

# New Family

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Good morning. It's good to be here this morning. It's my second visit to you. And I think I came in autumn last year. Some of you may not have been here. So I won't do my full introduction, but I will introduce myself a little bit. So my name is Claire Nichols, and I am one of the regional ministers with London Baptists. There are six of us all together. And I look after South East London. So you're part of South East London. You're almost on the border of having another regional minister, but you've got the privilege or whatever you want to call it of having me, which is nice. And I have the privilege of walking with you as well.

And the role of a regional minister is very varied, but it's particularly at this time, is you are right in the middle of your search for a new minister. I'm praying for you. I'm keeping a lookout for you. If I see someone out there who I think, oh, they might be nice for Herne Hill, or good for Herne Hill, or God might match them together quite well, I might push them in your direction. I don't have like a massive role in that. But occasionally it happens that a name comes up that matches quite well. And sometimes it works out. Sometimes it doesn't. In the end, God is in control, isn't he? And it is God who is bringing you together. I was very excited when I got your profile, because it's beautiful. And it really stands out. We're unfortunately living in a time where there aren't loads of ministers looking, but autumn brings new life to the search. So I'm praying for you as you keep walking and searching for the right person to come and lead this church family into the next phase of life, into the new phase of life. And we're talking about newness, aren't we? And we're talking about the fact that God brings us new life. Today, we're particularly focusing on family. And family is really important to me. I speak about family a lot. And as a single person, it has a different look to other people. People say to me, have you got a family? And I'm like, well, yeah, but they don't live in the same house as me. But I do have family. I have family who I have blood ties to. And I have a family who I don't have blood ties to. But they are my brothers and sisters.

And I have my church family as well, who I don't see very often, because I'm often out on a Sunday. But I am part of the family of God, part of my church family in Bexley Heath as well.

And I'm very independent. So I quite like living alone. I quite like having a single life. I'm very happy doing things and going places with just myself for company. I went to the ballet the other night, sat on my own. It was great. And just just processed everything I saw and heard in my own head.

It's where I live best. I don't know whether anyone else is like that, particularly the introverts among us. Some people think I'm a bit weird for doing that. But I find it really liberating that I can go out and eat on my own and go to the theatre and the ballet on my own. And I love living in London for the fact I can do this. However, even though I am very independent and can just get on with it, there are regular times that I recognise that I do need people and I do need family. I need to belong.

[ 4 : 01 ] I recently went to a festival and I went on my own. I was camping on my own in the tiniest tent you have ever seen in your life. I will not do it again. And I quickly realised that this just wasn't going to do because I felt very lonely in the middle of this festival. And I bumped into a friend from college and his family and I ended up hanging out with them for a while. And we ended up in a discussion about how we're actually like brother and sister. Our relationship is easy and we bounce off one another. Like family members who get on, because families are complicated, like those family members do. I think that that relationship is what it is because we have common things in our life.

We are both ministers. We train together. We sat in lectures together. And we both want to follow Jesus the best that we can. We have a lot of places and people in common and we might disagree on theology sometimes. But he is my brother and I feel safe and I feel good when I'm with him and his family.

Because family is important, isn't it? Whether it's blood family or whether it's family we've been drawn to because of the circumstances of life. There's something about the bonds we make around common things that make us feel alive, loved and valued. And the value of discovering new family, new bonds, it cannot be underestimated. So I've been told that you're working through Ephesians at the moment. You started last week and you're looking particularly at this theme of newness, new life.

Paul describes that in Ephesians and elsewhere as well quite a lot that we have new life in Christ. Ephesians is a letter of since and when and but and therefore because we know Christ, new things have happened and new things are possible. And as we come to chapter two, after the introduction to this new life, we see new life begin to be lived out in the community of God's people. Paul presents a new way of living together, a way of living that transcends historical divisions and hostility and speaks of the new bonds found in Christ that define and link us together. When I was reading it, I remembered a visit from a few years ago to a stately home called Tatton Park in Cheshire. And in that stately home, they often have art exhibitions.

And one that was on at the time was by an artist called Christina Rodriguez. She created exhibits in that stately home that reflected on the people that might have lived and worked in the rooms there.

[ 7 : 11 ] And there was a different exhibit in a lot of the rooms. And they also reflected the purpose of the room in which these art exhibits stood. And one particular one has never left me. It inspired my master's dissertation. It had such an impact on me. And it came to mind, like I said, when I was reading Ephesians 2.

It was in the kitchen. It was in the kitchen. And there was a table there in the middle of the kitchen by the window. So kind of in the middle. It was described as a table that had been donated. It was donated by an Iranian family, some refugees, asylum seekers who had replaced it in their new home as they settled with a table from Ikea, as we do. And it reflected on the kitchen, the art exhibit reflected on the kitchen as the heart of the home, and how we lose something when we don't sit down and eat together. Around the table, family is built. It's where the household comes together. And on the table and on the windowsill nearby, there were these ceramic hearts.

And connecting the hearts were ribbons of red and pink and white. And these were described as the blood energy lines that connect people together around the table. It's around the table that divisions were dealt with. Family are formed. Bonds grow deeper. And that image, for me, reflected on how we need one another. And as we spend time together, what unites us seals bonds between us that are very difficult to break. We are the same family, the same household. It says that in Ephesians. And this is an image of church family. This table is an image of church family that I think is really important. It's an image that speaks of what Paul reflects on, those blood lines, those blood energy lines that bring us together. And that's the blood of Christ, isn't it, if you think about it. This new way of life, it's bringing back something that was lost when creation turned its back on God. That intimacy, intimacy with God and one another that is built on trust and relationship. When we read the New

Testament and the story of the early church, we see that following Jesus is not just something that we do as individuals, but it's something we do as family. We are heirs according to his promise, and we are adopted as God's children. And so we belong together. That's why it's so important that we gather together, not just on a Sunday, but on other days as well. Our place at the kitchen table, the heart of the family home, maybe the communion table, we might think. It's important and it is necessary. Now, I don't know about you. You might be sitting here and think, well, I'm not really part of this family at the moment, but I really value my Christian family. From my friend at the festival who welcomed and embraced me as I found my independence a bit too much for a while.

To my youth leader from when I was growing up, who was my towel holder at my baptism, who I saw at the same festival and I hadn't seen for a long time, who knew me so well, even though it's been like 30 years.

[ 11 : 02 ] To my actual blood relatives who share the same faith as me. To my church family who I rarely see, but have accepted me as one of their own. To the wider church family that I belong to.

I really value being part of the family of God. Just have a think, what is it that you value about being part of God's family? What is it that you value about being part of this church family? Or your own, if you're just visiting today? What is it? Keep that in mind. Keep that in mind beyond what I'm going to do.

say next, in case you don't remember it. And keep valuing it. I'm going to focus on the second half of Ephesians 2, because it's quite a long passage, where the value of the family of God, bound together in Christ, is opened up a little bit. Paul's how exciting is this new life moments reflect on how much different and how much better this family is than how things had been before they discovered Christ.

It's so much better to have Christ in your life than not. It actually gives you life. He gives you life. And he begins in verse 11 to 13 by recognising the value of what unites us.

The fact is, says Paul, the fact is that you used to be separate from Christ. In fact, the Gentiles, the non-Jews, could not be in God's family, or so they thought, and now they can.

[ 12 : 56 ] Paul uses the word here that's part of the foundation for our word atheist, when he says that the people are without hope and without God, they are atheists, or they were atheists. An atheist is someone who has no God in their life. Interestingly, though, the citizens of Ephesus used to call Jews and Christians as well atheists. They used to say they're without God. How does that make sense? Well, Ephesian religion was built on temples where there would be a statue of a god in them, and people would go to that temple to worship that god.

Jews and Christians did not have those statues inside a temple to go and worship. Well, the Jews had a temple. There was no statue there.

So they were atheists to the society around, because the ways of the Jews and the Christians, they baffled them.

There's no place they believed that God resided in quite the way they were used to. No physical representation, no physical presence, they thought. And so they were seen in that society as atheists. And so Paul takes that language from society, and he turns it on its head and says, no, actually, they've got it wrong, because before you knew Christ, you were without God. And now with Christ, the Gentile believers could belong as much as the Jewish covenant people, because they are all part of God's family.

So in that, he challenges both the pagan gods and the Jewish people, who he talks about as wearing circumcision as like a badge of honour, kind of making circumcision into some kind of idol.

[ 14 : 53 ]    Actually, what he says here is that in Jesus, new blood bonds have been created. Those who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Christ, that's verse 13. That table in the kitchen where all those who were part of the family could gather, this is the picture that's being presented here, united in Christ. Maybe the table is Christ. It's Christ's table. Church families, whereas I love them, they can be strange places at times too, can't they? Made up of many different people from many different backgrounds. You wouldn't get them in the same room anywhere else. But yet we're united because of our shared love of Jesus.

Once we were separated, once we had nowhere to completely belong, but what unites us means that we can belong. Our ribbon blood bonds are so strong because Jesus made them that way. None of us are separated from Christ because nothing can separate us from his love. We all belong here. I value so much that centre, Jesus, that unites us.

So what does this new family of God look like that Paul describes? What does this family we have an opportunity to belong to look like? Well, I think that he kind of hints on the idea that it's a family that recognises and lives out the value of diversity. Paul talks about us being one humanity, being one body. Every bit of the body is different, isn't it? Yet it all works together as one. This is massive. It was massive at that time. It was massive for the Jews and the Gentiles who in the early days of the church found it really difficult to coexist and family together. You read that through scripture, particularly in Paul's letters. Any family that merges together is going to have different ideas of what it might look like, even if there are values that unite them. You probably know this, that you can try and follow Jesus. The path seems a bit different to both of you. Both of you sitting with the person even right next to you, it might seem different. But for the Jews and the Gentiles, these ideas were very, very different. But when we read the Bible, we see that it begins with unity.

unity. And as the new family is formed around Jesus, we get to see how that unity might work. But we also get an idea of how separated the world has become as it is turned its back on God. William Barclay says that the Jews had immense contempt for the Gentiles. It was not lawful to help a Gentile mother in labour because that would just bring another Gentile into the world. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl or the other way round, a funeral took place. Those people were dead to them. That's the wall of hostility that Paul describes. It's not just words. It's that massive wall of hostility they were in reality they were living in. Huge issue. Gentiles weren't even allowed in the temple, which is where they went, where worship of God happened in the Jewish faith. But that's not the way, when we read scripture, that the world is created to be. Although after the fall and after Noah and the flood, the tower of Babel, we see the world becoming more and more separated and those walls of the hostility beginning to grow.

[ 18 : 56 ] But this new family that Paul describes, thank goodness, is not that way. It overarches and it destroys the divisions and gives a place of welcome for everyone. Going beyond the Jews and Gentiles, this new family, it's multi-ethnic, it's diverse, it values and loves one another whatever their background. This new family is not the family of cultural divisions that the far right promotes and fights for by rioting, and neither is it people from one culture, nation, gender or race. It includes everyone who has put Christ at the centre. And although the focus in the letter to Ephesians is on Jews and Gentiles, we know that Paul focuses beyond that in other letters. In particular, Galatians 3, 28, where he says, there is no Jew or Gentile, no male or female, no slave, nor free, because all are one in Christ Jesus. That is the family of God. In Christ, hostility is put to death. And that's huge.

But it doesn't feel like it sometimes, does it? Paul reminds us that when we put Christ at the centre, we hear and we accept a message of peace. Verse 17 now.

Now, a message of peace is not too bad to live out, is it, when you get on and when you are all similar? But as more and more people are added to the family, more and more different people, it becomes more difficult to live out that message of peace. We need to remember that this new family, we have the privilege to be a part of values diversity. And we need to recognise what parts of us and our history we need to lay down so we can welcome others just as they are.

coming together with the new family involves trust that everyone wants to walk in the same direction. It means we've not got to be suspicious of one another and our motives, and we shouldn't have a reason for that. It means that we choose to trust and include one another instead, and value one another's voices amongst it all. I love the diversity of the Christian family, and in my role I have the privilege of encountering many different people from many different backgrounds, some who worship like me and some who don't, and I love worshipping with them, because I know that in our diversity we are united in Christ. It's a beautiful picture and place to be, and in this role I see many places where we don't get it right.

But we can choose to be different to that. We can choose to value the diversity of the family. It would be missing a key part of it if it didn't have the person that is different from you in it.

[ 22 : 03 ] And as we come together as a family of God, we discover the value of dwelling and being dwelt in together. Verse 19 tells us that we are no longer foreigners or strangers, but we are fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household. Being a citizen is one thing. It means you can call a place home. Being a member of the household is far much more, because this is family. We belong.

And so the language of strength in the passage is huge. Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus himself is the cornerstone. The whole building joined together, a holy temple, a house in which the spirit dwells. And that's why we need to value the family that we are part of, because we are stronger together. Stronger because we have a shared ancestry in those who have gone before, in the apostles and the prophets. Stronger because the most important part of our foundation is on Jesus. Stronger because we're connected to one another. We are a good structure and we can hold up.

We're stronger because Jesus lives amongst us. We're stronger because we can all call his family home. Christ gives us the chance to dwell in his house and to be built up with one another into a place where the spirit can dwell. Do you choose to be part of that? We all have a place in this beautiful family and we can all choose to belong. Belonging isn't about me and what I want. Belonging is about what is best for the family. To stand up strong, we need to trust that Jesus has brought us together and value the family as God has made it to be. Even those in the family that we might find it more difficult to get along with.

We are only human after all. Your voice, your presence is really important here. But it's no more important than anyone else's.

Well, so what? So what do we do with this? You might say, yes, I know this and I'm actually quite good at this. I'm here because I value this church family. I value that we are all different, but that Jesus unites us.

[ 24 : 37 ] I enjoy being connected to others. I've got it right, haven't I? I don't know you very well, but I would probably say that you probably have not got it right. I don't believe I've got it right.

There is still work to be done in me and in you. Just like me making sure I spend time with my friends who are like family to sustain that friendship and be built up in Christ. Just like the loss of the kitchen is the heart of the home and coming back and recognising the importance of those blood bonds to bring family together that Christina Rodriguez reflected on in her artwork.

It's easy to become so independent that we lose the value of belonging. And it's so easy to become detached and feel that someone else or even ourselves don't matter in all of this.

And the family breaks apart. We've all been part of places and people and families where we've seen that happen. So I want to challenge you with three things based on what I've said today.

Firstly, you need to continue to value and teach what unites you. Stand firm on what you have in common. A new life is in Christ. Christ who is the cornerstone.

[ 25 : 56 ] He is our rock. Our hope is built on him and nothing less. Don't forget the importance of worshipping together.

Studying the Bible together. Talking about faith together. The word of God is living and active. Gets into your very sinews.

Gets into your very beings. Continue to expect to be changed because you haven't got it right. But together you come to seek Jesus who unites you.

Even if you have nothing else in common with the person next to you, this is what you have in common. Jesus loves you. He loves the people you find difficult to love as well.

Approach every encounter you have with grace and with love. Because it is by grace you have been saved. If Jesus approaches us with grace, and so that is how we need to approach one another.

[ 27 : 01 ] Recognising each person as God's handiwork, creator to do good works. Secondly, you need to celebrate who you are.

Celebrate your diversity. There are so many different people in this church. So many different backgrounds. And one of the things I really love about ministering in London is its diversity.

In all of our churches we have people from all over the world. People from different social backgrounds. Men, women, children, young people. All in different stages of health.

We have people who approach life in many different ways. But we all have the chance to be part of God's family. The Jews and the Gentiles rubbed each other up the wrong way because of their history and their differences.

Try not to let that happen to you. Don't build up walls of hostility. Value the quirks of the one who has a different way of approaching tasks, rather than holding on because you think you know the proper way.

[ 28 : 01 ] You might discover something new and exciting. Value the voices of one another, and the input people can make. Include people from all sorts of different backgrounds in your leadership and on your platform.

Because this is what God's family is. We need to celebrate it, honour it, be good to one another. I've been working with a church that's had a really difficult time, and they've just appointed a new minister.

And he said to me, I'm restoring the joy as we value one another, as we value what unites us.

We begin to restore some of the joy. And that's a good thing. And finally, this is important, don't stand with one foot out and one foot in the family.

Choose to belong. Choose to follow Christ as part of a church family, uniting round what unites us, which is Jesus.

[ 29 : 09 ] We've got this great opportunity, haven't we, to be part of God's household, to find our ultimate place of belonging. Don't sideline yourself because you think you don't fit. I am someone who regularly thinks that people don't get me, but I have learnt to recognise that I still belong.

And people still love me, and people still value me. Don't let it be your identity and identity that you don't fit, because there is a place for you here. Don't sideline others either.

Let them belong, and let them be who they are. Because God made them, you know. Try not to judge them harshly, but recognise them as a person made in the image of God who has value to bring into your life.

Make valuing the family more important than getting your own way, because you belong in the family of God, and you matter. Every person here, every person who's not here today as well, who is part of this family, you belong.

Choose to follow the Jesus way and embrace this new family. Keep being renewed in him. This gift that has been given to you is to be a part of and be built together in God's love.

[ 30 : 27 ] Let's pray together. Father God, we want to thank you for for the gift you have given us of family, of Christian family, of family united because of our love for you.

United as we follow the Jesus way. United as we recognise what Jesus sacrificed for us on the cross. United because we value the fullness of life that has been gifted to us by you.

And we pray, Lord, that we might choose to fully belong to one another as we choose to fully belong to you. Lord, let us embrace this new family you have called us to be part of and keep renewing us by the transforming of our minds.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.