

Title: Family or Familiar?  
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Preached: 10 March 2001

To bring some context to my opening illustration I'll mention that some of you will remember the story I told from the summer of 1996 when I went to the Marine field training school at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. The story I told was of God's blessing when I asked for the Sabbath off when all the other chaplains were being given Sunday off. I told you how I received a ride to church. That is where I ended the story.

Today, I want to tell you what happened when I went to church. The church building was small. A small sign marked it. It was not out of place with the small homes on the residential street. I walked through the door with a deep sense of gratitude. Since I joined the church in 1983 I have probably preached 99 out of every 100 Sabbaths. I have not had a lot of experience visiting churches. But my experience visiting had been good, and so many people have told me, that when you visit an Adventist church anywhere it is like walking into family. Also, I have always heard that when you visit an Adventist church, anywhere, you can be sure to know someone that someone in that church knows.

I walked through the door with gratitude because I was going to get to spend some time with people who were not wearing green clothing, and didn't have high-n-tight haircuts. I walked through the entrance way, through a small foyer — helping myself to a bulletin — and timidly proceeded into the small sanctuary. The Sabbath School superintendent was just beginning her remarks. There were about 15 people in the room.

There were two sections of pews, with 8 rows each. But they were small pews which could hold 4 or 5 people. Maxed out the church could hold, maybe, 70 people. Even though it was small room the room seemed cavernous with only 15 people. I took a seat to the left side about half-way down the rows. I sat behind a couple.

The Superintendent finished her remarks. A mission story was read. Some announcements were made about the Community Services wanting to do some work to help clean up from the hurricane that had come through 12 days earlier. Then a man was introduced, their head elder, he was to be the Sabbath School Teacher. Everyone stayed in their seats.

During this whole time there were short, natural breaks, as the different people leading out from the front, stood up, or sat down. During these transitional moments, not one head turned to me to acknowledge my presence in the room. Not one friendly smile.

You know me well enough to know that this was not some sort of ego-trip where I started to have an attitude about being acknowledged. In fact, it was quite the opposite. My mind was working trying to learn a lesson. I knew my haircut betrayed the fact that I was from the Marine Base two miles away. But no one in that room knew I was an ordained minister. I soon figured out — I was incognito. I wasn't going to be treated special because of a title in front of my name. I truly was just a person who dropped into a church and wanted to worship the Lord. And it seemed to me that every person in that room could have cared less that I was there.

During the Sabbath School lesson the two envelopes — missions and Sabbath school expense — were being passed around. I could see that in the pathway the envelopes were

making I was going to be the last person to receive them. I noticed that they were passed out without any explanation as to their purpose. If I truly was a person in the church for the first time I would have had no idea what they were for.

Soon the couple in front of me had the envelopes. I had ascertained from comments made during the Sabbath School class that the couple in front of me were not visitors but were members of that church. When the couple put their offering into the envelope the gentleman turned in the pew to hand me the envelopes. This gave him away. He did know I was there and had not acknowledged my presence as a visitor. But when the envelopes were passed he simply reached back without looking at me. I was looking directly at him hoping to make eye contact. None!

This was becoming a game to me. I had been in the church for almost forty minutes, and I could have been their alone. I put a few dollars into the missions envelope and placed it by the end of the pew.

About 10 minutes later a lady walked in from the back of the church — she had other envelopes in her hand — this was the tell-tale sign that she was the Sabbath School Secretary — probably teaching in a children's division. She walked in and did a quick visual sweep looking for her precious envelopes. She saw them at the end of my pew. Grabbed them, and was off again, back out the door. Again, not so much as eye contact with me.

A few minutes before the end of Sabbath School I heard some commotion in the small foyer. I looked back to see that a young family had walked through the door — a couple with a baby. They sat behind me. The young man had a high-n-tight haircut. A Marine. I put a smile on my face, said good morning, and extended my hand.

The adult Sabbath School class finished as a few children started to make their way into the room, carrying their Primary Treasures and Our Little Friend papers. The room took on a time of business as they made the transition from Sabbath School to worship service. People walked past my row. And there were some that walked by several times. They were the leaders. The elder and the organist.

To cut this story short — it was not until the end of the worship service when I walked out into the foyer that people said hello to me, and told me how glad they were that I worshiped with them. Really!

I asked to use the phone so I could call a taxi to get back onto Camp LeJeune. As I was waiting for the taxi one of the men of the church asked how long I had been at the Camp LeJeune. I explained that I had only been there a week. I was a Navy Chaplain learning how to be a Marine. A light bulb went off in his head. "Are you a minister", he asked. "Yes", I replied. "A Seventh-day Adventist Minister?" Again, I answered in the affirmative. He seemed excited by this. He told me that he wished he had known that earlier because perhaps I could have preached. I said God had put a message onto the heart of the elder. He should have spoken. Then he asked would I sign the guest book. I agreed. The taxi came, and I went back to the base.

In truth I could not have had a better Sabbath worship experience because that day I learned not what to do if we are serious about building up a family of God waiting for the soon return of Jesus.

I begin with this story because it is really an extension of last week's message. In preparation for the arrival of Elder Cox, and hopefully a good number of visitors. Last week I asked the people who are leading out in the various areas of ministry to stand before you and share how the parts fit into the whole for our upcoming program. Hopefully, you saw the importance of the need for each individual of this church family to help out. Hopefully we can all appreciate the enormity and seriousness of the task before us. Today's message is an extension of last week's message because I want to project not to March 24<sup>th</sup> or March 31<sup>st</sup> while Elder Cox is here. But I want to take a look at the Sabbath of April 7<sup>th</sup> when Elder Cox is gone, and we, by God's grace, have new members, and/or very serious visitors joining us for worship.

We often speak of church family. Being part of a church family is a blessing of immense proportions. But there is also a curse involved, if we are not careful. A derivative of the word "family" is "familiar". When we are familiar with something, or someone, we can lose our objectivity. When we lose our objectivity we fail to see things as they really are.

A loss of objectivity will crush church growth.

Let me give a benign example: Everyone in this room knows how to get into this building. We do it without thinking about it. To get into this building one enters through the back-door of the church. You know the door I'm speaking of — the door without any sign which says "Entrance".

The problem is — the front door, and front entrance is over on this side of the building. I cannot tell you the number of people/visitors I have seen standing bewildered in the parking lot, trying to figure out how to get into the building. They stand in the parking lot, foolishly thinking they need to go in through the front door, but realizing that it is a hike around the building, and there must be some other way in. And they see that big door — which we all know is the correct door to go in — wondering, should I go in there?

When we are trying to get people in the door it is not a good start when they cannot figure out which door to use to get in.

I use this as an example to explain the difference between being objective and familiar. When we do things in a familiar manner those who are not part of the family, or who are joining the family miss out. And if they are too uncomfortable they will not come back.

Let us for a moment read some scriptures together. In my study this week I just went through the back of each of the letters of the New Testament. I read just the last few paragraphs of each letter. I discovered something amazing.

"The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss." — 1 Corinthians 16:19, 20

This is the apostle Paul. I read this so that we can see the bond between the church family. Just reading this makes it sound that the family of God is tight.

Let us read more:

“Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.” — 2 Corinthians 13:11, 12

There is that kiss again. The church of God is so tight that they greet each other with affection.

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.” — Galatians 6:18

When Paul uses the word “spirit” in this context he is talking about people’s feelings and attitude. Paul was concerned that the feelings and attitude of his brothers was filled with grace.

“Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with incorruptible love.” — Ephesians 6:23, 24

Now Paul is concerned not only for grace in his brethren, but that they have peace. Paul is demonstrating a real concern for how other people feel.

“Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household.” — Philippians 4:21, 22

Again, notice how tight the family of God is. “Every” saint is to be greeted.

“Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.” — 1 Thessalonians 5:26

Here Paul combines the all inclusive greeting of all the brothers and sisters, with the sign of affection — a holy kiss.

“Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus. Erastus remained at Corinth, but Trophimus I left sick at Miletus. Make every effort to come before winter. Eubulus greets you, also Pudens and Linus and Claudia and all the brethren.” — 2 Timothy 4:19-21

Here Paul takes the time to name the different people with him. Putting a name to a face in a greeting is very comforting and encouraging.

“All who are with me greet you. Greet those who love us in the faith.” — Titus 3:15

“Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.” — Philemon 23, 24

Again, Paul is naming people with his greetings. It assumes a tight personal bond.

“I had many things to write to you, but I am not willing to write them to you with pen and ink; but I hope to see you shortly, and we will speak face to face. Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends by name.” —

### 3 John 13-15

Here we have the beloved disciple John who has a whole lot to tell the people, but his earnest desire is to be face to face with his church family. Again, this text assumes that there are tight personal bonds among the church family. John is not just a theologian and a leader — but he is a friend among a group of friends.

“Though I have many things to write to you, I do not want to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, so that your joy may be made full.” — 2 John 12

Again, notice the assumption of love.

“Greet one another with a kiss of love. . . .” — 1 Peter 5:14

Peter speaks of greeting like Paul and John. Peter speaks of the kiss but it is a kiss of “love” — the word there is AGAPE — self-sacrificing love. Peter speaks of this affection as a family affection which says I will give my life for you.

There are other texts which we could read. But the point is made — in the New Testament church a picture of mutual strength can be found. People had given their hearts in faith to Jesus. They were now brothers and sisters of faith. They may have grown up in different cities, but now they were all on a trip to the New Jerusalem. They may have grown up in different homes, but now they were going to have rooms next to each other in the heavenly mansion. They may have grown up speaking different languages but now they were all going to speak the good news. They may have grown up eating different types of foods, and recipes, but now they all ate from the same table. In Christ a new family is made.

In a couple weeks, with God’s blessing we are going to have new family members in this room. They are going to be babes in Christ and are going to need to be afforded the patience and the total care that any other baby needs. And like children, they will make mistakes. But they will still need are total love and devotion.

Some of the mistakes they may make will be simple. Let me give you an example. Occasionally when I am walking through this room during the week I examine the pews. Examining the pews? What am I looking for? I’m looking for the name tags.

A new member or a visitor may sit down where you usually sit. Don’t sweat it! That’s a simple mistake.

We have a member in this church who has come to church for years; studies the Bible; studies the Sabbath School lesson; is at worship each week. But only within the past year has understood and been convicted in the heart concerning paying a tithe.

There is a saying in the world — “Patience is a virtue.” In the church, Patience is a fruit of the Spirit; Patience is a sign of mature Christians; and Patience in the family of God is a necessity.

Like new children in a home, new children in Christ will give us joy if they are given an environment to thrive in. They will have success in their Christian walk and they will bring

great joy to our collective heart.

There is a responsibility given to each of us to bring about the tight bonds of love and affection for one another which we read of in the New Testament. Today I have been making a contrast between family and familiar. When the church is a family each of us will devote ourselves to make sure each and new members is included, and wanted. Being familiar means we just go about business as usual without any regard for what is new, or changing, or needs to be improved.

It starts simply enough by learning people's names — bucking-up our courage and introducing ourselves to someone new.

This coming week when your church board meets we are going to talk about how to be proactive as a church family to ensure — as best we can — that new people, as well as every member, and regular visitor is not lost in just being familiar. We are going to talk about what we can do to be a family. We are going to report back to you in some manner with a plan.

The Scripture lesson read this morning from Ephesians, spoke of the surety that Jesus gave the world to adopt us as His children. Adoption is a good word to use when we speak of the family of God. We are a collection of people who are melted together by faith. The family of God is not about birth-rights, and blood-lines. The only blood that counts in the church family is the blood of Jesus, and our faith in that blood to save us.

I have been wonderfully impressed by this church family because of the number of adoptions which have happened in the individual families. It is a precious thing, yea, it is a holy act to give a home child who had no home. To form a family on the basis of love and not blood is thrilling.

There are lost ones who are going to come through the doors of this church who have no spiritual home, nor spiritual family. We **must** do our upmost to make sure these lost ones know they can be adopted into a family. We must do our upmost to make sure that these lost ones know they are cared for and not just another piece of furniture which is familiar.