

In The Family of God

Paul referred to believers as “*the household of faith*” and also as “*members of the household of God*” (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19). Other terms like “sons” and “children” are also used figuratively in the scriptures to illustrate a family relationship. These serve us well in emphasizing spiritual relationships for the familial kinship is appealing. All of us who are in Christ appreciate this bond of being together equally in God’s family.

Let us, in order to illustrate the family relationship, imagine a family with six children. These siblings are equally children of the same father though there is great diversity among them. In another lesson, we will hope to consider the diversity among those who are members of the same family. In this effort we will look at some different aspects.

Having been born into the same family, is there anything that can change their relationship so that they are no longer brothers and sisters? Is there any right reason for one of the children to declare that another of their number is no longer a brother or sister? Because five of them are wicked, is the other one a sinner for being their sibling and living together in that family relationship?

If in a tragic accident, both the father and mother are killed, would that change the relationship of the children as brothers and sisters? They are still the family of the father and mother. One by one the children are adopted by other couples. This brings a sad separation of the siblings. Are they still brothers and sisters? Even though they may be given different names and are separated so that they lose contact with one another, they are still brothers and sisters. Whether they are reared in godly or ungodly homes, they are still brothers and sisters. Their circumstances and characters might have changed but their parentage has not.

Let us draw some parallels with the family of God knowing that all illustrations may be pressed to include points not intended. For instance, in the parable of the prodigal son and in the figurative family of God, no mention is made of a mother. So the illustration should not be stretched to teach points about mothers. And when we are called sons of God, that must be interpreted as a generic term including females in God’s family also.

One can come into God’s spiritual family only by a birth. Jesus instructed Nicodemus to be “*born of water and the Spirit*” (John 3:1f). Paul explained, “*.. for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ*” (Gal. 3:25-26). We have covered these points in many other lessons. In truth, the family of God is the forgiven ones, the saved, those added together by the Lord in one (figurative) body of disciples which we have misnamed the “church.”

“Where is that family?” one may ask; “I want to join it!” You can no more join it than you joined your father’s family. You must be born into it. In being born of the water and the Spirit, “*.. by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body..*” (1 Cor. 12:13). Those

will be the saved ones with whom you will become family and community. But still – where can I find them in my community?

When those in the family of God associate themselves with local assemblies, they are “adopted out” in a manner of speaking. The adopted children are in different families with differing names but they are still siblings. The girls may marry and wear yet another name but that does not change who they are in regard to their parentage. Various members of God’s family may serve and worship with various congregations that are distinct from all others. They wear different names to identify themselves. Would that change the relationship of the children of God? Are they not all still brothers and sisters in the one spiritual family? Can one cease being a brother? How would you go about making a brother cease being a brother? Can you or he change his parentage?

He becomes a sinner when he joins a separate group, you may contend. If so, most of the saved become sinners for most of us form associations in separated groups for supportive sharing. Does becoming saved add one to the Church of Christ? If yes, which one – the a cappella Church of Christ, instrumental Church of Christ, non-institutional Church of Christ, one-cup Church of Christ, or other splinter groups – who variously disagree and reject each other? The Lord does not add a saved person to a splinter group -- a division – whether it is named Church of Christ, Baptist, Presbyterian, or any other designation. We join them by “placing membership” or association which indicates acceptance.

If one sins by serving and worshipping with a sect or denomination, then the prospect is dim for all of us. That pretty well sums up the menu we have to choose from. Can a child of God serve acceptably with sinners, whether they are organized or unorganized? If not, then none of us are acceptable for there are sinners in all of them! Even if they are all brothers, they are all brothers in error for, as has been observed, that’s the only kind of brothers we have!

Some in a particular group may not actually be brothers though they trust that they are. Is it becoming to reject another who claims the same Father as you? You may disagree with him and teach him but you are not the judge. We should leave that to God.

Am I contending that God saves sects and denominations? Absolutely not! Not even one of them. Not even if it wears the name Church of Christ (or church of Christ, if you prefer). God saves individuals. If an individual associates with others as he should, he has no choice other than associating with sinners.

There is no such thing as a perfect individual, much less a perfect congregation. Our only claim is that we are each accounted as perfect by the grace of God. This dispensation of grace is not granted being based upon our perfect faith, understanding, or association with a perfect church.

There is no advice from an inspired writer for a person to leave a problem-filled group such as some of the seven churches of Asia or the Corinthian church in order to start a pure one. There is call for reformation instead of rejection and division.

If you serve in a group in error, you sanction error, some object. Then you cannot serve with others whether they are organized or unorganized, for none are free of error. A sibling would be a sinner for living with other siblings who do evil things. Would one have to deny his brotherhood? And would rejecting your brother cause him to cease being your brother? Brotherhood is a relationship that we cannot control. However, you are not guilty of that which you disavow. Unless you approve of your brother's thievery, you are not made guilty by his stealing. You can and should take a stand against it in order to keep you free from his guilt. This applies to family groups and to spiritual family associations.

Maybe you protest that you cannot fellowship your brother's sins. Right. Our fellowship is not with things or actions. Fellowship is with people. You may have fellowship with your sinful brother while denouncing his sin. You are in fellowship with him because of your birth into the same family. We are to reject those who deny the basis of salvation, those who are impenitently immoral, and those who cause divisions in the spiritual family, but only God can dissolve your fellowship.

It is only natural and right that we want to associate with others who share our beliefs and convictions, but compatibility is no indication of freedom from error or of moral purity. We are still in fellowship with brothers in error!

Even though we may serve appropriately in more cloistered associations, it must not be in rejection of brothers and sisters in God's family at large. []

(Cecil Hook; January 2005)

Talkin' Texas: What man served as president of a nation, served in the U.S. Congress representing two different states, and served as governor of two states? He was first a Congressman and governor of Tennessee, then a two-term President of the Republic of Texas, a senator from Texas, and finally governor of the State of Texas. He was also commander-in-chief of the revolutionary forces of Texas. Who else but our Sam Houston? A unique career!