

# A Real Relationship

## Galatians 3:26-4:7

Life in the Spirit 5

I wonder if any of you read this article in last Sunday's Age newspaper. It was about the Sunday Assembly, an atheist church that meets monthly in South Melbourne. Barney Zwartz, the Age's religious reporter, describes what took place: "There is a polished, urbane man up the front holding a microphone, and behind him is a large screen to display the words for the songs and any video messages. Next to that is the band, much more casually dressed.



"The assembly unfolds in the normal format: words of welcome, music, members of the congregation doing the readings, more music, a message, a communal greeting of the people near you, a rather embarrassed plea for cash in the collection hat, and a closing song, after which an impressive home-made cake is shared. But there is no cross, no altar, no prayer, no Eucharist, and definitely no God."



One of the people who attends this gathering is an ex-Lutheran, and someone known to me. He writes in a blog: "I myself miss many aspects of church. I think we always need to emphasise the positive, loving, selfless parts of our natures, and I think that getting together regularly in a church-style gathering could be a great way to foster these attributes."

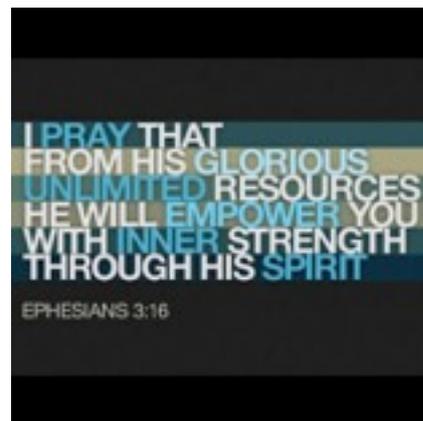
There's no doubt that the church is place where people feel connected, a place where community is generated and sustained. One Christian leader, in commenting on Atheist

Church, observed that, "Sociologists say that you are likely to live longer if you are a church. A church may be a people, who, despite the quirks, actually care for one another, and I think there's a craving for that. Too much secular society is based on performance."

So perhaps Sunday Assembly may succeed as a place where relationships between people are sustained and nurtured, and where the atheist viewpoint can be expounded and explored. But the Christian church is not just another place where community is built. The church is not just a sociological reality, but primarily a spiritual one. As two Christian leaders observed in the article: "The atheists have taken one part of it. The church is not simply a gathering, it's also the body of Christ... The key thing is the presence of the living Christ in our community and as the focus of our worship."



Human relationships are an important part of why we gather together. Scripture consistently calls us to love one another, to place ourselves at the service of one another. But the call to love is always based on another, deeper, and much more significant relationship. This is how Paul puts it in his prayer for the church in Ephesus: “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”



Shared philosophy and ideology may instruct us, and change the way we think, but they can’t change the essence of human nature. Neither is our relationship with one another, and our pledge to care for one another, enough. Barney Zwartz wrote that Sunday Assembly’s “application of the day’s theme, ‘lend a hand’, was hardly sacrificial — it amounted to ‘see if you can do something for someone some time’.”



The heart of the church is the common relationship that we share with God the Father, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. This spiritual relationship is the generator that powers us to love in the context of all our human relationships. Without this core relationship in common, our efforts to love and serve others are doomed to fail. The church is not a gathering of like-minded people, not a club for people who share the same interests; rather, it’s a melting pot into which are poured people of the greatest diversity, but out of which comes brothers and sisters who share the same Father, Saviour, and Spirit. If the church forgets this, it exhibits all the worst characteristics of human nature and human organisations: thinking only of itself,

being closed off to outsiders, creating divisions and suspicion even within the community, devouring itself.

A real relationship with God is the core of the church’s being. The book of Galatians is concerned with how we come into relationship with God. Is it about signing up to fulfil all the decrees of God’s law, or about being a member of the right race? Neither of these. It’s actually about the saving work of Jesus, which is transmitted to people through the Holy Spirit: “Jesus redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”

The Holy Spirit is the go-between God, who works to create faith in God, to make all the benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection real in a personal way, and to grow us in community with God as Father, Son and Spirit, and with God's people. This is nothing less than new birth, such is the radical change in our nature and our identity: "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith," Paul reminds us.



Remember what it was like to be a child, or what it's like right now. It's a time of wonder and excitement, of growing physically and intellectually, under the care of parents. There's freedom to explore as identity is slowly built, founded on the core relationship we have with our parents, and our siblings too. The best kind of childhood is one in which we know that we are secure under our parent's care, and that we are deeply loved and valued, no matter what mistakes we make.



When we are children, our relationship with our parents is characterised by trust, dependence and intimacy. What's remarkable about what Paul writes today is the way that he speaks of our relationship with God our heavenly Father in such tender and intimate terms. It's the Holy Spirit who creates and maintains that closeness. "Because you are children," Paul writes, "God sent the Spirit of his Son in our hearts crying, 'Abba! Father.' And in the book of Romans Paul says, "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

In essence, Abba means Daddy. But no faithful Jew of the time would have ever dared to address God in such a familiar way. But Christians do, because of Jesus, who when he was praying to his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, cried out: "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not my will, but yours be done." Jesus and his Father were one in spirit and heart, and it's because of this that Jesus took the final step to the cross. And through Jesus' cross and resurrection, Jesus has redeemed us, "so that we might receive adoption as children". That's where the Holy Spirit comes in, placing Jesus' words "Abba! Father" in our mouths, because we share the same relationship with his Father as Jesus has.

Think of this every time you pray the Lord's Prayer. "Our Father in heaven" is not an absent, angry and stern taskmaster, but your loving Father, and mine. That's what the Holy Spirit is continually reminding us. You are loved and cherished by your heavenly Father. You are precious in his sight. Even when you slip up and sin, he continues to love you and rehabilitates you with his forgiveness. You're not a slave. You don't have to climb up the ladder of performance to God's perfect standard. Jesus had done that for you, for good. What you are called to do is to recognise this, and to live out this good news, guided by the Holy Spirit who lives in you. Living for God isn't about duty and making sure we



follow the textbook, and do what we should do or else; it's about being a child who lives to please his parents because love makes him do it. That's what the Holy Spirit is constantly doing in your life and mine; reminding us of this truth and directing us to always live in and through it.

Our relationship with God through the Holy Spirit is what sets the church apart from all other form of human community. We are sons and daughters of God through the Holy Spirit who lives in us. He is constantly active and growing us into deeper maturity as children who are more and more like their Father. Abba, Father, we praise and thank your love through your Son, Jesus. Holy Spirit, make us full of gratitude to our Father and overflowing with love. Amen.

