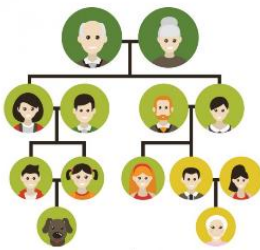


# A Family to surround you

“A happy family is but an earlier heaven.” — George Bernard Shaw (Playwright).  
“Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city.” — George Burns (Comedian). “In family life, love is the oil that eases friction, the cement that binds closer together, and the music that brings harmony.” —Friedrich Nietzsche (Philosopher). Whether your thoughts about your own family are warm or lukewarm, the idea and construct of family comes from the mind and heart of God, and is an image of His Triune nature (in terms of plurality and ordered relationships), and though spoiled and darkened by the Fall, is still to be valued and honoured. Whether your experience of family has been a wonderful refuge or a huge disappointment, the truth is that the Christian Faith puts us into a family. God’s family. For He saves us from the world, and puts us in His own household, the Church.

## Icebreaker



Most people have an “interesting” character in their Family Tree, for example, a bushranger, a convict, a war hero, etc. Who is your most renowned, or infamous, relative? Share your answers around the group. (If you feel your family circle is a bit “beige”, then expand your ‘tree branches’ to include neighbours, pets, and acquaintances.)

## Read: Acts 2:36-47

<sup>36</sup> “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” <sup>37</sup> When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” <sup>38</sup> Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup> The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” <sup>40</sup> With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” <sup>41</sup> Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup> Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup> Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. <sup>46</sup> Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

## Introduction

In his second Book, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Luke records the assembling of the New Testament church in the days following Pentecost. It would be incorrect to say that the church began at Pentecost, for the church is the community of the redeemed, and redemption began not at Pentecost but at the Fall. But the 3,000 converts on the Day of Pentecost found themselves bound together in a new and special way, and Acts 2 tells the wonderful story of their remarkable love and communion.

## Question 1

Well-respected Bible teacher John Stott says that there are four things that mark out the early Christian community, and calls this Acts 2 church:

1. A learning church (with Biblical teaching)
2. A loving church (with caring fellowship)
3. A worshipping church (with living worship)
4. An evangelistic church (with ongoing, outgoing evangelism)

What verses in the passage match these four marks?

## Question 2

Do you think that these elements of teaching, caring, worshipping, and outreaching should be found in the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

*To ponder: Our own congregation has the 'three Es' as the descriptors of its Mission Statement: Exaltation, Edification and Evangelization. Can you match and align them to the marks above?*

## Question 3

Undoubtedly there are some things in Acts 2:42-47 that are unique, such as the presence of Apostles (v43) at whose hands many signs and wonders were done. Another element that is uncommon for churches in all times and places is the 'enjoying the favour of all the people' mentioned in verse 47? (See ahead to Acts 8:1). In what way then ought we to be careful in our handling of this passage?

## Question 4

Many Christians have wondered if they should commit themselves to a life of radical simplicity by selling all their possessions and giving the proceeds to the church for distribution to the poor and needy. Consider carefully the following verses from Acts, and then give your opinion about this idea.

- 2:46 *They broke bread in their homes*  
4:34 *From time to time*  
5:4 *Didn't it belong to you before it was sold?*  
5:4 *And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal?*

Even though this passage does not advocate a common pooling of funds, what does this passage teach us about generosity of spirit?



## Case Study 1

Tracy was impressed with some very amazing Christians who stopped her for a street interview just outside the entrance to her university. They invited her to study the Bible with them and to move into a share house with some of their members, which she did. But Tracy is now finding the going tough: sharing a house with twelve other people, four girls to a room, and getting up at 4.30am every morning to study the Bible. Not only that but she was asked to deposit all her savings into the 'Community Pool of Christian Love', which she did, but now has to fill out a form and prayerfully submit it to her Spiritual Director every time she wants to purchase some stationary supplies, etc. What advice would you give to Tracy?

## Question 5

The disciples in this passage seem to practise both 'big church' and 'small church' at the *same* time. In verse 46, they met at the temple ('big church'), but also in their homes ('small church'). The phrase 'to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship and to the breaking of bread and to the prayers' (v42) seems to fall in the context of formal corporate worship, whereas 'the breaking of bread' in verse 46 seems to fall in the context of informal fellowship. Is their practice in these two matters to be thought of as a precedent for us to follow, or something unique to their age?

## Case Study 2

William became a Christian in his final year at High School, but does not belong to a church because he thinks that the idea of the institutional church is foreign to the teaching of the New Testament. He prefers to read religious books at home and to listen to some religious music in his bedroom. He feels particularly justified in this view when he overhears some Christians arguing over doctrine, and makes a mental note that he will never belong to a church. What would you say to William if you met him?

## Question 6



If Acts 2:42-47 was the only portion of the Bible that you possessed, and the only piece of information that you knew about the Christian church, what would be the encouragements and disappointments, and blessings and challenges, and surprises and mysteries, in being a member of the Christian church today?

## Extra 1

If you have time, look up the following Bible verses and write down what they teach about the church:

*Ephesians 5:25b*

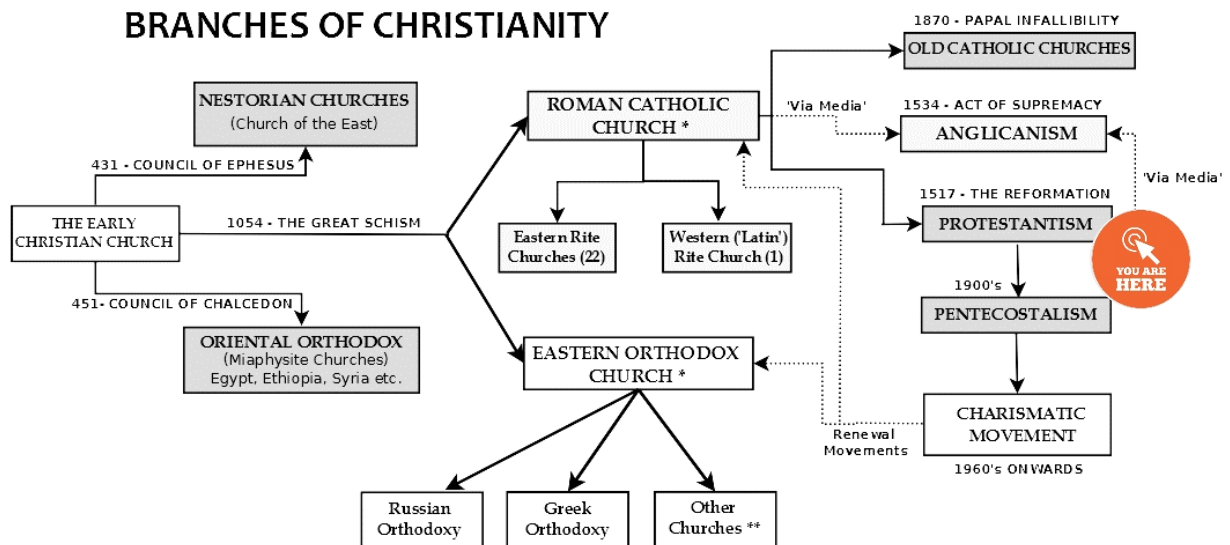
*1 Timothy 3:14-15*

*Revelation 5:9,10*

Some Christians, before the Sunday service begins, or before they rise at the conclusion of the service, offer a short prayer. If you were to adopt such a practice, what might be some useful thoughts for such a prayer in light of the verses above?

## Extra 2

One of the more puzzling aspects of the Christian Faith is the story of its denominations. The diagram below is a simple chart of the history and origin of the different families within the 'holy catholic church'. The Presbyterian Church is included in the grouping called Protestants which emerged from the time of the Reformation.



In view of the complexities of above chart, and keeping in mind that phrase from the Apostles' Creed, 'I believe in the holy catholic church', ('catholic' meaning 'whole'), read and reflect on these verses from Samuel Stone's well-known hymn.

1. The church's one foundation  
Is Jesus Christ, her Lord;  
She is his new creation  
By water and the Word:  
From heav'n he came and sought her  
To be his holy bride;  
With his own blood he bought her,  
And for her life he died.

2. Elect from ev'ry nation,  
Yet one o'er all the earth,  
Her charter of salvation  
One Lord, one faith, one birth;  
One holy name she blesses,  
Partakes one holy food,  
And to one hope she presses,  
With ev'ry grace endued.

3. Though with a scornful wonder  
Men see her sore oppressed,  
By schisms rent asunder,  
By heresies distressed,

Yet saints their watch are keeping,  
Their cry goes up, "How long?"  
And soon the night of weeping  
Shall be the morn of song.

4. 'Mid toil and tribulation,  
And tumult of her war,  
She waits the consummation  
Of peace forevermore;  
Till with the vision glorious  
Her longing eyes are blest,  
And the great church victorious  
Shall be the church at rest.

5. Yet she on earth hath union  
With the God the Three in One,  
And mystic sweet communion  
With those whose rest is won:  
O happy ones and holy!  
Lord, give us grace that we,  
Like them, the meek and lowly,  
On high may dwell with thee.

## Prayer

Finish in prayer – praying for the unity and spiritual prosperity of the church at large, remembering the persecuted church throughout the world, and praying for the mission and ministry of our own congregation.