

# “You Were Formed for God’s Family”

Ephesians 4:1-7, 15-16 <sup>1</sup>

Have you ever wanted to be a part of something big, something really, really BIG? Many of us have such dreams when we’re twelve, or eighteen, or twenty-eight, but it often happens that when we reach middle age or when we retire, we look back wistfully and conclude that nothing really BIG seems to have happened along the way.

I’m very happy to be able to tell you that, **no matter how young or old you are, there is still a place for you in the greatest enterprise that has ever existed.** There’s a place for you in a plan *so huge* that it actually encompasses the entire universe. Paul told us that God chose him to explain the Ultimate Plan that has been kept secret from the beginning of creation, and here it is: “*God’s intent was that now, **through the church**, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Ephesians 3:10-11).

There’s a great deal more in that sentence than we have time to explore here.<sup>2</sup> For this morning, the key is to see that the church is absolutely central to what God is up to in the cosmos.

I’m sure you remember that the Bible tells us that God is mysteriously both one Person and three Persons at the same time. There is only one God, but God is at one and the same time Father, Son, and Spirit, Creator, Redeemer, and Comforter (Matthew 28:19). One of many things that this means is that **being in relationship is at the very center of God’s own Being as Three-in-One.**

One of the many symbols that attempt to represent Three-in-One and One-in-Three is the triquetra, which some of you recognize as the background for this week’s PowerPoint. And so, since loving and personal relationship is the foundation of all that is, the Bible makes it clear that God treasures such relationships and desires that all creation be filled with them (1 John 4:16).

That’s where you and I come in. Because God IS love, **the most important lesson God wants us to learn in this life is how to love.** Whatever else God intends to do in the universe, it’s clear that God’s purpose on Earth is to populate this planet with persons who of their own free will choose to join their lives together in a community of relationships that only God can build.

But learning to love is not an easy thing to do, because most of the time, you and I are willful, self-centered, selfish, and generally not very lovable. That’s why life as we know it is, when all is said and done, a recruiting office and a boot camp to prepare persons of every “*tribe and language and people and nation*” (Revelation 5:9) to learn how to love one another so we’ll be ready for the New Heaven and the New Earth that are to come.

This recruiting and this training are to some extent clandestine operations, since only those whose “*have eyes to see*” (Ezekiel 12:1-2) are aware of their activity. Those who sign on are known as “the church,” and **the creation of this unique community is God’s Ultimate Purpose in all that happens on planet Earth.** The Bible calls this remarkable group of people “the *family of God*” (Ephesians 1:5), and tells us that this family is actually **one body**, with **one**

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on February 21, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> This verse is, in my estimate, the KEY to understanding the entire Bible. See “An Approach to Understanding the Cosmos” at [http://dcstancil.com/other\\_writings](http://dcstancil.com/other_writings)

**Spirit, one Lord, one Father, one faith, one baptism, and one glorious future** (Ephesians 4:4-6). To say all this more simply, “church” is not a place that we go to. “Church” is a family that we belong to. And the Good News is that there’s a place for you in this family.

The Bible tells us that “*Christ loved the church* [His human family] *and gave his life for her to make her holy*” (Ephesians 5:25); and Jesus said, “*I will build my church, [my human family] and all the powers of hell will not conquer it*” (notice that Jesus treats “the powers of hell” with absolute seriousness; Matthew 16:18).

One of the most important functions of human parents is to shape and mold the character of their children, and it’s the same in God’s family. Our Heavenly Father intends to shape the character of His children—and we are they—so that our character becomes more and more like God’s own. Let’s look again at the beginning of our text in Ephesians 4 and examine some of the characteristics of persons who are being formed for God’s family:

*“Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace”* (Ephesians 4:1-3).

The first character quality Paul mentions for life in God’s family is **humility** (Ephesians 4:2). In Philippians, Paul tells us to “*Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself*” (Philippians 2:3). This doesn’t necessarily mean that we think less of ourselves, but that we think of ourselves less. Paul went on to say, “*Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too*” (Philippians 2:4, NLT).

Because every human person is created in the “image” of God, God certainly intends for us to treat all persons with respect and care. At the same time, we’re told to give extra-special attention to our relationships with persons who have been adopted into God’s family through their personal faith in Jesus Christ (Galatians 6:10). This is because, as we’ve already noted, the creation and development of the unique community that is the church, the family of God, is the Central Purpose of all that God is doing in the world.

The primary way God creates this unique community is by adopting us into it, into a family that is chock-full of ordinary, flawed, sinful people (like ourselves, of course) who do all sorts of things that disturb, aggravate, and offend us, and telling us to think of all those folks as being more important than we are.

Being a member of the Body of Christ is a character-shaping enterprise of the first order, and while life in the Church is truly a glorious experience, it’s difficult much of the time, painful some of the time, and against our natural inclinations all of the time. It’s against our nature to be humble, and it’s a little frightening to realize that we have genuine freedom to punch “eject” at any point and put a stop to the processes by which God shapes us. This is an enterprise “for volunteers only.”<sup>3</sup>

The second character quality Paul mentions is **gentleness**. One of the main characteristics of God’s family is that membership is open to all who are willing to acknowledge our own sinfulness and accept God’s gracious gift of forgiveness, and it’s frequently the case that persons whose sin and brokenness are fairly obvious tend to be more eager for God’s forgiveness and healing than are those whose sin and brokenness are less obvious and more easily hidden. This means that, when we’re doing what we’re supposed to be doing, the church has the glad

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<sup>3</sup> We’re warned, though, that there will be a reckoning for those who sign on and then fail to follow through (Matthew 25:26-30; 1 Corinthians 3:15).

opportunity to provide welcome for many persons who find no welcome in other places, persons whose past experiences have not given them many resources for life in community.

And this is, in fact, God's purpose—to take persons whose lives are rather a wreck and to heal our brokenness, joining us in such family relationship with each other that the world can find no other explanation for our relationships than the transforming activity of God. It is this redemption that we proclaim, this redemption that we live out together.

As my friend, Bob Robinson, put it, “If we serve them, they will come, and if we love them, they will stay.” And we do it gently.

Gentleness has as much to do with how we talk to and about each other as it does with anything else. As we are shaped into family together, the Bible tells us to “*let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them*” (Ephesians 4:29). As it is written, “*If another Christian is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself*” (Galatians 6:1).

After gentleness, we're told to “*be **patient** with each other*” (Ephesians 4:2). As with every other character quality, God builds patience into our lives by allowing us to experience situations where it's easier to be impatient. It's easy to be patient when no one is irritating us. It's easy to love at a distance. As Lucy put it in *Peanuts*, “I love the whole wide world . . . it's just *people* that I can't stand!”

It's easy to fool ourselves into thinking we're mature if there's no one to challenge us. **Real maturity shows up in relationships.** Love and patience are more difficult to practice amid the bumps and bruises of family life, and God places us in such relationships in the church for that very purpose, bringing unpolished persons into the fellowship both for their benefit and for ours.

Let me say again that God's overarching purpose is to create a community that is chiefly characterized by **love**. There are things about every single one of us that others find irritating. Knowing this, Jesus told us that “*Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples*” (John 13:35), and just to make sure we didn't miss the point, Jesus said, “*I command you to love each other*” (John 15:17).

The fourth thing Paul tells us to do is to “***make allowances** for each other's faults . . . because of your love*” (Ephesians 4:2). In a way, these qualities are all really aspects of love, aren't they? As Paul famously put it in 1 Corinthians 13, “*Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged. . . . Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance*” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

So what does it mean to “*make allowances for each other's faults*”? It means that I bear in mind that other people find me a pain in the neck sometimes, too. It means remembering that **grace involves giving people what they need, not what they deserve**. It means that you and I keep ourselves ready to offer and to ask for forgiveness—and we can do neither if we lack humility. “*Making allowances for others' faults*” means remembering that I will never have anything to forgive in you that even comes close to what God has already forgiven in me.

Characteristic number five is to always **keep ourselves united** in the Holy Spirit, bound together with the peace Jesus purchased on the Cross (Ephesians 4:3; 2:14). Notice that choice is involved here: “*keep yourselves united*.” You and I are to be *peacemakers*, not *peace lovers* or

peace *hoppers* or peace *wishers*—peacemakers. And Jesus told us that peacemakers will be called the children of God (Matthew 5:9). It's a family thing.

Please skip down in your Bible to Ephesians 4:15-16: *We will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love* (NLT).

In verse 16, Paul tells us that Jesus fits every part of His body together perfectly. What good is a liver without a body in which to function? What good is a heart without a body? What good is any part of your body without the rest of your body? The answer is obvious—it's no good at all. Each part of the body gets its meaning, its function, its purpose, and its health from its connection to the body as a whole. And it is so with our life in the Body of Christ as well.

There's no such thing as a "lone ranger" Christian in the purposes of God. Please take the handout in your order of worship and look at the "one another" passages listed there. The phrases "one another" and "each other" appear in the New Testament dozens of times. Rick Warren put it this way: "We are commanded to love each other, pray for each other, encourage each other, admonish each other, greet each other, serve each other, teach each other, accept each other, honor each other, bear each other's burdens, forgive each other, submit to each other, be devoted to each other, and many other *mutual* tasks. This is biblical membership! These are your 'family responsibilities' that God expects you to fulfill through a local fellowship. *Who are you doing these with?*"<sup>4</sup>

My friend, if you're trying to follow Jesus without meaningful membership in a local expression of His Body, you're in significant danger of becoming a "shriveled liver" for God—a body part with no function, no nourishment, no purpose, no fruit. Jimmy Carter almost made that mistake many years ago: "When I was first elected governor," he said, "and knew that I was going to come to Atlanta . . . I went to visit a woman who was ill and was under my responsibility as a deacon. I told her that I was so loyal to my church in Plains that, even though I was going to be governor, I was going to retain my membership in Plains.

"She said, 'Brother Jimmy, you're making a serious mistake. My momma always said that when you move your stove, you move your church membership. You're going to be cooking in Atlanta, and I think you ought to worship in Atlanta.'

"When you're elected Governor," Jimmy said, "many Baptist churches in Atlanta would like to have the governor be a member of that church. It's even a greater desire when you become President and move to Washington. But Rosalynn and I decided quite early that we would choose the geographically closest Baptist church to the Governor's mansion and then later to the White House. So that is what we did."<sup>5</sup>

People sometimes say, "Well, I'm a Christian, but I don't want to belong to any church." Rick pointed out that that's like saying, "I'm a football player, but I don't want to be a part of a team." That's like saying, "I'm a tuba player, but I don't want to be a part of an orchestra." That's like saying, "I'm a bee, but I don't want to be a part of a hive." A Christian without a church family is an orphan. God meant you to be a part of a family.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Rick Warren, *What On Earth Am I Here For? The Purpose Driven Life*, expanded edition (Zondervan, 2012), p. 136.

<sup>5</sup> Jimmy Carter, in John Pierce, "A Baptist-to-Baptists conversation with Jimmy Carter," *Baptists Today*, November 2003, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Rick Warren, sermon, "You Were Formed for God's Family."

In *What On Earth Am I Here For*, Rick wrote that “God created the church to meet your five deepest needs: a purpose to live for, people to live with, principles to live by, a profession to live out, and power to live on.”<sup>7</sup> As a follower of Jesus, you can only become what God intends for you to be if you’re meaningfully committed to and involved in the local, tangible, specific life of God’s family, the church.

And God intends for you to be a contributor, not just a consumer. And when that happens, “*as each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love*” (Ephesians 4:16)—which is God’s Ultimate Purpose, both for your life and for our planet as a whole. **The church is God’s “demonstration plot” that the New Creation has already begun.**<sup>8</sup>

To experience family in this way is to have found a treasure indeed. Psychiatrist Scott Peck wrote that “when I am with a group of human beings committed to hanging in there through both the agony and the joy of community, I have a dim sense that I am participating in a phenomenon for which there is only one word. I almost hesitate to use it. The word is ‘*glory*.’”<sup>9</sup> Now that’s big. That’s really BIG. And that’s what God intends for you. Have you found it?

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<sup>7</sup> Warren, p. 138.

<sup>8</sup> Craig Van Gelder, at the BGAV annual meeting in Richmond, November 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community-Making and Peace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 106.