

The Big Picture
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The big picture of Christianity often gets lost in the details. So, this morning, I will stick to just the big picture in broad, sweeping terms. You will notice on your handout that some of the frames have a lot of small print. Don't get worried. Those are there for future reference, in case you want the verses to look up when you are talking to someone outside of church.

So, here goes.

With all the claims and hype about Christianity, we need to fall back to the big picture: what is God's objective? What does He want? Is He the kindergarten teacher, the prison guard, the judge? Before answering that, think about how often in the Bible family is used as the illustration. Father, Son, brother, sister. That is because God's objective is to assemble a big family that will last.

Everyone came from somewhere. Everyone, for better or for worse, has a family. Some are good. Some are bad. Most are various shades of gray. But all, no matter what they have experienced, know what a family is. Even if they must look at someone else's family to see it, they understand the basic idea.

What makes a family stick together? What qualities must be present in the family members to make it work? Plenty of books in the library and the book store have their ideas. Christianity presents two character traits that God says are required to make family work: mutual trust and selfless concern. If you don't have those, the family will be dysfunctional. Think about your family. What is it that makes them valuable to you? Some family members detract from the quality of the family. Some add. If you can trust them, they contribute. If they can think about something besides themselves, they contribute.

But notice that family members whom you trust are not always the ones who make good choices in their own lives. You may even have a family member who is a total mess, but, when the chips are down, that person will show up. You don't think so much about their run-ins with the law or failed businesses or bad relationships if you can trust them. God agrees. That's why He puts up with us. We are each the black sheep of the family. But God trusts us and we trust Him.

But, that second part, selfless concern, sometimes we don't do so well. So, as in Romans 5:5, God pours that selfless concern into our hearts through the Holy Spirit whom He gives to each faithful person. So, if we trust God, He will give us the other part, selfless concern.

And why is that important? What difference does that make in my life? Having a family is important to every human being. It is important to God, too. Life is not about how well you perform, how many mistakes you make, or how many successes you have. It's about family, about being the one the family can count on to show up.

Step 1: God wants a big family that will last.

Step 2: Creation is an incubator for faith – that trust on which the family is based.

Think about it. Why did God bother to create the universe? He already had angels. We know that because they participated in creation (Job 38:4, 7). Obviously, some of the angels chose the wrong side. Was the earth a second try? I doubt it. Can God be God and have to try several times to get something right? Rather, the angels needed something – the same thing we need to be part of the family. They needed trust, faith. But if you live with the big guy, no trust is needed. He's right there. You either do what He says or you don't. They don't need to trust

what they can't see, because they can see. They walk by sight; whereas we are supposed to walk by faith – trust. The universe was created so God could put some of His spiritual beings down here, where they couldn't see, so their relationship with God would be built on trust, not sight. And, by the way, killing two birds with one stone, this also allows the angels to learn faith vicariously, by watching us (Ephesians 3:10). That's a little extra motivation to trust God. I don't want to be responsible for teaching angels a twisted kind of faith and getting them kicked off the team.

Further, this creation was built already headed downhill – in a downward spiral. Even overlooking all the bad stuff people do that spills over on those around them, this world was built with earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, tornados, and other natural events that cause destruction. Strangely, the insurance industry still calls all those events, “acts of God” in your insurance policy. Because the universe was created to fall apart, even without the disasters that we humans contribute, life is going to be fundamentally uncomfortable. God's question is, “Can you trust me when things are not going well?” That's what it takes to make a family – people who show up when your life is a disaster. This is where we learn it, and where we teach angels about it.

Why is this important to me? Because I need to understand why the world is such a mess. I should not expect life on earth to be comfortable. We have a choice: trust God or make it on our own. We know from experience that trying to make our own way does not work all that well. We need to know that there is another choice: trust God.

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Step 3: The church is the family.

There's a line in Hebrews 12:22 – 23 that lets us know that the church is composed of spirits who trust God and trust each other – and that includes breathing Christians, no-longer-breathing Christians, deceased faithful people from before Jesus, and angels. We are in this together. Hebrews 1:14 lets us know that angels trust us enough to work stuff out for us. We trust them enough to set a good example from which they learn faith. We selflessly care about each other, no matter which group we are in. The church, the eternal family, is here so that we can comfort each other, strength each other, help each other, build each other, and spread that news to people around us.

But, perhaps you have noticed, that the church does not always function smoothly. Just the fact that there are hundreds of brand names for churches lets us know that we have seriously messed this up. However, this does not mean that God is a bad engineer, a poor planner, and gullible. No, from before creation God planned to put the earthly church in the custody of people. He also planned the whole Jesus thing before creation. If God planned to send a redeemer before people were created, He already knew that we were going to make a lot of bad choices. Certainly, we should want to make it work according to plan, and we should do our best and, even more importantly than doing our best, we need to use the power of the Holy Spirit who resides in every faithful person to do the impossible – to work at getting the people who trust God to fit together and get along. Jesus prayed in John 17:20 – 24 that His future followers be united, as a proof that He was who He said He was. So this unity is really, really important. Remember, executing the plan flawlessly was not one of the necessary ingredients for the eternal family. Trust God; trust each other. God can work from there.

And just a reminder about the family. We need to know each other through spending time with each other. Knowing what is in the book is a big plus – however, not every time we

get together needs to look like school. Not everyone liked school. But we do need to learn so that we know what God has promised (you can't have expectations of God unless you know what He promised to do) and we need to go over the examples of character well done in the gospels, so we can see the same scenarios played out in our everyday lives and know how we should react.

Why should this be important to me? Because God has built a family – the very thing that everyone wants. Further, it's not a competition between blood family and eternal family – if you have blood family whom you trust, they should be a part of this bigger, worldwide family call the church. They work together.

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Step 4: People are messy

The kingdom of God, the family of God, holds together because of mutual trust and selfless concern. Trust and concern require the ability to choose. We are not robots. We call it free will. People have free will. It does not take a rocket scientist – or God – to figure out that any system that includes free will is going to get messed up – in a hurry. It is not that people are naturally defective. As Solomon wrote in the last verse of Ecclesiastes 7, “God made man upright. He goes astray in his schemes.”

Compounding this “going astray” problem is the ripple effect. We can't reel our mistakes back in even if we are sorry and make every effort to pay for it. What we did has already affected others, and we can't unaffected them. Knowing this, God set in motion a plan in which the right-and-wrong system could get paid off while enabling us to qualify for the kingdom on a different basis.

That's why God had to come to earth as Jesus and pay off the system. God could not just pretend all our mess-ups didn't happen – that would go against justice. He couldn't let us just go morally bankrupt and start over, because in bankruptcy someone always gets left holding the bag. So, He paid up the right-and-wrong system for everyone, not just for church people but for everyone (1 John 2:2). And, He set the entry requirement for the family – trust.

We need to trust God, which implies that we need to know what it is we are trusting Him for. And, on the scary side, He has to trust us. Obviously, we all have some history that might make it hard for God to trust us with His kingdom. We might just make heaven look as chaotic as earth, only longer. How does God trust us again after our many untrustworthy moments? In the Bible it's called forgiveness. Forgiveness is not blotting out your sin – that's redemption, which was done once for everyone by Jesus. Forgiveness is to push aside your untrustworthiness and give you a fresh try. It's like a job application that doesn't ask if you have a felony record.

However, even we can foresee that this may not run very smoothly. We drag our pasts and our bad habits with us into the kingdom. God has a fix for that one, too. It's called the indwelling Holy Spirit. Everyone who trusts God gets help to overcome themselves. The church is like a collision repair shop. It's one of those promises God made that we really need to understand. God provides the overhaul function. The trick is that you have to have a confident expectation that it's going to happen, or it won't.

However, we all know that a new car is preferable to one that was totaled by the insurance company but put back together by the body shop and sold on a salvage title. Right now, as long as the earth exists, we are rebuilt, salvage-titled cars. We look like new, but various things are going to pop up as time goes on.

That's OK. Have you ever thought about that heaven is that way, too? Satan used to be able to roam heaven and earth freely, creating havoc everywhere. He had his guys, we call them demons. Well, when Jesus went home, in Hebrews 9, not only did He offer His own blood in the tabernacle in heaven to pay up the right-and-wrong system, a war broke out between the good angels and the bad angels. You can read about it in Revelation 12. The good angels won. The bad angels, including Satan, were exiled to earth for a short time – about 40 years – after which they were all chained up in the abyss where they can cause no further trouble. Jesus cleaned up heaven, set it back to what we would expect heaven to be. But, heaven, just like the faithful on earth, is rebuilt, repaired, on a salvage title.

God figured that one out, too. On Judgment Day, not only will the earth and the rest of the universe get burned up, so will the present heaven. At Judgment, there will be a whole new heaven which has been in storage, just waiting for the big moment. Plus, we get to shuck our salvage-titled selves and get new ones. Paul called it our resurrection bodies – totally new, not rebuilt. Those who trust God and selflessly care about people will be the only ones left, so it will be a pretty nice place – full of people who trust each other and who care about each other. The untrusting and the self-centered won't make the cut.

That's how God takes care of the messy-people problem. That's supposed to be a great comfort to the earth-bound faithful. Of course, we want to do things right. But, we are messy, so it does not always work out that way. God says, "Just trust Me. I can work with this."

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Step 5: We need reminders

We have the Lord's Supper to remind us of essential concepts and promises so we don't drift off on our own, chasing what seemed like a good idea at the time. This is a group activity, not an individual activity. Each facet of the Lord's Supper must be understood in its collective, group sense.

The Lord's Supper, at its core, is a remembrance of Jesus. But, remember what? By my count, the New Testament gives 15 different ways. Each topic may be more or less significant to different people at different times. Today, I put proclaiming His return at the top of my list. Every time we break bread and raise our cups together, we remind each other that we mean it when we say, "Come quickly."

Second: self-examination. This examination is like any other. If we began to think about the material on a school test as the papers were being handled out, we would not do well. Rather we bring the result of a week of preparation. I bring the result of examining how I fit into the group.

Third: our participation in Jesus' sacrificial meal. We do not simply observe Jesus' sacrifice, but consume it as a family in the presence of God, celebrating and re-affirming our group, not individual, commitment.

Fourth: fellowship. We are declaring the connection between our spirits, and by extension our connection with the faithful around the world. We gather to revitalize this eternal connection as a reminder of what is, by far, the more important: the unseen.

Fifth: unity. We are all different parts of the same body, working in concert, differently but to the same end so that all parts arrive together.

Sixth: singleness of purpose. The big religion word is sanctification, reserved for god's purposes. We cannot dabble in different worlds on different days. As we re-affirm our total commitment, we rejoice with those who have overcome and are models for us, and we comfort, encourage, and build up those who are struggling.

Seventh: the bread represents manna for the spirit provided for the people of God daily, miraculously.

Eighth: the bread is unleavened, representing purity, sincerity, and truth. We are affirming to everyone else that we will deal with them truthfully, with pure motives, and that we trust them to do the same.

Ninth: the bread is from the Feast of Unleavened Bread, in which we celebrate our haste to accomplish our release from slavery to sin and our affliction during this journey on earth. This is a group effort because we have trouble identifying our own baggage and trials make up grumpy. We overcome by building up the others.

Tenth: the fruit of the vine represents the blood of Jesus which sealed the everlasting contract in which He promises not only to be the God of those who trust Him, but also to enable them to know the mind of God as a group, not individually.

Eleventh: the fruit of the vine represents the blood of Jesus which was shed for the remission of sins. The thrust of the reminder is that we have been redeemed from the right-and-wrong economy and transferred to the faith economy. The faithful recall as a group that all sorts of people are rescued from diverse hopelessness. We rejoice together for the successful faith of others.

Twelfth: drinking the fruit of the vine represents drinking the blood of Jesus, of taking the character of Jesus (His life) into ourselves. We do it together to reinforce that the same blood is in all as we are one body.

Thirteenth: "Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed." Picture the Israelites in Egypt, painting their doorposts and lintels with the blood of their Passover Lambs, confident of being passed over by the death angel. We, as the kingdom of God rather than as lone believers, act a little strangely based on our boldness in believing that certain death is no longer ours. But our selflessness raises terror in us for those with unpainted doorposts, so we are motivated to persuade others.

Fourteenth: Jesus is an all-encompassing umbrella, not a few minutes taken out of a busy schedule. The Lord's Supper is not a crumb and a sip with a prayer or two, but a meal for both body and spirit.

Fifteenth: we repeat it, not as a commanded ritual but as a meaningful illustration. Our repetition demonstrates that we are confident that Jesus' educational objectives are sound.

The important application is that we need constant reminders about our group effort. We are in this together for the success of each one.

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Step 6: We have each made a commitment

God set up a simple commitment ceremony in which each faithful person makes a public declaration to God and people of these things:

I accept the fact that Jesus paid off my debt. Many people travel through life with a burden of guilt for their bad choices. Baptism is a symbol of releasing that baggage.

I have a confident expectation of the Holy Spirit taking up residence in me for the purpose of character development, being transformed into the character of Jesus.

I assert that I am permanently reserved for godly purposes.

I have a confident expectation of being raised on Judgment Day.

I have a confident expectation that I am freed from my slavery to sin.

I vow that I will be a walking celebration of forgiveness.

I am dedicated to miraculous unity with other faithful people.

I am confident that the bad things of this world can no longer overpower me.

That's the big picture, from God's objective, to the purpose of creation, to the purpose of the church, to the messiness of people, to the reminders we need, to the commitments we have made. If, this morning, we can be of assistance in setting you on your journey with God and the faithful worldwide, please come forward as we stand and sing.