

Family Is a Verb

by Bryan Craig

Last Sabbath as I waited for the worship service to begin I looked around at the families in my congregation. I was surprised.

I had grown up with the idea that a “family” is a woman and a man who get married and stay married and eventually produce their average census quota of two kids.

This Sabbath my eyes were opened. More than half the people in my congregation didn’t fit that definition. Among us were solo parents with children, and some who had been married before and were now blending two families together. I also saw many singles—some never married, others were widowed and living alone, and a number were separated from their partners.

Then, during the “sharing and caring time” an elder announced that the church was planning a “family social”—for moms, dads, and their kids. He didn’t realize it, but he had excluded half the audience.

Families these days come in all shapes and sizes. It’s time to take a new look at what we mean by “family.”

Many people are worried about the way family has changed. We know that the family is central to society, and that through families our values are transmitted from one generation to the next.

Families have tremendous power to build or to destroy. It is in our family that we gain emotional stability and well-being, or learn dysfunctional behavior with its long-term consequences. It is in a family that we first

develop our capacity for intimacy, both with God and with others.

As a Christian family counselor, I have often wished my Bible had “The Book of the Family.” I’d like some clearcut definitions. But no word corresponds exactly to our idea of a nuclear family in either the Old or New Testament.

The biblical concept of “family” portrays the extended family or kinship, and the emphasis is on “how we treat and value one another regardless of our marital status.”¹

Thus, Christian family sociologist Dennis Guernsey concludes that “family” in Scripture is used “primarily as a verb rather than a noun.”² In Scripture, then, “family” is not so much a label to describe *who* we are as it is a way of describing *how* we care for one another.

Relationships Make or Break Us

Because our personal identity is born within relationships, what happens to us in family, church, and friendship networks is crucial. These relationships make or break us personally. They also influence how we respond to and “family” one another.

The early church saw itself as an extended family, “the family of God” (1 Peter 4:17 NIV). It was made up primarily of kinfolk, but even where there were no blood ties, members became “brothers and sisters” in Christ. Paul pictured the church as a place where all would be nurtured, supported, and cared for—especially the disadvantaged (1 Thess. 5:1-8).

He calls on the “whole family” (Eph. 3:15) to demonstrate Christ’s love by caring deeply for one another.

For Paul, being *family* means that we will build our relationships on:

- Unconditional love and genuine respect (Eph. 4:2; 5:1).
- Tolerance and gracious acceptance of our differentness (Eph. 4:2, 3, 7).
- Open, clear communication in which we speak the truth in love, affirm one another, and respond to others’ needs (verses 15, 29).
- Honesty and truthfulness (verses 14, 15).
- A determination to resolve conflict and anger (verses 26, 31).
- Forgiveness for one another, just as we have experienced forgiveness from God (verse 32).

- Mutual submission based on love and commitment (Eph. 5:21, 31).

The Bible says this is how we “family” one another. Sociologists and family researchers identify these same characteristics as the essential building blocks for healthy relationships. No friendship or marriage, family or congregation, can remain healthy if these components are missing.

It is imperative, then, for both individual Christians and the body of Christ to seek to understand more fully the significance of what it means to be “family,” and to “family” one another. “Family” is not about counting noses, it’s about touching them, as in a Maori gesture of love.

¹“Family Is a Verb, Not a Noun,” *SAM* 95: 8-10.

² *Ibid.*