of that out there. It's why so many people are turned off by the Church. And I'm like, "Yeah, I don't want any part of that either!" But that's not God's design.

The Church is at its best when it's living out God's design to be a family that is with and for one another and that eagerly welcomes others to join them. The Church is at its best when people are sharing life with one another the way a family does. Sharing dinner around a table, laughing and crying with each other. Carrying each other's burdens, rejoicing in each other's celebrations.

The Church is at its best when there's a depth of relationship that stirs an affection for one another. An affection that's so deep and lasting that, when problems arise, you work through them. You protect the unity of the family, not work against it. You refuse to talk badly about another member of it, and instead, talk to them and work it out.

The Church is at its best when, like a family, they celebrate the next generation and make sacrifices so they know how valuable they are to the family. The Church is at its best when the

younger generations honor and show appreciation to those who came before them and made those sacrifices so they could enjoy the fruit of them.

The Church is at its best when it's living out God's design to be a family. And, while there are so many characteristics that define family, the one I want to focus on as we close out today is the most defining characteristic of them all...LOVE.

If you were to create a word cloud of everything that family is, LOVE would be the biggest and boldest, right there in the middle. And, the same is true for the Church family. Jesus said in John 13:34-35, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

People will know that the Church is the family of God, not because we come and sit together in a building for one hour a week, but in the way we love one another like Jesus loved us. The Apostle John echoed this decades later in 1 John 2:10-11, "Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them."

Love ought to be the defining characteristic of the Church family. So, what does that love look like? Well, we're actually given a really good definition of it in a passage that you might be very familiar with, especially if you've been to a wedding recently. 1 Corinthians 13 is known as the "love chapter" and it's often used in wedding ceremonies because it gives such a beautiful description of what tender, sacrificial love between a husband and wife ought to look like.

But, marriage is actually not the focus of this chapter. Paul writes these familiar words to describe how WE are to love one another within the Church, as brothers and sisters in Christ. He's writing to a church that's like a dysfunctional family. They're constantly arguing and bickering with one another. They're fighting to get their own way. And, Paul basically says, "Listen, the Church is not about what you can get from it! It's about what you give to it. What you give to each other and how you serve. And, it doesn't matter what you do, or how important you think your role is, without love, none of it matters."

He says..."If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, 'Jump,' and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love."

Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, Doesn't have a swelled head, Doesn't force itself on others, Isn't always 'me first,' Doesn't fly off the handle,

Doesn't keep score of the sins of others, Doesn't revel when others grovel, Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, Puts up with anything, Trusts God always, Always looks for the best, Never looks back, But keeps going to the end.

Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love."

Imagine what it would be like to be part of a church family defined by love like that. And, I'll tell you, I've seen this kind of love demonstrated so much at Sherwood Oaks. I know many of you have experienced that kind of love here, and others, maybe it's fallen short of that. Families aren't perfect and don't always get it right, and the same is true with the Church family. So there are times we need to ask each other for forgiveness and extend each other grace, but this is the kind of Church family we want to be because it's how God designed us to be.

So, we want the defining characteristic of the Sherwood Oaks family to be LOVE. Love for God, love for each other, and love for the world around us. And we want that love to be expressed in action, not just words, because using our gifts to love and serve our church family leads to a stronger church and greater witness in our community.

And, we are so blessed as a Church family to have people all around us who model this kind of love. And at the top of the list for me is our Elders. I've said it before, but it's worth repeating, I joyfully submit to our Elders at Sherwood Oaks Christian Church. They are men of faith and integrity who love Jesus and love this Church, and they give countless hours and energy to both. I'm so grateful for them.

And next week, we're going to ask you to affirm 3 new elders. John Barnes, Jamie Crowhurst, and Greg Reece. And to help you get to know them a little more, I'd like to invite them up to the stage with me. Can you help me welcome them?

Interview Prospective Elders (Name Tags)

1. Introduce yourself. Tell us how long you've been a follower of Jesus and attended Sherwood Oaks. And, for fun, share with us your favorite dessert!
2. What do you love about the Sherwood Oaks family and why do you feel called to serve it as an elder?

Next week, you'll get a chance to affirm these men to be added to our Elders. So, vote early and vote often. Actually, I don't think that's how it works. But, if you are a member of Sherwood Oaks, you'll have a chance to cast a ballot either online or in the lobby next Sunday.

Let me close with this.

At Sherwood Oaks, may we be a family that deeply loves one another and invites others to be a part of the family with us.

May love be THE defining characteristic of our church family.

Out of that love, may we serve one another and with one another. May we share life together in our community and around the dinner table.

May we take the grace we have received through Christ and extended it to one another. May we love one another enough to talk to each other when we have a disagreement, and not about each other.

May we love, even the unlovable, and may others love even the most unlovable parts of us.

And may we trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, and love extravagantly, knowing that the greatest of these is love.