

**REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY – ATLANTA**

**COMPREHENDING THE LOVE OF GOD AS THE FAMILY OF GOD:  
A REFLECTION BASED ON EPHESIANS 3:14-21**

**SUBMITTED TO THE COMMITTEE FOR THE THOMAS CHALMERS EXEGETICAL  
SCHOLARSHIP**

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**MAY 11, 2024**

## Introduction

In J.I. Packer's classic *Knowing God*, he argues that the believer's adoption into God's family is the highest privilege bestowed upon us by the gospel and says that the Spirit's "task and purpose throughout is to make Christians realize with increasing clarity the meaning of their filial relationship with God in Christ and to lead them into an ever deeper response to God in this relationship."<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 3:14-21 is the extraordinary prayer of Paul which expresses his desire for God to supply the power his brothers and sisters need to comprehend the multidimensional love of God. It comes at the end of the first section of Paul's letter in which he builds a foundation for their identity in Christ. They have been given every spiritual blessing in Christ having been made alive in him. Further, as Gentiles, they have gone from being strangers and aliens, cut off from the fellowship of the redeemed, to being full members of the household of God, made into one new body through the atoning work of Christ. This mystery is great, and Paul takes his assigned stewardship seriously as he bows to pray for them. What is often overlooked in his prayer but is crucial for his readers and for us to understand, is his choice of words in verses 14 and 15 to describe God and the people he has redeemed. He says, "I bow my knees before the *Father*, from whom every *family* in heaven and on earth is named." This essay will explore the important theme of the family of God in this prayer, how familial language develops throughout the story of redemption and how that relates to growing in our experience of God's love. In his great love, the Father has created a family for himself. Understanding our corporate identity as the family of God should change how we see ourselves and how we live as believers. More specifically, this understanding of and living out of our corporate identity can equip the church today in confronting and overcoming specific challenges we face – identity, power dynamics in ministry, and the wise use of technology. A misunderstanding of our identity as the family of God makes us anemic and prone to division and sin, but a correct understanding will allow us to live in the fullness of love that has brought us together as one.

## Paul's Prayer

Of all the prayers contained in Paul's letters, the one in Ephesians 3:14-21 stands out for its stunning scope. The prayer is located at the end of the doctrinal section of the letter, and this

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<sup>1</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 20th anniversary ed (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1993). pp. 207-220.

gives us some insight into the grandeur of his prayer. He has spent two and a half chapters telling the Ephesian believers all that they are in Christ and all that they have in him. Before he goes on to give them practical instruction he is compelled to pray for them, that they would fully comprehend the love of God that has accomplished all this on their behalf. It is worth quoting the prayer in its entirety:

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith – that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

The way that Paul begins his prayer points us to a more specific reason why he’s praying. He begins in 3:14 with the words, “For this reason.” What reason? When we look back at the beginning of chapter 3 for the answer, we see the same words in 3:1, “For this reason.” Is there a more specific reason for Paul’s prayer? I believe we find it in the second half of chapter 2.

In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul exhorts the Gentile believers to remember their former identity. They were separated and alienated from the believing community, strangers and aliens without hope. But the good news of the gospel was not just what happened to them individually, but to them and the Jews corporately. He says, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” (Ephesians 2:13-16) This is the heart of the mystery of the gospel that Paul describes in the beginning of chapter 3. Notice the plural pronouns and the contrast between two different people and one new man, one body created in Christ Jesus.

Paul finishes chapter 2 by using several metaphors to describe this one new man. He calls it the household of God built on a certain foundation with Christ as the cornerstone (2:19), a structure, a holy temple, and a dwelling place for God. (2:21-22) Paul wants the Gentile believers in Ephesus to understand exactly what he told the Galatian believers in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek.” It’s difficult for 21<sup>st</sup> century believers to understand the magnitude of what Paul is saying here, but this is the great mystery that he says was “hidden for ages in God.” (Eph. 3:9) The Gentiles have now been brought near in Christ and have been reconciled together with the Jews into one people of God, one household of faith. (See Ephesians 4:4-6) In his commentary on this passage, Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, “The church is not a sort of coalition of Jews and Gentiles; something absolutely new has come into being which was just not there before.”<sup>2</sup>

But what is this absolutely new thing that Paul has in mind as he begins to pray in Ephesians 3:14? We might expect him to continue employing the imagery of the building from the end of chapter 2 and address God as the master architect. But instead, he addresses God as Father. We’re so familiar with Father language that it’s easy for us to overlook this as we read Paul’s prayer. But I believe Paul is being intentional in his choice of language to communicate something about the nature of this great love that he wants the Ephesians to comprehend. Paul’s choice of address is related to what he says next – “from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.” (Eph. 3:15) At the end of chapter 2, Paul speaks of buildings and structures and temples. But here he speaks of the Father and his family.

To move forward we need to address what Paul means when he says in verse 15, “from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.” Is Paul referring to multiple families? Is he making a point about the fatherhood of God? Don Carson, in his helpful book on Paul’s prayers, talks about the challenge of interpreting this verse. He says, “The expression that the New International Version renders ‘from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name’ is extremely difficult to translate. It may simply mean that every notion of fatherhood – fatherhood of the nuclear family, of the clan, of the tribe – finds its ultimate archetype in God himself: God is the supreme Father, the model of all valid fatherhood. But it may mean that God

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<sup>2</sup> David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Way of Reconciliation: (Studies in Ephesians, Chapter 2)* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972). p. 215.

is the heavenly Father of all his people, whether they be still in this world or already in heaven. Either way, God is the ultimate Father.”<sup>3</sup>

Lloyd-Jones and John Stott both agree that the context of the whole letter helps us to see that Paul is emphasizing the one family of faith that God has brought the Gentiles into. Stott says there are not a multiplicity of families. There is one family into which God has brought both Jew and Gentile. That has been the theme throughout the book. “Yet there is something inherently inappropriate about this reference to a multiplicity of families, since the dominant theme of these chapters is that through Christ the ‘one God and Father of us all’ (4:6) has only one family or household to which Jewish and Gentile believers equally belong.”<sup>4</sup> Lloyd Jones admits that we can interpret verse 15 in different ways, but he doesn’t think that fits the context. He believes that when Paul uses the words, “For this reason,” he’s pointing back to chapter 2 and what God has accomplished in bringing the Gentiles from the position of strangers to full members of the household of God. He says, “I believe the Apostle used this form of expression in order to teach these Ephesian Christians not to think of themselves any longer as Gentiles. They were to think of themselves now as the children of God, as belonging to God’s great family. This was the wonderful result of what had happened to them, they had been made ‘members of the household of God’, ‘fellow-heirs’ with the Jews, members of the same body, partakers of the same promises; they had been brought into the great family of God.”<sup>5</sup>

Paul has spent the first half of his letter to the Ephesians explaining how the Gentiles have been brought into this new identity. They are no longer outsiders and aliens, cut off from God. They are fellow citizens but even more, they are beloved children in the Father’s family. A love that merely forgave us and spared us from hell wouldn’t require as much strength to comprehend as a love that made enemies into cherished daughters and sons. John Stott prefers to describe the people of God as the “divine society”<sup>6</sup> but I prefer Lloyd-Jones’ description of how Paul approaches the Father on behalf of the Ephesian Christians, “And here this great brother,

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<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1992). p. 200.

<sup>4</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God’s New Society*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England ; Downers Grove, Ill., U.S.A: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986). p. 133.

<sup>5</sup> David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ: An Exposition of Ephesians 3:1 to 21* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1981). p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*. p. 140.

the Apostle Paul, this mighty brother who was so advanced in knowledge, is telling his humble brethren, his young brothers there in Ephesus, that he is going to ‘our Father’ on their behalf, and is about to ask Him to do certain things for them.”<sup>7</sup> In Paul’s prayer we see that a key to comprehending the magnitude of God’s love for us is understanding our corporate identity as the family of God.

If this is our primary identity as believers, beloved children of the Father’s family, we should expect to see evidence for it in the rest of Scripture. The next section of this essay will explore how this familial identity develops through the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the New Testament epistles.

### **Familial Language in the Old Testament**

From the early chapters of Genesis, we see hints of familial language. In Genesis 2:18 we read, “Then the Lord God said, “it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”” From those words we learn that man was made for relationship, not only with God but with his fellow man. Part of being made in God’s image is a capacity for loving relationships and God provides for man by creating a woman. God’s desire for them is to hold fast to one another, to be fruitful and multiply, to make families. This is the first family. According to Michael Reeves in *Delighting in the Trinity*, the loving dynamic between Father, Son and Spirit, is to be replicated in marriages. This is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. We love as he loved us. And if God’s love is, according to Reeves, a kind of spreading goodness, it would make sense that God would expect us to live and love like him. This may be why he describes their mandate in terms of fruitfulness. As they live into their identity as image bearers this will bear the fruit of many families and will be a reflection of the spreading goodness of God’s love.<sup>8</sup>

The curse of sin enters the picture just one chapter later, but this doesn’t invalidate the mandate for Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, to create families – it just makes it harder. That first human family experiences pain and suffering as they are sent out of the garden into exile. But the story of redemption has already begun, and we see in the Old Testament a focus on

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<sup>7</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ*. p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022). p. 28-29.

God as Father and his people as a family. John Frame points out, “Although *Father* is not a frequent name of God in the OT, Scripture from the beginning presents the history of redemption not only as the history of covenants or of the kingdom, but of the royal family.”<sup>9</sup> The beginnings of this royal family emerge when we examine the genealogical records from Genesis 4-11. We see the ungodly line of Cain distinguished from the righteous line of Seth. And then after the Flood, we see a further distinction between the sons of Noah when he singles out Shem and blesses him. The focus is further narrowed as we read of Shem’s descendants at the end of Genesis 11. The focus terminates on Abram as God calls him to leave his country and his father’s house to go to a land that God will show him. In Genesis 15, God initiates a covenant with Abram which consists not just of land but of innumerable offspring, a family. As the story progresses, we see God being faithful to grow this one family. God could have focused on multiple individuals from various people groups scattered throughout the earth but that wasn’t his plan. From Genesis onward through the history of the nation of Israel, we see the story of redemption moving along from generation to generation in this specific family. Geoffrey Grogan, in his essay exploring the biblical theology of the love of God, says, “In Abraham we see God’s electing love taking the form of a divinely initiated covenant with a family.”<sup>10</sup>

Familial language continues to show up as we progress in the Old Testament. Father language may be rare, but in a particularly important passage, God commands Moses to say to Pharaoh, “Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son.’” (Exodus 4:22) Building on Grogan’s observation, God’s covenant isn’t merely a legal contract with a nation but an oath of loyal love to a chosen and beloved son. We also see familial language in how the people of Israel identify themselves, and in how they are expected to treat each other. In Deuteronomy 1:9-18, Moses recounts how he appointed judges over the people and says in verse 16, “And I charged your judges at that time, ‘Hear the cases between your brothers, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the alien who is with him.’” Later in the same chapter Moses reminds them of the spies who gave a bad report of the land and recounts how they murmured in their hearts saying, “Our brothers have made our hearts melt,

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<sup>9</sup> John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2013). p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God: Papers from the Sixth Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference* (Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, Grand Rapids, Michigan Cambridge, U.K: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001). p. 55.

saying, ‘The people are greater and taller than we.’” (Deuteronomy 1:28) By this time the people of Israel had grown very numerous and yet all of them were considered a family, brothers and sisters. In the case of the bad spies, the unfaithful actions of these brothers prevented their siblings from enjoying the fullness of their inheritance in the Promised Land. In the law codes in Deuteronomy, we see a more striking example which connects how the people of Israel identified themselves with the behavior that was expected of them. In Deuteronomy 22:1-4 it says,

“You shall not see your brother’s ox or his sheep going astray and ignore them. You shall take them back to your brother. And if he does not live near you and you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home to your house, and it shall stay with you until your brother seeks it. Then you shall restore it to him. And you shall do the same with his donkey or with his garment, or with any lost thing of your brother’s, which he loses and you find; you may not ignore it. You shall not see your brother’s donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and ignore them. You shall help him to lift them up again.”

In four verses the word *brother* is used five times. What’s even more significant for our discussion is the fact that the brother who has lost his livestock may not live nearby or even be known to the one who finds it. Members of the family of God are to care particularly for one another and their property because they are siblings. Their care for one another is a reflection of God’s care for the whole family.

We see more evidence of father language for God in the Psalms. Psalm 103:13 compares God’s compassion to a human father’s: “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.” And in Psalm 68:5 it says, “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.” For God to identify himself as Father communicates that his people can be confident that he will act like a father in protecting and providing for them. In a similar fashion, God’s people are identified as fathers and children in Psalm 78. Notice the connection between how God describes his people and the behavior he expects of them.

“Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their



children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments; and that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.”

Throughout the Old Testament and here in Psalms, God has identified the ancestors of his people as fathers because he wanted to communicate the kind of close relationships he desired among the people of faith. They were to treat one another with familial affection and pass down the faith to their children. This also reflected an important aspect of his relationship with them that is further revealed in the Prophets.

In Isaiah 1:2 we read, “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the Lord has spoken: ‘children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.’” This verse alludes back to Exodus 4:22 where God identified Israel as his son. Alec Motyer comments on the unique relationship Israel enjoyed with their God compared to others: “Unlike contemporary pagans, who considered themselves children of their god by some quasi-physical act of begetting, Israel was the Lord’s son by historical divine choice and by the exodus as a work of redemption. Redemption initiated a process of divine providential care. The picture of the attentive parent and the growing child covers the whole historical period from Exodus to Isaiah.”<sup>11</sup> Isaiah ends his prophecy with prayers for mercy to the Father of Israel: “For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name,” (Isaiah 63:16) “But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.” (Isaiah 64:8). Some of the most tender father language is found in Hosea. In Hosea 11:1-3 God says, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols. Yet it was

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<sup>11</sup> J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993). p. 43.

I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them.” James Boice comments on the remarkable nature of this passage: “True, it is of Israel as a whole. But the portrayal of God as a father calling and caring for his son is so tender in its detail that it is hard to imagine anyone (particularly a Jew) reading this and not feeling personally the object of such divine compassion.”<sup>12</sup> In Hosea 11 we see the father heart of God on full display. It’s not the aloof judge or the stern dictator. It’s a father caring for a child. Roy Clements, in his essay on the love of God in Hosea, says, “Astonishingly, in this passage the prophet tells us that what we find when we look through that window at the heart of God is a broken heart, the broken heart of a deserted parent.” He goes on to explain Hosea 11:3-4 and says, “It is hard to imagine God’s dealings with Israel ever being described in terms of greater affection.”<sup>13</sup>

What we’ve seen from this brief survey of familial language in the Old Testament is that God doesn’t just identify himself as the Creator and Ruler of the universe. He is also a tender and compassionate Father to his firstborn son, Israel. And as a Father, he has sovereignly called his people into the family of faith. This new identity brings along certain expectations. The people of God are called to treat one another as family, caring for each other’s needs and passing along the faith from generation to generation. The family of faith is to reflect the love of the Father and this enables the family to understand more deeply the love of the Father. As we turn now to the New Testament, we’ll see the story of redemption reach a climax in the coming of Christ and how he sheds new light on our relationship with God as our Father and with each other as we’re incorporated into the ever-expanding family of faith.

### **Familial Language in the Gospels**

In Mark’s gospel we read of Jesus calling his first disciples. He calls Simon and Andrew to leave their nets and then goes on to pursue two other brothers. Mark 1:19-20 says, “And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.” These first disciples didn’t realize it yet, but Jesus

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<sup>12</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2002). p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> Vanhoozer, *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better*. p. 207-208.

was calling them to a complete transfer of loyalty that would redefine how they thought of family.

Jesus' use of Father throughout the gospels to describe his relationship to God and his disciples' relationship to God reveals that Jesus thought of God and his disciples as a family of faith. Father language for God occurs all throughout the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus appeals to his disciples to let their light shine so that others would see their good works and "give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16) He challenges them to love their enemies so they would be "sons of your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:45) In Matthew 6:1-18, he encourages them to give and pray and fast in secret "and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." He also exhorts them to not be anxious in Matthew 6:25-34, based on the loving care of their heavenly Father. Addressing God as Father may not have been common for those first disciples, but Jesus desires for them to see God as a Father who cares for them and gives good things to those who ask him. (Matthew 7:11)

As Jesus' ministry expands and the crowds grow, we see him defining a new kind of family, one that requires his disciples to identify with him and forsake all others. In Mark 3:31-35, we read of a scene where Jesus' mother and brothers are calling to him from outside the crowd. The people in the crowd relay the message, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." But Jesus astonishes with his reply, "And he answered them, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.'" Jesus is calling his followers to leave their own families for him. This exchange of loyalty would involve much risk and pain. In Luke 9:59-62, Jesus explains the cost of following him:

"To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, let me first go and bury my father.' And Jesus said to him, 'Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Yet another said, 'I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'"

Jesus warns his disciples of the conflict that will occur within their own blood families because of their new loyalty to the family of God. He says in Mark 13:12, "And brother will deliver

brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death.”

This transfer of loyalty would bring significant hardship, but Jesus also reassured his disciples of the blessings they would receive as a part of this new family of faith. After Jesus’ encounter with the rich young ruler in Mark 10, he comments on how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Peter points out that they have left everything to follow him, but notice the familial language as Jesus responds in Mark 10:29-30: “Jesus said, ‘Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.’” Joseph Hellerman comments on this passage saying, “Jesus promises Peter, who left his own family to follow him, that Peter will enjoy sibling-like relationships with others who have made such a sacrifice (“brothers and sisters, mothers and children”) and find life’s necessary physical resources – such as shelter (“houses”) and food (“fields”) – in the context of the new community.”<sup>14</sup>

Throughout Jesus’ ministry he modeled in word and deed the kind of behavior he expected in this new family. It would welcome the marginalized as Jesus welcomed the woman with the hemorrhage in Mark 5 calling her daughter. It would embody a spirit of sacrificial service instead of rivalry, “for even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) And it would take care of the grieving just as Jesus instructed John from the cross to take care of his mother. (John 19:26-27) Hellerman concludes, “For Jesus, then, family is not simply one among a variety of equally significant metaphors upon which he draws in order to portray the community he envisions. Rather, it is the dominant social model as well as a metaphor that Jesus uses to engender a specific kind of behavior.”<sup>15</sup>

Old Testament saints were brothers and sisters but the focus there was primarily on bloodlines. When Jesus came, he emphasized that only those who believe in him and are born again are the true children of the Father and members of the family of faith. (John 1:12-13; 3:3;

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph H. Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001). p. 66-67.

<sup>15</sup> Hellerman. p. 70.

8:39-44) As the early church is formed, we see the New Testament authors using this familial metaphor to represent the identity of the believing community and to both encourage and discourage certain behaviors within the group. As we turn to the rest of the New Testament and the end of our survey, we will see how this new identity strengthens the sibling bond between members of the family of faith and allows them to better experience and comprehend the depth of the love of God.

### **Familial Language in the New Testament Epistles**

Joseph Hellerman calls the church a “surrogate kinship group.” He makes the case that this is the predominant social model throughout the New Testament and early Christianity.<sup>16</sup> David DeSilva argues similarly when he says, “Kinship language, household relations and adopting a kinship ethos as the standard for interpersonal relations within the group dominate the descriptions of, and prescriptions for, the church in the New Testament.”<sup>17</sup> How does God want the family of faith to act? What makes brotherly love different? From exhortations concerning the use of food to encouragements to take up offerings and visit prisoners, we see the authors of the New Testament leveraging familial language in both their indicatives and imperatives. Because they are the family of God, they should treat one another accordingly. As a result, their familial bond will be strengthened, and they will enjoy deeper fellowship with one another and with the Father.

Mutual love is the dominant theme of the family of faith. In 1 John 3:16 we read, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” This kind of love is called brotherly affection in Romans 12:10 and should “outdo one another in showing honor.” Paul gives an example of this kind of love two chapters later when he gives instructions on eating certain foods. He says, “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.” (Romans 14:14-15) DeSilva points out that “the

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<sup>16</sup> Hellerman. p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> David Arthur DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000). p. 199.

Christian's freedom is always directed by love for the other," and "abstaining from hurting the sister or brother takes the highest priority."<sup>18</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul appeals to the Corinthian believers' identity as brothers and sisters in his call for unity. He says, "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers." (1 Corinthians 1:10-11) DeSilva comments about the importance of identity matching behavior: "The repetition in each sentence of the address 'brothers and sisters' is strategic, as Paul holds before them the disgraceful inconsistency between their identity in Christ (their close kinship) and their behavior (divisions, quarrels)."<sup>19</sup> Paul's point is this – brothers and sisters in the family of God should be known for and work for unity. But why? Even though the image of God in man isn't triune as in the divine Trinity, as God's image bearers we are to reflect the kind of love that exists within the Godhead. This community of love is one that is, as Michael Reeves describes it, "deeply personal: the Spirit stirs up the delight of the Father in the Son and the delight of the Son in the Father, inflaming their love and so binding them together in 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' (2 Cor 13:14)."<sup>20</sup> As the family of faith reflects the unity that exists between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, they will also experience the same kind of bond which kindles love for one another and for God.

Sacrificial giving should also be a mark of the community of faith. In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, Paul goes into detail about the collection for the Jerusalem church who had been suffering from severe poverty. He encourages the Corinthians to finish their work of generosity that they had started the year before in imitation of the Lord Jesus himself who "though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9) In God's economy, we are called to use our abundance to help those who are in need. But notice the result of our sacrificial giving in chapter 9. He says, "You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God." (2 Corinthians

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<sup>18</sup> DeSilva. p. 214.

<sup>19</sup> DeSilva. p. 218.

<sup>20</sup> Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*. p. 29.

9:11) As the family of God joyfully sacrifices for one another, they will be enriched in every way, experiencing the grace of God which will result in thanksgiving to him.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:1-16, Paul describes his ministry to the Thessalonians as a spiritual parent taking care of his children. As an apostle, Paul didn't wield authority like a dictator among subjects. He didn't see himself or the church in this way. He says, "Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us." (1 Thessalonians 2:6-8) At the end of chapter 2, Paul reveals that in the Day of Christ his boast will be in them – "For you are our glory and joy." (1 Thessalonians 2:20) Those wielding authority like a dictator don't rejoice in their subjects but in their accomplishments. But Paul and his coworkers' investment as spiritual parents in their Thessalonian children will result in an abounding joy when Christ comes again.

The author of Hebrews shares this imperative in Hebrews 13:1: "Let brotherly love continue." Why the added descriptor? As Jesus taught his disciples in the farewell discourse, and John emphasized in his first epistle, Christians are to love one another as Christ has loved them (John 15:12), and "whoever loves God must also love his brother." (1 John 4:21). Before the author of Hebrews shares his final instructions, he wants them to remember that they are a family characterized by a certain kind of love. Richard Phillips comments on this verse by saying, "Christians are to live continually by this principle. Christianity is the family of God; the church is to be a community characterized by family love."<sup>21</sup> The author then shares some examples of brotherly love. They are to practice hospitality and "remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body." (Hebrews 13:3) The family of God makes sure that those who are suffering are not neglected because they know that as a body "if one member suffers, all suffer together." (1 Corinthians 12:26) DeSilva mentions in a footnote the experience of Ignatius as he, a prisoner heading to his eventual martyrdom in Rome, was attended the whole way by Christian brothers and sisters who practiced

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<sup>21</sup> Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken, *Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2005). p. 587.

“familial loyalty” through their hospitality to him.<sup>22</sup> He comments further that in doing these things they are “for one another the visible and active manifestation of the promise of God never to forsake or leave the believer (Heb 13:5).”<sup>23</sup>

My argument throughout this essay has been that when we understand our corporate identity as the family of God, this will drive our behavior and result in a deeper and richer experience of God’s love. What we’ve seen from these examples in the New Testament is that the people of God will more experience the love of God when the whole family of God is living in the fullness of this identity. And based on DeSilva’s comments above, I contend that if we don’t live and love like the family of God, we are essentially telling a lie about who God is. If we don’t understand the truth of who we are as the people of God – a household and a family – we will not act like family towards everyone else in the body. This concept of family is essential in realizing what our salvation means, that we are brought in according to the staggering love and grace of God, and we are to experience that same love as we love one another. Lloyd-Jones makes a similar argument in his sermon on Ephesians 2:19. He says,

“More and more it seems to me that it is our failure at this point that really explains why the Christian Church is as she is. And it does not matter what we do or try to do; until we come back to this and really understand this and feel it and experience its power, I see no hope for the Church. We are the children of God, partakers of the divine nature.”<sup>24</sup>

The Christian church in 2024 faces different challenges than when Lloyd-Jones preached this sermon over 50 years ago. But whatever challenges we may face, I think the doctor has prescribed a powerful remedy. We must remember who we are as the family of God if we are to know how we are to live as that family. Only then will we be able to comprehend how deeply we are loved by our heavenly Father. In conclusion, I wish to provide some practical implications of what has been said in this essay to help my fellow brothers and sisters live and love well in the family of God. I will address three areas of concern: 1) our identity as the church, 2) ministry within the church, and 3) technology in the church.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*. p. 223, n. 19.

<sup>23</sup> DeSilva. p. 223.

<sup>24</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Way of Reconciliation*. p. 330.

<sup>25</sup> For the sake of clarity, the practical implications raised in this essay address issues I see in the context of the American church.



## Practical Implications

### Our Identity as the Church

It is self-evident that we are living in a culture that exalts the individual and encourages us to define ourselves according to whatever standard makes sense. In Carl Trueman's important book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, he explores the historical development of identity and explains why it has become so malleable. He argues that the therapeutic needs of man are central to modern man's identity and makes the following point: "If the inner psychological life of the individual is sovereign, then identity becomes as potentially unlimited as the human imagination."<sup>26</sup> Thomas Smail, writing 40 years before Trueman, spoke similarly: "We live in a world facing identity crises at many levels where individuals and communities are looking sometimes wildly in all sorts of directions to discover who they are."<sup>27</sup> One hour of perusing the filter-infested self-promotion of social media puts to rest any doubt about the truth of both these assertions. The problem is only accelerating. But how should the church address this? I believe Christians must think just as hard about *who they are* as they do about *what they do*, for as I've contended throughout this essay, identity will drive behavior and this will result in a certain experience of the love of God, whether positive or negative.

I suggest that the church must actively push back against the ethos of individualism that is entirely too much with us in the West, especially the American church. For years I read many of the commands in the New Testament epistles as directed to the individual, not realizing that they were addressed to the plural "you", the corporate body of believers. I was like the fish who was asked to define water. He couldn't do it because it was all he'd ever known. The water we swim in is called individualism and we must be more purposeful in allowing what the Bible says about our identity to shape us and our behavior. DeSilva helps us see that we should find our identity by looking to our family of origin not inwardly at ourselves. He says, "A person's family of origin is the primary source for his or her status and location in the world and an essential reference point for the person's identity. Location in a larger family – an ancestral house – is critical not only for the person's self-perception but also for the perception and expectations

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<sup>26</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020). p. 50.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Allan Smail, *The Forgotten Father*, American ed (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1981). p. 69.

others will have of him or her.”<sup>28</sup> How wonderful to understand through Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians that our identity is rooted in the Father who through the blood of Christ, has broken down every dividing wall and obstacle to bring his beloved children into one household, the family of God.

But how can we practically go about practicing this corporate identity so that we will comprehend more deeply the love that God has for us in Christ? One suggestion is to consider the Sunday gathering of believers. Both Donald Whitney and David Mathis suggest looking at the weekly gathering of the church as a spiritual discipline. Five years ago, it would have seemed silly to exhort Christians to go to church but since the Covid-19 pandemic, churches have struggled with people content to watch a live stream from their couches. Consider what Whitney said in 1991 in reference to television broadcasts of worship services: “To express and experience Christianity almost always on the individual level (that is to the exclusion of the group level), means you will needlessly and sinfully miss much of the blessing and power of God. This verse [he is referring to Hebrews 10:25] teaches that those who ‘give up’ the disciplined ‘habit’ of assembling with other believers have developed an unChristian habit.”<sup>29</sup> Whitney calls forsaking the assembly a sin and says that much of the blessing and power of God is experienced corporately, not individually. Mathis, writing in 2016, emphasizes the importance of the corporate discipline of worship. He says, “As the Swedish proverb says, *a shared joy is a double joy*. In corporate worship, the ‘graces and benefits’ we uniquely enjoy are not only awakening, assurance, advance, and accepting others’ leadership, but also the accentuated joy of deeper and richer and greater adoration and awe, since our delight in Jesus expands as we magnify him together with others.”<sup>30</sup>

This focus on the group doesn’t match the current cultural ethos which encourages people to go within themselves to experience the greatest spiritual high. But it makes perfect sense if we remind ourselves again of the nature of God and how he desires us to imitate him. Michael Reeves explains the differences between a single person God and the Triune God of Scripture:

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<sup>28</sup> DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*. p. 158.

<sup>29</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 1994). p. 86.

<sup>30</sup> David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2016). p. 163.

“Such are the problems with nontriune gods and creation. Single-person gods, having spent eternity alone, are inevitably self-centered beings, and so it becomes hard to see why they would ever cause anything else to exist. Everything changes when it comes to the Father, Son and Spirit. Here is a God who is not essentially lonely, but who has been loving for all eternity as the Father has loved the Son in the Spirit. Loving others is not a strange or novel thing for this God at all; it is at the root of who he is.”<sup>31</sup>

If love is at the root of who God is as a triune being, then we as his image bearers cannot hope to truly understand the depth of his love apart from communion with him and with the family of God. Carson makes a similar point in reference to Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians, “It is inconceivable that a genuine, deepening grasp of the love of Jesus Christ could remain entirely privatized. Paul wants the entire church to grow in this way; and he prays to this end.”<sup>32</sup> Paul begins his prayer in Ephesians the way he does because our heavenly Father has brought us into his one family, and we experience the love of God more deeply in the context of that family. A shared love is a multiplied love.

### **Ministry within the Church**

It’s been common in recent years to talk about ministry in the church using business strategies. In May of 2019, Karl Vaters, writing in *Christianity Today*, warned against using business principles to help renew and grow churches. He says, “If we keep on this path, business ideas won’t be supplementing biblical ideas, they’ll be replacing them.”<sup>33</sup> Although he stresses that the church isn’t a business and shouldn’t be run by secular business strategies, he never clarifies what the church is. What I’ve argued throughout this essay is that the church is a family. But how should that influence how ministry is done? What we see in the New Testament is that the family metaphor extends to the leadership style God desires to be implemented in the church. The pastoral epistles outline the church leadership positions of elder and deacon, but it’s interesting to note how Paul instructs Timothy to treat the members of his church. 1 Timothy 5:1-2 says, “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as

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<sup>31</sup> Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*. p. 41.

<sup>32</sup> Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*. p. 198.

<sup>33</sup> Karl Vaters, “Why We Need To Be Careful About Adopting Business Models In Our Churches,” Pivot | A Blog by Karl Vaters, accessed May 9, 2024, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters/2019/may/business-models-in-churches.html>.

brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.” The way church leaders should interact with the members of their churches is not in an aloof sort of way, cloistered away from their people like a CEO in the corner office. They should know, love and correct their people with a spirit of familial tenderness and care.

Shortly after Saul’s conversion, Barnabas brought him to the apostles so they could hear his testimony. (Acts 9:27) Luke recounts, “So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.” (Acts 9:28-30) Luke calls the leaders of the early church “apostles” in verse 27 but then “brothers” in verse 30. If titles and power were most important, we might expect Luke to continue to use the word “apostle” in verse 30. But he doesn’t. He uses familial language. The leaders of the early church were operating according to a familial identity. I think they learned that from Jesus himself.

In Matthew 20:20-28, we see the mother of James and John asking Jesus to grant her sons special positions of authority in his kingdom. The disciples had already discussed the subject of greatness with Jesus in Matthew 18:1-6 and Mark 9:33-37 and received this answer, “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:4) Perhaps James and John weren’t listening closely enough during that discussion, but whatever the reason, they and the rest of the disciples needed Jesus to teach them about humility again. When the ten heard of this request from the sons of Zebedee, they were angry. Jesus responds by gathering all twelve about him and saying, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you.” (Matthew 20:25-26) The disciples learned from Jesus how leaders should lead. They should serve their brothers and sisters, not lord their authority over them. DeSilva comments that those who lived in that classical world understood clearly what it meant to operate as a family. It meant solidarity and cooperation, protecting the reputation of others, forgiveness, and trust. He says, “Rivalry, competition and working against a brother or sister’s advantage would be as unnatural and as

dysfunctional as for one hand to break what the other hand builds, or for one foot to trip up the other.”<sup>34</sup>

Last year I was invited to be a part of a teaching team of women Bible teachers at my church who would work together to teach the book of Colossians. The women’s ministry at our church had traditionally brought in a well-known speaker to headline their events, but this was different. Six regular women, none of whom had anything close to a “platform” or “influence”, worked for a year to craft messages that would connect seamlessly together to truly represent the message of the book and serve the needs of our women. As I participated in the preparation for this event, I found myself again and again having to humble myself and cooperate with the other women as we worked together to make sure our messages connected well and were all pointing toward the same learning objective. I realized that the Lord wanted me to support and encourage my fellow Bible teachers, my sisters, not compete with them for the greatest accolades. On the day of the event, we all worked together, along with many other sisters behind the scenes, to offer the gift of God’s Word to the church. Those who lead in the family of God are not to seek prominence but cooperate and honor one another as they serve the Body of Christ. In commenting on the rivalry between the disciples, DeSilva explains, “Jesus declares that such an attitude must yield to the kinship values of cooperation and seeking how to be most of service to the brothers and sister, rather than seeking how to achieve the greatest precedence and distinction among them.”<sup>35</sup>

Our interactions within the church, whether in person or online, could be radically transformed if we thought of one another through the lens of family. I don’t have space to address the details of the theological debate between complementarians and egalitarians, but what if our arguments concerning this issue have been framed incorrectly? The debates we have online and in print have the flavor of James and John asking to be second in command in the kingdom. We look at roles in the church as opportunities for significance, influence, and power. Equal access to roles determines value. But the kingdom principle that Jesus teaches is one of service, of laying down your life for your brother and sister. We are brought into a kingdom and

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<sup>34</sup> DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*. p. 167.

<sup>35</sup> DeSilva. p. 221.

a family where equity and equality are not the driving principles. Love is. Michelle Lee-Barnewall comments on our incorrect emphasis on equality within the community of faith:

“What Jesus promotes is inclusion in that he made it possible for all people to become disciples and members of the new covenant community. Rather than an egalitarian community, the believers formed a surrogate family where people were included not by blood ties but on the basis of faith. The bonds among the members were the ties of brotherly and sisterly love. As Elliott notes, seeing Jesus’s intent as establishing a ‘community of equals’ is not only incorrect but can also obscure its true original model as one of a household or family.”<sup>36</sup>

Paul addresses three major divides among people in his epistles: the divide between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, and male and female. In his letter to the Ephesians, he explains what God has done to overcome the division between Jew and Gentile. But notice how he does it. It’s not by proclaiming their equality, but rather their unity in Christ. “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.” (Ephesians 2:14-15). In chapter 4, one of his first imperatives is to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:3) What if in our debates about gender roles in the church, we focused more on oneness in Christ rather than equality, unity as a family instead of equity amongst individuals? It is worth quoting Lee-Barnewell again when she says, “Paul also affirms a kingdom community characterized not so much by equality as by a “oneness” in which all could be included, regardless of factors such as gender, race, or socioeconomic status, and even more, could love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ despite these traditional barriers. While such inclusion might have social ramifications such as equality, it was the love of the believers for one another that was to be a hallmark of the body of Christ.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Michelle Lee-Barnewall, *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016). p. 86.

<sup>37</sup> Lee-Barnewall. p. 84.

## Technology in the Church

The final practical implication of this essay has to do with the wise use of technology in the church. This should flow out of our identity and the way we do ministry. The church has constantly adopted and adapted to new technology. Some adopt wholeheartedly and unquestioningly the latest advancements, but only a few have stopped to ask the important theological and philosophical questions that inevitably arise with technological advancement.<sup>38</sup> More important to the issue being discussed in this essay, how might technology encourage the church to interact in ways that run contrary to our identity as a family and therefore hinder our ability to comprehend the depth of God's love?

Because of the Covid -19 pandemic, the phrase "virtual church" has entered the public lexicon. But since then, the technology of virtual reality has further transformed some people's thinking about how the church gathers and even what the church is. In 2016, former high school teacher D.J. Soto founded VR Church, a spiritual community that exists entirely in the metaverse. Their website states, "We believe the church can be anywhere at any time with anyone." Soto says, "The future of the church is the metaverse. It's not an anti-physical thing. I don't think the physical gatherings should go away. But in the church of 2030, the main focus is going to be your metaverse campus."<sup>39</sup> Soto's unquestioned acceptance and promotion of a technology that goes beyond the live streaming many of us endured during the pandemic to a sometimes-far-flung community of pseudonymous avatars brings into question his understanding of ecclesiology. If the church is a family consisting of flesh and blood individuals, then that family must minister to one another as brothers and sisters, embracing each other physically, sitting in the same room as they grieve the loss of a loved one, looking each other in the eye as they ask their sister for forgiveness. How can we bear our brother's burdens if that brother is merely an avatar? In Samuel James' book on technology and wisdom, he sums up the dangers of an unquestioned acceptance of virtual reality when it comes to the church:

"The web is not simply another way to do all the things we do offline. It's an entirely new epistemological and spiritual habitat. It shapes everything on it into its image. If, as I've

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<sup>38</sup> See especially Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th anniversary ed (New York, N.Y., U.S.A: Penguin Books, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> "VR MMO Church in the Metaverse," accessed December 4, 2023, <https://www.vrchurch.org/>.

argued, the wisdom of God is necessarily given and embodied, it is impossible to meaningfully be shaped by that wisdom in an exclusively digital context. When we physically gather, we learn what cannot be learned in other ways, and we are shaped in ways we cannot be shaped in other ways.”<sup>40</sup>

Interacting with people in a virtual world or on Twitter not only limits human communication, but it stunts communion and the kind of transformation that only occurs when humans live face to face with one another. In their book on how people change, Lane and Tripp observe,

“When we are adopted into God’s family, we have many new brothers and sisters to love! Yet this is not simple. Being involved with people is time consuming, messy, and complicated. From our point of view it is inefficient, but from God’s point of view it is the best way to encourage growth in grace.”<sup>41</sup>

God has certainly used all kinds of technology to bless our lives and further the spread of the gospel, but we would do well to evaluate any new technology according to the values it promotes, not merely according to its practical usefulness. Many technologies today promote a kind of efficiency that is fast and frictionless. But do these values inadvertently undermine the kind of family dynamic that Lane and Tripp describe above? Any technology the church adopts should contribute to the growth and health of the family of faith and its ability to comprehend the love of God.

## **Conclusion**

My contention in this essay has been that we can more deeply comprehend and experience the great love of God when we understand and live out of our identity as the family of God. We cannot fully understand the love of God as individuals. As John Stott said in his commentary on Ephesians 3:14-21, “It needs the whole people of God to understand the whole love of God.”<sup>42</sup> As the family of God, we should take time individually and corporately to

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<sup>40</sup> Samuel James, *Digital Liturgies: Rediscovering Christian Wisdom in an Online Age* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2023). p. 176.

<sup>41</sup> Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, *How People Change*, 2nd ed (Greensboro, N.C: New Growth Press, 2008). p. 72.

<sup>42</sup> Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*. p. 136-137



contemplate how our actions are contributing to or diminishing how our brothers and sisters are experiencing the love of God. Adopting a kinship ethos in the church has the potential to heal the wounds that we have inflicted upon one another, and dare I say Christ himself (Acts 9:4-5), through gossip, rivalry, dissension, and abuse, and powerfully reflect to our individualistic and lonely culture that the church is the place to find belonging and a fullness of love that is beyond comprehension. For people in the church to more fully experience the love of God, I believe we must take up the challenge of DeSilva as he concludes, “The church has an enormous opportunity, as it is instructed by its Scriptures, to realize the depth of mutual commitment, help, encouragement and healing that would come from choosing to live as a real family, related by blood – the blood of the Lamb.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*. p. 238.

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