

PERSPECTIVE

JANUARY 2019

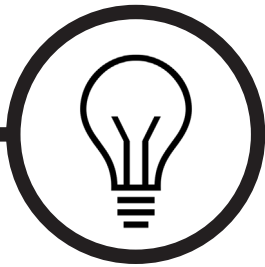


The Church as *One Family*

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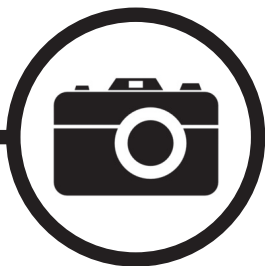
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The Church As One Family

Driving through north Georgia one afternoon, I passed a billboard advertising a local church. It read, “A church for families.” My heart sunk. Did this mean it *wasn’t* a church for singles, for the divorced, for the empty-nester, for the childless, or for the widow?

Whoever prepared the slogan certainly had the best of intentions. Parents need help, and it’s good for churches to think strategically about how they can be a blessing to moms and dads. There is nothing wrong with aiming to be a church that serves families well.

But churches that *target* families will give the impression that those without kids are second-class citizens — this unkind and unwise.

THE RISE OF “FAMILY” MINISTRY

The past few years, many churches have done an excellent job of communicating Christian parents are responsible for training their children to know God’s Word. Such congregations push against the consumerist mentality where parents drop their kids off at church hoping the experts will give them a religious and moral education.

However, the role of the church is to equip parents to evangelize and disciple their kids. The church isn’t to replace the parents. To make this distinction clear, some churches (including ours) refer to this equipping work as “family” ministry. We want to communicate the notion that the church comes alongside and supports parents. The church is not to replace parents.

Bryan Nelson defines family ministry as “the process of intentionally and persistently coordinating a congregation’s proclamation and practices so that parents are acknowledged, trained, and held accountable as primary disciple-makers in their children’s lives.”¹ This is a fine definition. It communicates parents are the main influence on their children’s spiritual development. A number of books and articles published in the last decade show that “family ministry” is slowly replacing a more kid-centered vision for reaching the next generation.

ONE WORD OF WARNING

This move toward family ministry is a good one. But we should be careful not to address nuclear families (dad, mom, kiddos) to the exclusion of other church members. The nuclear family is not *the* building block of a healthy, local church.

We don’t want to become like that church with the billboard in north Georgia. By prioritizing outreach to families, it is leading the members to think a church is a “family of families” and that a teeming preschool wing is the mark of success. Not so fast.

Instead of thinking of the church as a family of families, it’s better to think of the church as one family. This idea should be in the very definition of “family” ministry. True family ministry begins with an understanding of the church as *one family*, partnering with parents to show the next generation the way of Christ.

The fact that we are “one family” is not incidental to family ministry, it gets to the very heart of a congregation taking responsibility for the evangelization and discipleship of the next generation.

ONE FAMILY AND THE BIBLE

Does the Bible speak of a local church as one family? It does, in a number of different ways.

Acts 12

Luke records the imprisonment of Peter in Acts 12. Herod Agrippa is on the throne. He cut off the head of the apostle James (12:2) and set his sights on Peter. As Peter sat in jail, with no earthly hope of escape, the church in Jerusalem prayed. “So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church” (12:5).

God answered the prayer of the church. He sent an angel to set Peter free (12:6–11). What’s fascinating about this whole episode (besides the fact that an angel appeared out-of-nowhere in Peter’s cell!) is Luke’s description of the church in prayer. While members of the church gathered in a home to pray, Peter showed up. Rhoda, the maid, told the gathering Peter had arrived, they dismissed her, saying, “You are out of your mind” (12:15).

Why does Luke tell us both that the church prayed *and* that the church prayed with little faith? He wants us to know God didn’t answer the prayers of the church because the church was faithful but because the church was family, God’s family.

- Romans 8:15–16, “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness

with our spirit that we are children of God.”

- Ephesians 5:1, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Looking back at Acts 12, it’s remarkable God answered the prayers of the believers in Jerusalem. They were a faithless bunch! They prayed and doubted at the same time. But God did not give them the cold shoulder. He did not cut off his ear to them. They didn’t pray to a sky of brass. Not at all. God loved them. He saw them as children for whom his beloved Son had died. God welcomed them as his own. He didn’t answer their prayers because they were faithful, he answered because they were family.

Mark 10

Mark records the visit of the rich young man to Jesus. He came wanting eternal life (10:18). Jesus knew his heart and explained what true repentance would look like for him: “go, sell all that you have and give to the poor” (10:21). Unfortunately, the man loved his money, and he would not obey the Savior.

Jesus explained it’s hard for the rich to be saved. “It is easier,” Jesus declared, “for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (10:25). His teaching troubled Peter, John, and the rest. “Then who can be saved?” they asked. Peter, however, took heart. He concluded they had done everything they could do. “See,” Peter replied to Jesus, “we have left everything and followed you” (10:28).

Jesus responded with tenderness and clarity. He didn’t berate Peter’s confidence; many of these disciples did leave much behind to follow Jesus. However, the Lord wanted Peter to understand the cost of discipleship. Thus, Jesus explained both the promise and pain of submitting their lives to him. As you read Jesus’ response, pay particular attention to what those who leave the world *gain* when Christ becomes his or her king.

Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life (10:29–30).

Jesus says to be a Christian you must leave something behind. Early Jewish disciples often left their families. Some of Jesus’ earliest followers were kicked out of the synagogues and disowned by their loved ones. Though this rarely happens in the western world today, it’s common in communist and Muslim contexts. There, new Christians are often disowned by blood relatives.

What does Jesus say to those who would give up their home to follow their King? They will receive a new homestead, a new family: “houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands.” Jesus says nothing about receiving fathers. Why is this? Could it be to drive home the point that when you become a Christian, God is your Father? I think so.

Jesus knew that following him would be hard. It requires saying goodbye to important relationships, and it leads to persecution. But the believer, Jesus promised, will not be alone. In addition to the very presence of Christ (Matt. 28:20), God will give the believer a new family, the church. We are on firm, biblical ground when we say the church is one family.

IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Is it really important to understand the church is not a family of families but one family? Yes! Here are five reasons.

First, because a secular world needs to see a biblical family.

We are living in a day when there are fewer and fewer examples of biblical families. God designed a husband and a wife to raise children—but we see this less and less. Many of our neighbors don’t agree with biblical views masculinity and femininity. Divorce has severed so many families that many never grow up with mom and dad under the same roof. Finally, plenty of believers didn’t grow up with parents who knew how to raise them “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”

Given this state of affairs, where is a believer to turn to understand how a father can lead with gentleness and conviction? Where can we find women who are strong and wise and know how to honor their husbands? Where does a young man see an example of humble, faithful, sacrificial leadership?

Jesus gives us an answer: the church! In the church, we can find mothers and brothers and sisters and fathers

all modeling godly characteristics of family life. It's not that the church replaces the family unity. But the basic elements of a family are on display as members of a church interact with one another.

The world needs to see this. The local church is a marvelous witness of the kind of godly relationships families ought to model.

Second, because we need to see a biblical family.

To be clear, it's not merely that the secular world needs to see a biblical family at work, we need to see it, too. Some of us have lost mothers and fathers to sickness. Others have moms and dads, but they might not be Christian. Many of us don't know what it's like to grow up with siblings who love and serve the Lord.

God gives us the church, as one family, to help us run the Christian race. In the most intimate terms imaginable, God says the Christian doesn't have to be alone. God has given us more than friends; he has given us family.

Clearly reflecting on Mark 10–12, Andy Crouch goes even further. He says God designed us to learn things about the family from the church that we may never learn from our biological families.

As a Christian, I actually don't believe the biological family is the main place we are meant to be known and loved in a way that leads to wisdom and courage. Jesus, after all, said some pretty harsh things about ordinary, biological family. He said that his way of wisdom and courage would divide children from parents and brothers from sisters—as it did in his day and sometimes still does in ours. When his own biological relatives came to one house where he was teaching and healing, trying to convince him to come home and stop being so messianic, he looked around and said, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? ... Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:48–50).²

I'm very thankful for my biological family. They aren't Christians, but I know they love me and my wife and my kids. I am dear to them, and they are dear to me. Still, there are things I learn from the church that I will never learn from them. There is a love I experience from the body of Christ that I may never experience from them. The same is true for you. If you are a Christian, you need the family of faith God put in your life.

Third, because every church member is of equal and infinite value.

This takes us back to the church billboard. What is a church that sees itself as a “family of families” communicating? That somehow a couple who can't have children, a wife who lost her husband, a husband whose wife abandoned him—somehow these people have less to offer the church than a stable, two-parent unit. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Consider Paul's commendation of singleness, “Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am” (1 Cor. 7:7). He goes on a verse later to state: “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am.” Singles are not second-class citizens. One might even argue that, to Paul's mind, they are the engine that keeps the church running.

Recently, a widow at Mount Vernon stood up to ask for prayer. On Christmas Eve, instead of spending time with her family or friends, she decided to host a dinner for those without close family and unbelievers in her neighborhood. She asked us to pray her non-Christian friends would see something of the love of Christ. This is a single, at work for the Lord, just as Paul intended.

There are different members in the body of Christ. Some are married, some aren't. Some have kids, and some have not been able to have kids. Some are divorced, some have seen their husbands and wives go on to be with the Lord. All are made in God's image and have a role to play in one family, the church of the living God.

Fourth, because our evangelistic witness depends on it.

Ask someone on the street what a family is supposed to do, and she'll quickly answer, “A family is supposed to love one another.” This is true. Regardless of how families fall short, there is general agreement that the biological bond that draws people together is to be visible in daily acts of love.

The same is true in the family of faith, the church. In our family, we are to show love for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus, who declared we would be one family (Mark 10) also declared that it would be through our familial love that others would come to saving faith. “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

The past few months at Mount Vernon, I've observed something spectacular—more and more people opening up their homes in the spirit of hospitality. Their heart is to invite brothers and sisters from the church into their home as well as unbelieving neighbors (like the widow I just mentioned). Why are they doing this? Because this is how Jesus predicted the world would know we belong to him. When they see our familial love, they will understand more deeply that we have been adopted into a family where God is our Father—God who loved us enough to make the way for our salvation. The gospel must be spoken in words, absolutely! But we can show it in acts of love within the family of faith, the local church.

Fifth, because our safety and security depend on it.

Many years ago, the police wrongly arrested my brother. It was a case of mistaken identity; he resembled someone who had committed a crime. As a result, my brother had to spend a few days in jail. It was a scary time for the family. I lived across the country, but this didn't keep me from buying a ticket and standing by his side. This is what brothers do, and I know that my brother—who is not a Christian—would do the same for me.

How much richer and deeper and more profound is the care we show each other as members of a local church, as *one* family? James closed his book with a word about the careful love siblings show one another:

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (James. 5:19).

This is strong language, isn't it? We know it is *God* who saves souls from death. And yet, there is a sense in which God uses us, his children, in the process of saving one another—preserving each other's faith; keeping us from falling away. We need one another. We need to be in one another's lives, knowing and serving and, yes, challenging one another (see Heb. 3:12–14).

The church, Andy Crouch argues, is our “first family,” and that means we have a responsibility for one another that goes above and beyond simply gathering together. Crouch put it well:

The first Christians met in homes, and those homes were not single-family dwellings but Greco-Roman “households” that often included several generations

as well as uncles and aunts, clients, and indentured servants of the “paterfamilias.” The church too was a household—a gathering of unrelated persons all bound together by grace *and the pursuit of holiness*.³

Crouch is right. We are one family for a purpose: “the pursuit of holiness.” We aren't here for a singles ministry, a married ministry, a youth ministry, or even a children's ministry. We are one church “bound together by grace and the pursuit of holiness.” To neglect this reality is to put our very souls in harm's way.

CONCLUSION

In the days ahead, I'm hopeful Mount Vernon will be able to think even more deeply about the ins and outs of family ministry. I want us to be a church where married couples receive wise counsel, parents receive clear instruction, and children are loved and cared for well. We ought to think more carefully about how we, the church, can partner with parents to show their kids the way of Jesus Christ. I'm truly thankful for the rise of so-called “family ministry.”

However, first and foremost, I long for us to understand Mount Vernon is not a “family of families.” We are one family, determined by the grace of God to model the gospel of Jesus Christ to one another and a lost world.

— Aaron Menikoff

¹ Bryan Nelson with Timothy Paul Jones, “Introduction,” in *Trained in the Fear of God: Family Ministry in Theological Historical, and Practical Perspective*, eds. Randy Stinson and Timothy Paul Jones (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 2011), 15.

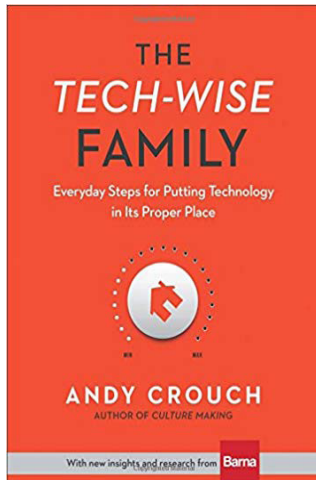
² Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*, 60.

³ *Ibid.*, 61.

The Tech-Wise Family

Written by Andy Crouch

Bookstall Price: \$10



Do any of your New Year's resolutions have to do with technology use? If they do, you aren't alone. Though we've been living in the age of the iPhone for over a decade, many of us still struggle to know what it looks like to put technology in its proper place in our lives. Recognizing this, Andy Crouch has written a helpful, balanced guide to help Christians think through this important issue.

Crouch's approach is not what you might expect. Rather than focusing on the evils of technology, he instead focuses on

the importance of virtue in the Christian life and helps us to see that Christian virtue is not created virtually. Reading the book, I walked away with three important takeaways.

Christian virtue is forged in the context of family. We were created to grow as men and women and as Christians in the context of family. The church (our first family as Christians) and the home are the places where Christian virtue is primarily forged. In the context of family we are truly loved, we are forced to deal with our sin and shortcomings and the sin and shortcomings of others, and we learn what it is to show and be shown mercy, forgiveness, and grace.

Technology, though a good gift, must be kept in its proper place. Crouch goes out of his way to make it clear that technology isn't our problem. The problem is in the way we use it. We give technology a far greater place in our lives than we ought. Rather than being a tool that helps us, we've allowed it to become a master that constantly distracts us and at times allows us to avoid the face-to-face interactions that are so crucial for our growth and development as Christians.

There is no simple formula for putting technology in its proper place in our families. Crouch acknowledges this reality and doesn't shy away from suggesting ten commitments to help readers think through what it might look like to put technology in its proper place in their own lives. He devotes the bulk of the book to explaining both the "why" and "how" of these commitments. Though I didn't always agree with the "how," I found each "why" compelling. So compelling, that I began working out the "how" for myself and my family, which, I think, is exactly what Crouch was hoping for.

— RECOMMENDED BY DUSTIN BUTTS

Excerpts From the Book

1

"In the most intimate setting of the household, where the deepest work of our lives is meant to take place, technology distracts and displaces us far too often, undermining the real work of becoming persons of wisdom and courage."

— Choosing Character, p.66

2

"The lilies of the field close up their blooms at night and rest patiently for the next day, but we, cloaked in ghostly light, make tomorrow's troubles today's and tonight's instead. The devices we carry to bed to make us feel connected and safe actually prevent us from trusting in the One who knows our needs and who alone can protect us through the dangers and sorrows of night."

— Waking and Sleeping, p.117

3

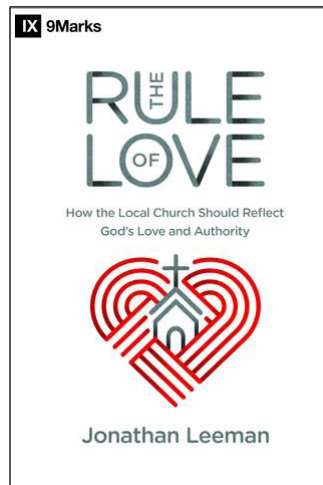
"The less we rely on screens to occupy and entertain our children, they more they become capable of occupying and entertaining themselves."

— Learning and Working, p.133

The Rule Of Love

Written by Jonathan Leeman

Bookstall Price: \$13



Many people assume there is a dichotomy between love and authority. That one cannot love while exercising authority. Yet, many relationships prove this to be a wrong assumption. The family is a prime example, where parents love their children to the point of being willing to give their lives for them, but they also set rules and boundaries. Those rules guide and protect, which is an expression of their love.

What about our relationship with God and the church? Can such love and authority go hand-in-hand? Jonathan Leeman in *The Rule of Love* shows how the character of

God defines and sets the boundaries of love and authority and how the church reflects, albeit imperfectly, this life-giving relationship.

Two things stood out to me in reading *The Rule of Love* that make it worth recommending.

First, Leeman equips readers to think about love in a way that is contrary to worldly thinking and more thorough than most Christian thinking. Love is something many assume they have a good understanding of. The culture says it's unconditional, without any constraints to moral norms. Period! Christians see otherwise knowing God's law is for their good, but his willingness to show love is unconditional. Period! Leeman helps readers think in a more nuanced and particular way about love. This is particularly helpful today when Christians are called bigots for making judgments about the morality of "love" for others and when churches are unwilling to deal with public sin among members. Chapter 6, "Love and Judgment," is particularly helpful.

Second, readers should have a better appreciation for the church. I was particularly thankful for Mount Vernon at points in reading the book. The church is, as Leeman said, "an embassy of heaven," where God's loving authority is exercised through the preaching and teaching of his word. It's where elders exercise loving authority, and members submit. It's where different but complementary relationships and roles experience God's loving authority. This is life-giving to God's people and should drive us to thankfulness.

— RECOMMENDED BY BRAD THAYER

Excerpts From the Book

1

"The local church serves, therefore, as a three-dimensional display of God's love and God's authority...This living, breathing, and ordered collective called a church demonstrates love's demands and authority's blessings."

— Introduction: When Love Is God, p.21

2

"The tragedy and shame of sin, then, is the tragedy of a soul scorned, a body abused, a garden neglected, a house trashed, a relationship exploited, a civilization corrupted, a world bombed and turned to ash. It is most profoundly the tragedy of Righteousness, Love, and Beauty Himself belittled and blasphemed."

— God's Love for Sinners, p.91

3

"Make no mistake: every form of love, righteous or unrighteous, makes judgments. To love something, by definition, is to place a value on it, as we have seen...Loving is a judging activity."

— Love and Judgment, p.117

JANUARY

These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!

January 1	1 Samuel 27	January 17	Acts 2:14–24
January 2	Psalms 31:1–18	January 18	2 Peter 3:1–13
January 3	Psalms 31:19–24	January 19	Zephaniah 1:2–18
January 4	Luke 23:39–49	January 20	Zephaniah 1:2–18
January 5	Psalms 31	January 21	Zephaniah 2:1–15
January 6	Psalms 31	January 22	Genesis 18:16–21; 19:23–29
January 7	Zephaniah 1:1–18	January 23	1 Samuel 5
January 8	2 Kings 22:1–20	January 24	Philippians 2:1–11
January 9	2 Kings 23:1–20	January 25	Matthew 10:5–15
January 10	2 Kings 23:21–30	January 26	Zephaniah 2:1–15
January 11	2 Thessalonians 3:1–15	January 27	Zephaniah 2:1–15
January 12	2 Chronicles 34:1–21	January 28	Psalms 51
January 13	Zephaniah 1:1	January 29	2 Samuel 11:1–27
January 14	Zephaniah 1:1–18	January 30	2 Samuel 12:1–14
January 15	Deuteronomy 6:1–25	January 31	2 Samuel 12:15–25
January 16	Deuteronomy 7:1–26		

TAKE UP & READ

NEW MEMBERS



Fidel Agbor



Jacob & Carli
Anderson



Butler Brewer



Matt Calvert



Alex & Laura
Cramer
Hudson (2)
Susanna (2)
William (0)



Natalie
Fernandez



Bill & Jenny
Griscom



Grace Roberts



Dan & Meredith
Ryder



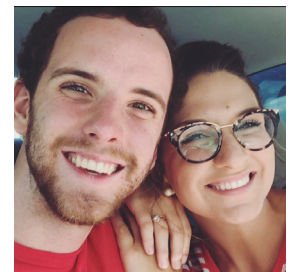
Evan & Ashley
Taylor



David Thompson



Wesley Toler



Matt & Kayla
Williams



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH