

What is the Church About?

Acts 2:42-47 Gal 5:16-6:5, 9-10

My brother in law and I, with a few friends, drove to a Promise Keepers Friday night and all day Saturday meeting. We enjoyed being in a place where over 45,000 men were worshipping God in the Silver Dome. Around noon time on Saturday the speaker issued an invitation for men who had never accepted Jesus. And it was an invitation for men who had been separated from God for many years.

Several thousand men went forward. As you can imagine it took a while for each of the men to be personally counseled. So there we were, sitting, praying, waiting, and after a while getting bored. Then suddenly, someone from the congregation, in the stands, yelled at the top of his voice that was heard all over the dome, "Welcome to the family! Welcome to the family! Welcome to the family!"

Immediately, in a split second, everyone leaped to their feet, with a roar, that I've never heard before or since. It went on and on. I suspect it's the one thing every man there remembers to this day.

The concept of **family** is precious to us. The term family brings out all kinds of emotions. This concept of family is so meaningful that we extend it beyond ourselves to our community and even our nation. That's what happened with the people of Israel. They extended the meaning of this word beyond their relatives to their tribe and then to their nation. God told Abraham that his descendants would be a nation, a family, focused on God. God told Peter to extend the family to Gentiles. Jesus extends family to his followers.

It's difficult in the Bible to separate the biological family from the family of God. Frequently when there is mention of family, it's within the context of church life. The concept of family is used often to illustrate how church life should be. In the Bible the biological family functions as a religious community, preserving past traditions and passing them on through instruction & worship. Forces that threatened the family integrity and security were vigorously opposed by biblical writers.

Every church has their particular focus, style, and purpose. We here at North Star Mennonite happen to be a small church, with Anabaptist theology, that emphasizes being family. This gives us our identity as well as our values. For the next few weeks we will be studying what the church is to be about and what it should not be.

One primary purpose of church is to **fellowship**. It's to be together as the family of God. Its relationships. It's the reaching in church. It's the family reunion church. The symbol for this purpose is the **casserole dish**. The fellowship hall with fellowship meals are important focal points. It's just great to see how often and how many of us hang around for a while visiting after worship – when we had church together. As well as hanging out with each other during the week. With Covid – it seems what we miss most about church is the fellowship – being together – being social.

One of the purposes of the church is to be together focused on following Jesus Christ. Our Creator made us with the desire to be with each other. To relate to him and each other. It's a reason why isolation has been so painful.

That's what the early church did. In the Acts passage we read, they ate together. They devoted time to the fellowship and worship. They had found a place of belonging and they valued that companionship. That's what the church is about. Giving people a place of comfort, encouragement, nurture, protection, and support of various kinds.

What are the traits of a family focused church? Let's focus in on a few from Galatians 6. **Verse 1**. "If anyone is detected in a **transgression**, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness." What does this mean? First of all this text is talking about moral slip ups. We could say, its spur of the moment sins. Like that flash of anger. Or the impatient outburst. And the impetuous giving in to temptation.

Notice that in Galatians 5, the works of the flesh and the Fruits of the Spirit have been contrasted with each other. The Apostle Paul's been pointing to the ideal and here in Galatians 6 he gets

practical. He's pointing out that people slip up. And, followers of Jesus can be trapped in chronic sins, bad habits. So we are urged to not overlook these or deny them, be idle, or say – It's just Sam.

The instruction is, if anyone is trapped or detected in sin, we are to correct them. So Paul is saying, there are some standards by which a church family lives. Every family has some values which govern their behavior. A church family bases its standards on the Bible. It also creates some spoken and unspoken expectations of behavior. These informal and tacit rules smooth the way so we relate to each other in ways we understand. We are instructed to not ignore things that are sin. Plus, we are to be open about our expectations of each other. This openness with one another, moves us to relationship and spiritual health.

One way to encourage healthy fellowship is to help each other stay within God's guidelines for living. Paul tells us to not be idle about this. Instead we help each other. Helping healing occur is a key standard in the family of God. The verb used here to restore is a medical term for setting a fractured bone. The persons' sin has fractured their life; the life of their biological family; and the life of the family of God. Even the surrounding community family. So it needs to be set in order for healing to take place. Then restoration occurs.

How is the healing to happen? First by talking to the person about it with the goal of restoring them. But notice who is to do the talking. It's those who are Spirit filled. It's not just anyone. It's those who have demonstrated in their lives that they are growing in the Fruits of the Spirit. This is one definition of Spirit filled. It's those people who desire to live in the Spirit. Mature Christians are to take on this responsibility. Being spirit filled is a goal and a desire. It's a gift for us from God. It entails being responsible within the church family.

We want to be spirit filled. We want to have the Fruits of the Spirit in our lives. We are to grow in the Fruits of the Spirit, in order to be able to restore each other. I think we love the idea of being loving, full of joy, peaceful people, patient, kind, gentle, generous, faithful, and self controlled.

But this comes with the responsibility of restoring each other. And we have an obligation to want to and to allow ourselves to be healed, to bear fruit.

As a theory this is great. As something you and I are expected to do, this doesn't sound so great, does it? But it's a standard within the family of God. Our personal spirituality is not for our own benefit. It's to help God's family develop, mature, grow, move into better health. As God's grace helps us live by the Fruits of the Spirit, we can help the church family grow spiritually and as witnesses to the power of the Gospel. Conversely, when we are not restoring each other, or want to be healed, we cannot be labeled spirit filled.

So how do we do this? By gentleness. This is another standard for the family of God. It's one of the Fruits of the Spirit. So a church family has to focus on more than just hanging around. It has to focus on more than just being together. It has the focus of helping each other meet the standard of sinlessness. We go about this gently.

John Stott's comments puts these ideas together nicely. "If we walked by the Spirit we would love one another more, and if we loved one another more we would bear one another's burdens, and if we bore one another's burdens we would not shrink from seeking to restore a brother or sister who has fallen into sin. Further, if we obeyed this apostolic instruction as we should, much unkind gossip would be avoided, more serious backsliding prevented, the good of the Church advanced and the name of Christ glorified."

Notice what comes next. A warning. "Take care that you yourselves are not tempted." That means, don't fall into sin. It also means, don't make yourself into a spy or a traffic cop, handing out parking tickets. Spying around and fining people are behaviors that are not appreciated in God's family. It's a fine line between helping others and looking for people to "help." Also, being family means I must be willing to be helped by you to live together with each other and with God.

Verse 2. "Bear one another's burdens and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ." This is a follow

up to the instruction of restoring each other. It says carry one another, not judge each other, or simply put up with each other. The word burden here means heavy. It's more than one person can carry. It's that super heavy furniture that needs two young people to carry. As we bear with each other, as we carry each other's extra weight, their super problems, we fulfill the law of Christ. And what's the law of Christ? Its helping each other stick with God's standards; helping each other be productive effective spirit filled family members.

This line of thinking continues in **Verse 3** - "For if those who are nothing, think they are something, they deceive themselves." In other words, don't start thinking you are something since you didn't sin like your brother or sister in Christ did. It's too easy to be full of conceit. It's too easy to look down on someone because of their behavior and consequently we don't help them carry their burden, but give them extra weight to carry.

Verse 4 is another warning about getting over enthusiastic about putting others in their place. Inspect yourself. Check out your own work, not your neighbors. Watch out for your own pride. It's so tempting to compare ourselves to each other. Here we are warned that this is a temptation that keeps us from being spirit filled. It keeps us from lifting up and carrying each other.

Notice what's happening in this text. The works of the flesh and the work of the Spirit are contrasted. Then we are given some practical points about how the Spirit Fruit works. We are told to help each other keep to God's standards. We are to be restorers and to be restored. Then we are told to not let our egos get carried away with this. The passage begins with an instruction to help those who do wrong, to see their wrong and be restored into the family. Then all the rest of the instructions warn us to not go overboard in judging, being harsh and so on. Be in the Spirit. Be gentle. Don't be tempted yourselves. Bear each others problems. Don't think too much of yourself. Check your own work and attitude.

Then **verse 5**. Everyone is to carry their own load. Here the word load means back pack. So it's

lighter than the burden mentioned in verse 2. Here is another standard for God's family. The church works together by first carrying your own load and then helps others carry their load in the family. Lazy habitual people need to be responsible. We need everyone's involvement for the church to be healthy and witness and be family together.

And I think the weight difference between the burden and back pack means – we are to share our burdens with each other! Let someone else help lift that furniture or help us carry that intractable problem. That's what it means to "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." Be responsible for yourself, but also help others carry their load when it's beyond their capacity. But each of us does our part. And each of us shares our worries, cares, temptations with others.

Family is the in thing today. When people rank their priorities they often say, God first, biological family second, and job third. Church then is the fourth or fifth priority. I want to suggest that church maybe should be ranked higher. I'm not just talking about time. I'm talking about attitudes. When a church member is having a tough time in life, we are to be there helping them, and be willing to be helped. All of us have times when life seems tough, out of control, unbearable. Some times it may involve sin. Being family means we are there to restore the person to spiritual wholeness. To take on some of that heavy load.

This also means, we are to do our share of the work in the church. Too often a few members carry a big load and some members aren't doing their share of the work. This happens when some of the members aren't able to carry their load because of sin, or age, or problems in life. Or they simply need a time to rest after being very busy. But it also happens because we have excuses.

What is the best excuse to turn down a position for ministry in the church today? It's, "It would take away time I need to give to my biological family." How can we argue with that? But the biological family has become one of the gods of people today. It's a way of tempting us to not carry our own load in the church. The family can be a

convenient excuse for turning our backs on other people. We need to be careful we don't misuse a good thing God has given us. I think a helpful pattern is tying our biological family time together with church time as often as possible. Then each family strengthens the other.

This passage ends with two more traits of the church family. **Verse 9** - let's not get tired of doing good which involves - Restoring each other to God's family. Reestablishing ourselves to the family. And as we invite others into the family, we are assured, "At the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

And **verse 10**; always look for opportunities to work for the good of everyone, and especially for those in the family of believers.

Family. It's something we were made to be a part of. We want our families to be healthy. A spirit filled family sticks to God's standards. God values the biological family so much he uses it as a model for the church family. God loves families. Biological and Spiritual. Otherwise why would the Almighty have made so many of them? A purpose of the church is to be a healthy family.

Benediction

"May we never tire of doing what is good and right before our Lord because in His season we shall bring in a great harvest if we can just persist. So seize any opportunity the Lord gives you to do good things and be a blessing to everyone, especially those within our faithful family." Following in the path of the Holy Spirit is not a chore; instead it opens up to us experiencing the life our Creator has for us.