

The Oneness of a Family
Romans 15:4-7

INTRODUCTION

I love my family. I mean really. I am more excited to be around those in my family than anyone else. I think that is the way it's supposed to be. It's not always that way with every family member. It's not always that way with every family. But when it comes down to it, I love being with my family the best.

And the zenith of that joy is in my home. The home Lorrie and I have together is a gift from God. The people who live in my home are the top priority in my life in all things. This includes my wife and right now, one of my children. But it also includes my brother and Soo Young. All who live in the home are united –not by a set of rules, but by the law of love that governs our family. In our home, everyone matters. The physical, emotional, intellectual, and even spiritual health and safety of each member is a priority for me, and I believe for the other members of the household. Therefore, it matters that all eat. It matters that all sleep. It matters that all can clean themselves and be clothed. It matters that all are celebrated at certain times and it matters that everyone's complaints get a hearing. It matters when someone is happy. It matters when someone is sad. The joys of others are important to all, and the sorrows likewise. There is not perfect agreement on all opinions or all matters but there is perfect agreement on unity –we love one another, welcome one another, accept one another, and swear our first loyalty to one another.

Now when people come to visit, we extend the same rules to them. For the time they visit in our home, be it an hour or a week, our home welcomes them like one of us. Our love welcomes them. We are a household of sinners, regular folks. But we are, by the kindness of God, united as a family. We are one. I would hope that all people here had a home and a family to love. If not, may God supply you with what you need soon. But how does the Church of Jesus Christ fit in? Well in two ways.

First of all, we have Christian home. That does not mean that everyone in the home must be a Christian. Each person must choose for himself. But it means that we behave as a family that is part of the church. We are an outpost for the church, for the people of God. We find our place among the church people and seek to know, love, encourage, and serve all we can, according to the gifts and opportunities God allows us.

But there is another way. The Church, the group of people who are the followers of Jesus, is obligated by God to behave like my family. There is to be the unity based on love and common commitment to the health and well-being of all. And here is where we often lose our way in the church. We can see the church and define the church so many ways that we lose the first thing it is. It is the family, the household of God. We can often see it as many other things.

We can see it as a store, where we go to buy what we spiritually want. We can see it as a hospital, a place to come and find healing. We can view it as a work station, intended to accomplish a task. We can see it as a school, made to educate Christians. We can see it as a tradition preserver. We can see it as a comfort preserver

But it is not any of those things. It is the family of God. Because of that, the most important thing we do is receive one another in love, and love the Father of the House. Today, I'm going to invite you to join a community group this fall. I would like to do that by showing you the goal God has for us as a family, and show you how the ministry of a community group can move you toward that goal.

Romans 15:4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such *harmony* with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that *together* you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Paul is ending his letter to the Romans with an appeal that they live for love of one another, that they build up each member of the family of God, and include all. I would like to focus on the last half of the passage the most. But let's begin with a quick look at verse 4 and the beginning of verse 5:

4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through **endurance** and through the **encouragement** of the *Scriptures* we might have hope. 5 May the *God* of **endurance and encouragement** grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus,

Paul uses the same words in verse 4 that he does in verse 5. Perseverance, that ability to make it to the end, and the encouragement to carry one, these are things that are needed for every Christian's journey, are found where in verse 4? In the Scriptures. In this case, it is the Scriptures of what we call the Old Testament, which Paul quotes further on in this passage.

Then in verse 5, how is God described? As the God of endurance and encouragement. The ability to finish the race, to make it through every day and end your life a faithful lover of God, these things come from the Scriptures, and they come from God. That means that God uses the Scriptures to bring perseverance and encouragement to us. God wants you to endure, and to be comforted and encouraged on your journey. The means He puts forward is the Scripture.

Paul is now pronouncing a blessing on them. He is praying that God grant them something. What is the fruit of endurance? How do you know you are enduring? What is the fruit of encouragement? How do you know God is encouraging you on the path of Jesus?

The answer is largely in what Paul is asking God to grant them. What is that? To live in harmony with each other.

I must say at this point that I don't like using the word harmony here. Why not? Because it will fit so much better with verse 6, first of all. Second, the literal translation is clearer: What the King James renders "likeminded" and the NASB translates as "same mind."

Paul is asking that God grant them to live with one way of thinking. This is the way of thinking a family has. They don't all agree on all things, but they all agree that they exist for the betterment, safety, happiness, well-being, and productivity of all the members of the family, and that the leadership of the home is to be supported for the good of all. This is the one mind that Paul wants. The leadership of the home if Jesus, it is the Father, is the Holy Spirit; it is expressed in the word of God. The one thought that should guide all is that we exist for the benefit and well-being and success of all the family members.

Families can split. Families can be miserable. Members of families can leave in anger. But the families that are happy and stick together live by a simple unity of mind: they exist for the good of one another—they honor the leadership of the home. The same is true in the family of God, the church. This is, according to the end of the verse, in "accord with Christ Jesus." That is, Jesus has commanded this.

Let's look at verse 6 again:

6 that *together* you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Let me show you why I wish the translators of the ESV hadn't used the word "harmony" in verse 5. Here in verse 6, the word translated "together" is a Greek word that is better translated "in one accord," or of the "same mind." This is a unique word that comes from two word meanings brought together. One is "to rush ahead," and "in unison." What a great word. What a great picture. To rush forward in unison! We don't really have a word for that in English, but here is where words like harmony do help.

When people sing in harmony well, they all are rushing forward, each with different voices, each singing different notes, but so unified in purpose and practice that they blend together for a thing of beauty; all that is behind this word in verse six "together." Put this together with verse 5 and we see that God is going to be glorified on this earth when we, as members of His household, are unified in our understanding that each person is a member of the family and that each person matters, and that, respecting the head of the house, Jesus, we move forward in unison.

Let me state explicitly, based on the scripture, the church of God will march forward, healthy and unified, on the love of the brethren, or not at all. A program based church that runs

smoothly and accomplishes many goals is not what glorifies God. God is glorified when we unity run together, loving one another and honoring Jesus. With this in mind, I love verse 7 as the application point:

7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

To welcome one another, to love one another, this is something I understand. This is what we do at my home. We call it family. We welcome one another. We receive one another. All members of the household are fully received as they are. All are welcome. And, we welcome all visitors who come in love, who honor the home and are willing to join us in love. And this is what Jesus does for us. He welcomes us, into His home, into His family, into His household. He says, "Come in, you are one of the family. Plan to stay." He welcomes us regardless of our sins.

My home and my family, I told you I love them. But what I might not have mentioned is that we are all sinners. We have our moments. We are not always easy to live with. We expect some mess. We expect one another to be less than perfect and at times we correct each other, disagree with each other, hurt each other, apologize to each other, and all the rest. But that's the great thing about family: no one is kicked out for being a sinner. Often people are looking for a level of perfection in a church community and in church people that is not attainable on this earth.

The family of God on earth, until Jesus returns, is made up of sinners, just like my home. At times it is messy. At times we misbehave. At times we have to correct one another. At times we hurt one another. At times we apologize to one another. But the unity does not come from our perfect behavior. The unity must come from our agreement that those who are in Christ, and honor the Father's leadership, are part of this family and we won't revoke that. All who want to visit but don't want the Father's leadership, we'll treat with grace, hoping that one day, they will bow to the Father and join us not simply as a guest, but as a brother or sister.

This unity is not something even aimed for in many churches. We can easily rush forward here at Harvest and not aim for it here either, and many might say, "This is a great church." But it's not. A great church is one filled with mutual love.

I have been to families that I thought were great. Everyone was nice to me. They had it all together. They dressed in clean clothes, served nice food, were fun to visit, and all the rest. But when the guests left, or if you looked too close, you could see that the family had no unity, no joy, no real looking out for the benefit of all the members. And often, that great family fell apart in an instant. I live so that we can love one another. Not perfectly, but in perfect unity.

Now, I hope you can see how this relates to community groups. We live busy, 21st century American lives. We have jobs that take us from our homes. We have schools that take us from our homes. We have activities and sports and clubs and even church events that keep us busy.

Free time is hard to come by.

This is good for we have a good life in America (thank God). But this life style presents a challenge for us achieving the goal God has for us regarding family unity. How can we love and be loved if we only come together to worship on Sunday mornings? We can't know all the people in the building. But we can know a few. But not on Sunday morning, where it's "Hi, how are you? Gotta go!"

So we have something we call community groups. They are one tool. (Let me stress that fact. They are **one** tool. It is up to each of us to figure out how to find time and to love the family of God in a thousand little ways. But here is one tool we can all participate in.) The community groups are to function as a way to gather us together in smaller groups, where we can know each other, where we can learn the names of all the people in the room, where we can have brothers and sisters who we look after and whose concerns matter to us.

With this in mind, let me outline a few things about community groups so that you can understand them better and now how to participate and why.

> We prioritize community groups second only to Sunday worship services.

We know some people work on Sundays and can have a hard time getting here, but for the most part, we hope that all members of Harvest will be here on Sunday mornings. Why? Because it is when we obey the Lord's call to assemble, to be a gathering, to dedicate ourselves to the Bible's teachings, to sing praises to His name, to teach our children to worship. This is the time in the family when we honor and listen to the Father of the House directly and direct our attention fully to Him.

>Next in priority, we put community groups. Here is the time when relationships with other believers come in. Everything else comes after that for us. Your life is busy. You have to make time for many things, including your own times of prayer and Bible study and good deeds you'd like to do. With this in mind, we say that of the things we all do, we ask that if you have time for nothing else, you take the time to worship as family on Sunday, and meet in small groups as community groups.

> Community groups meet for three 10 week semesters throughout the year. There are lots of breaks, so the commitment is for 2 and half months at a time.

> You can go to any community group you want, and you can switch around till you find one you like.

> Community groups meet in homes so that the hospitality of an individual family is at the center. Therefore, they will all be different, flavored by the home they are in. Some will emphasize food, some will emphasize play, some will emphasize quiet, some will be loud, and many other things.

> The content for organized discussion at the community group will be the Sunday sermon. Our bulletin will be changing so that when you come on Sunday, if you fill in the blanks on the sheet in your bulletin and listen to the sermon, you will be ready for 75 percent of the discussion in the group.

> There are many other issues regarding community groups. Much of our philosophy of approach is found in this book: sticky church. You are free to pick one up in the bookstore to read more.

> Fred Neal (the younger) is the contact person for all community group questions you have at this time. Once you have a community group, you can also talk to the leader of that group.

> Sign ups are available here at the church building. However, if you would like to discuss alternate places or times, let Fred know.

Unity in the family of God, His Church, is God's priority. Look at the prayer of Jesus on the night He was arrested:

John 17:20-23 20 "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

By the sacrifice of His own life for mine and for yours, Jesus has opened up the household of God, and offers the unity and oneness that He shares with His Father. It is His prayer request that we, in the world, would display that unity so that the world could believe. May His prayers be answered.