

April 24, 2005 Fellowship: You Were Formed for God's Family 1 John 4:18-21

Last week we looked at God's first purpose for our life, which is getting to know and love God. We call this worship we were planned for God's pleasure. Today we're going to look at the second purpose; Fellowship - we were formed for God's family. Ephesians 1:5 says God, "*Destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will.*" God wants a large family. God wants lots of children. God wants us to be part of the family of God. The Bible is basically the story of God building a family. Once we get started on our first purpose, knowing and loving God, God wants us to begin to focus and start practicing the second purpose of our life which 1 Peter 2:17 states this way, "*Love the family of believers.*" That's what God wants us to do. That's the second purpose of our life.

God wants us to learn to love our spiritual family because it makes us more like God because God is love. Second, as God's children, the Lord wants us to learn to get along together. Parents want their children to get along. Third, we're preparing for eternity. In heaven we're going to love God and we're going to love the other believers who are there. It's going to be a place of love. So God wants us to practice now learning to love other believers. So our second purpose in life is **Fellowship**. Like the word "Worship," "Fellowship" is often misunderstood. After worship today a couple guys will be talking and one of them will say, "Hey, how you doin'?" "I'm doin' okay, how you doing?" "I'm fine, how's the golf game?" "Not bad" "We'll see you next week." "Okay see you next week. Nice fellowshipping with you." That's not fellowship. Fellowship is more than coffee, cheese and crackers or even a supper. **Fellowship is loving God's family.** 1 John 4:18-21 says,

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

**We love because he first loved us.**

**Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sister also."**

We have to love other believers and the Bible tells us how to do that. Paul wrote to his younger companion in ministry Timothy (1 Timothy 3:14-15), *“I am writing these instructions to you so that...you may know how to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God.”* The household or family of God is the church. The church is a family. The church is not a building; it’s not an institution; it’s not an organization; it’s not a business; it’s not a club. It is a family. People often say, *“I’m going to church”* as if church is a place you go to. That’s not correct. Church is not a place you go to. Church is a family you belong to. There’s a big difference. Today we’re going to talk about the three levels of fellowship in God’s family. It’s impossible to fulfill all the other purposes God has for your life without fellowship. We are not to go through life on our own. The truth is we need each other.

The first level of **Fellowship** is **Membership, Choosing to Belong**. That means we find a church family and choose to get connected with it. Ephesians 2:19 says, *“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.”* **The Christian life is not just a matter of believing, it is also a matter of belonging and we must choose to belong.** When we’re born, we automatically became part of the human family, but we choose to belong to the family of God. Some people say, “Well, I’m a Christian, but I don’t belong to any church.” That just isn’t possible, it doesn’t make sense. The church is where we live out what it means to be a Christian. It’s like saying, “I’m a soccer player, but I don’t want to be a part of any team.” It doesn’t work, there’s no game to play in. It’s like saying, “I’m a tuba player, but I don’t want to be part of an orchestra.” Tuba solos sound pretty funny. A Christian without a church family is an orphan. God meant us to be part of a family. This week in the Purpose Driven Life book, we’re going to be reading six reasons why we need to be a part of a church family, why it meets your needs and why you meet other people’s needs. Paul says in Romans 12:5,

*“For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”* The word “members” is mentioned three times in one sentence. The word “membership” was originally a Christian word; it comes from verses like this one. Today it is used for being a member of every kind of club to buying books

or CD's. But being a member first referred to being a member of the Body of Christ. Just like your hand is a member of your body, that is how closely, tightly, and interdependent we are as members of the Body of Christ.

People today go church shopping, which is fine if you are a seeker, or new believer or a new resident of an area. However, if you want to grow, if you want to see God working in your life, you need to be a part of a body. As followers of Jesus we attach ourselves to a family of believers and say, "I want to be part of what's going on here."

Jesus loves the church. Jesus wants us to love the church as he does. Now I would never say to someone, "I love you, I just can't stand your body." How would we feel hearing that? The church is Jesus' body and we are to love it. The Bible also describes the church as the bride of Christ. Can you imagine someone saying to you "I love you, but I can't stand your wife." The church is the bride of Christ and because Jesus loves the church, the family of believers growing and serving together, we need to have the same kind of love for this body and we express that love by choosing to belong. The symbol we use to express that choice, that desire to belong to God's family is called "baptism." 1 Corinthians 12:13 says, "*For in the **one Spirit** we were **all baptized** into **one body** – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of **one Spirit.***"

Do hear the oneness – "one Spirit, all baptized into one body, one Spirit?"

Baptism is a public way of expressing, "*I am a part of the family of God and I am excited to belong to this group of believers.*" Romans 6:3-4 says, "*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.*" Baptism is a public way of saying, "I am dying to my old self-centered way of living; I am rising to walk in a new way of life." Baptism is a visible symbol of the commitment of a person's heart that I am not ashamed to tell the world I belong to Jesus. By the time you are done with the reading for this week, some of you may wish to take the step of being baptized because it is something you have never chosen to do. I anticipate that we will be baptizing people soon, perhaps even during the 40 Days or not long afterward so

please speak with one of the pastors if you are feeling led to make that decision and to take that first step of choosing to belong to God's family and by doing so to make public your commitment to Jesus.

The Second level of Fellowship is a little deeper and this is **Learning to share**. We are created in God's image so we are made for relationships. The Bible says, "It is not good for man to be alone," and it's not so good for women either. We were made for each other. Life is not a solo act. We all need friends. Acts 2:44 says, "*All the believers met together constantly and shared everything with each other.*" To develop friendships we need to meet and share together. I feel blessed to have some friendships that go back to my elementary school days. I'll be getting together with three of those friends in Boston in two weeks. Having long-term friendships may depend somewhat on where we live, but more so we choose to develop friendships by making time for them. Friendships require making time and getting together. Until this is a priority in our life, we're not going to develop any deep friends.

Learning to share in the family of God means we share lots of things – including our **experiences**. We learn from each other. It may be wise to learn from experience, but it is much wiser to learn from the experiences of others because we don't have time to make all the mistakes our selves. If you learn everything in life personally by trial and error, you're going to go through a lot of problems you don't have to and just about the time you figure it all out, you're dead. There isn't enough time to learn everything on our own. We learn faster from the experiences of others. We're all ignorant, just on different subjects. Some of you may not know as much of the Bible as I do, but you wouldn't want me to put the plumbing or electricity in your house to fix your car or to take you out in a boat. We can learn from and share with each other and we all win.

In addition to experiences, the Bible says we're to share our **homes**. 1 Peter 4:9 says, "*Open up your homes to each other.*" We are to share or open our homes because you can't fellowship in a crowd like we have on a Sunday morning. We can worship, learn, and celebrate in a crowd, in fact, it's more fun with a crowd, but we fellowship in a small group or one on one. For the first several hundred years of Christianity folks met in homes, there weren't buildings like this one, and that was the fastest period of growth for the church. This is why we put such a strong emphasis on being in a 40 Days of Purpose

group. How many of you are in a group? Would you raise your hand? How many of you would say, “The first time I ever went to a small group, I was a little nervous?”

A group I’d like to honor today because they took a step of faith and courage is the hosts who opened up their homes for all of us. If you are a host, would you stand up and let us appreciate you because you’re opening your home. Thank you.

Not only do we share our **experiences and our homes**, we also are to share our **problems**. Someone said when we share a joy it is doubled and when we share a problem we cut it in half. The Bible says we “weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice.” In a group sometimes we laugh together, sometimes we shed tears together. I was driving up to Maine on Tuesday to lead the funeral for Keith White’s dad and I was on the expressway in Boston I passed a billboard that said, **“There’s hearing, then there’s listening.”** We don’t have to fix everyone’s problem, we can share in them just by listening, and by giving someone a little focused attention. This level of fellowship isn’t going to happen unless we get into a small group that meets regularly. Hebrews 10:25 reminds us, *“Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.”* The primary purpose of a group is to encourage each other. I hope many of you will continue the habit of meeting together after these 40 days are over because you’re always going to need encouragement. Let me share part of an email I received this week. *“Hi Doug I admit after meeting last week I wasn’t sure where our group was going to end up. No one knew each other we were all coming from different places and just didn’t seem to mesh. Tonight was a whole different ball game. It went very well and I really felt like we were all connecting. We had great discussions. Just wanted to let you know how things were going and say Thanks.”*

Pastor Mary may not want to hear me say this, but if you really don’t feel like your group is right for you talk to her or me and we will try to help you find one. Or you may want to form a group with some folks you know and want to invite when the 40 Days are over. Just don’t give up on the idea. A few months ago our family tried a restaurant in Hyannis for the first time and it was definitely not up to our standards in any way. So after trying this restaurant and finding it didn’t work for us, I decided we are never eating out again as long as we live. Yeah, right. We’ll keep going out, we just will eat at other places.

**A third level of fellowship is Partnership. Partnership is doing my part.**

Partnership is simply realizing, “I’ve got a contribution to make; the family of God needs me.” God didn’t lead you to Brewster Baptist so you can sit and soak in a spiritual spa. God brought you here to contribute to what God is doing. God brought you here to serve, that will be a whole theme in a couple weeks but it is an aspect of fellowship and loving others. In every family there are family responsibilities – we divide up the chores and being part of the family we all do our part. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:9, “*For we are God’s servants, working together.*” 58 times the New Testament says we are partners with one another – serving, loving, praying, and even putting up with one another. This is love in action. Love is a verb. In level two of fellowship we share our heart, in level three we do our part. We’re going to have a fabulous ministry fair on May 15<sup>th</sup> after each worship service so everyone can find where they fit, where their niche is and do their part by sharing in a ministry. We all have a part to play in the body of Christ and we get more done together than we could ever accomplish on our own. And whatever we do, we remember we are doing it for and to Jesus.

Mother Teresa invested her life working, as many of us know, with the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India. When she was asked how she dealt with all the death disease on a daily basis she replied, “*Every person I bathe, every person I bandage, I imagine seeing the face of Jesus and I do it for him.*”

Basically Fellowship is about growing deeper together and **loving other believers like family**. Romans 12:10 says, “*Love one another with mutual affection, out do one another in showing honor.*” The word for “fellowship” in the Bible is the Greek word is “koinonia” and the basic root means being committed to each other as we are to Jesus. That is the deepest level of fellowship. Being as committed to each other as we are to Jesus. 1 John 3:16 tells us, “*We know love by this, that he laid down his love for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.*” The deepest level of fellowship is sacrificing for each other. While we don’t face persecution for following Jesus as some of our brothers and sisters in Christ do in other parts of the world, we can sacrifice for each other by standing by one another when some one is going through a crisis.

There are many people here who have walked through the valley of the shadow of death in recent years who could share how the love of some good friends in this church

helped them through. I have been with many people when they dying. I have buried more than 100 people who were a part of God's family at BBC when I came. I can tell you that no one I have been with has ever said, "Let me see my diploma one more time. Let me hold my palm pilot one last time. Let me see look at my bank statement for the final time." What people say in a moment like that is, "Call my family and friends." In our final moments we talk about and want what matters most.

The sooner we figure out that what really matters in life is knowing God and having loving family and friends the better our life will be. Don't wait until the final moments of your life to begin to fellowship as God intends because life is all about love.

Loving God is called **Worship**. Loving each other is called **Fellowship**. We want BBC to be known not for our size, not our sermons, or singing, not our building, but our love. We want people to say, "*That's the place where they love each other,*" because that is what Christianity is all about, loving God and loving each other.

How do you know if you're in God's family? 1 John 3:10 says, "*Anyone who does not love other Christians does not belong to God.*" 1 John 4:20, says, "**Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.**" 1 John 3:14, "*We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another.*" **That's the proof.** God's family the church is a lab for learning how to love.

Which level of fellowship are you at today? Have you made it to level one – choosing to belong? Have you committed yourself to membership in God's church and being baptized as a public expression of your commitment to follow Jesus? If you haven't done that then you know your next step – please speak to one of the pastors so you can be part of the next group of people who do that at BBC.

Our second step is learning to share with a small group of other folks and then we begin to do our part. We find a place to give back and make a contribution to the family of God. We find and fulfill our family responsibilities. The deepest level is devotion - are there are other believers who know you are devoted to them, that you will be there for them in a crisis? We choose to be a part of God's family, if you haven't made that choice, I hope you will soon because it is life changing. We become God's children

through faith, as Paul says in Galatians 3:26, “*For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.*”

Let’s pray, Loving God, we thank you for the opportunity to be a part of your family. Thank you that we don’t have to do through life isolated, lonely, and disconnected. Thank you for creating the Brewster Baptist family for all of us.

You may want to pray this in your heart with me:

“Dear God, I want to be a part of your family and I want to learn to love my spiritual family just like you do. Forgive me if I have been treating it too casually. I want to grow in the levels of fellowship so today I’m choosing to belong. I want to learn to share and make time to develop real friendships. I want to do my part in the family of God. I want to learn to love other believers like brothers and sisters. Teach me the meaning of real love. In your name I pray, Amen.”