

## **Vision Forum: Part #3 – What is the Church? – By: Joe Fleener<sup>1</sup>**

This article is the third in a series. In part one I mentioned that the series would only have two parts...oops! In part two, I stated, “For Vision Forum, their church model is not inherently wrong.” Now in part three I want to look more closely at the church.

What I said at the conclusion of the second part in this series is still true. By “church model,” I mean the basic way they conduct their services. For those who are not familiar, one of Vision Forum’s primary distinctives is their “Family Integrated Church.”<sup>2</sup>

The basic idea of having the family together on Sunday, not having age-segregated Sunday Schools, and separate youth/singles groups, etc. is not inherently unbiblical. I, for one, like the creativity and think they are addressing some significant issues in the way we often “do church” that need to be addressed. We will visit this again later.

### **Let’s Review**

Part #1 in this series discussed the underlying theological world-view driving the teaching and practice of groups like Vision Forum. We discovered that they are operating from a *Theonomistic* world-view which is already a distortion of historical biblical theology.

Part #2 in this series showed how Vision Forum and others are distorting *Theonomy* even further by applying its world-view to the family, therefore teaching an unbiblical view of the family on an unbiblical theological foundation.

Here in part three I want to investigate Vision Forum’s teaching on the church. The purpose of this article is not to analyze the practical issues involved in having “family integrated” church services.<sup>3</sup> Frankly there is something more important than this to discuss.

As was mentioned in the first article in this series, every issue/problem is ultimately theological. We must learn to look at everything biblically/theologically if we are going to discover what God has to say on a subject. We will then know how best to please Him with our lives, our families and our churches.

### **A Brief Grammar Lesson**

I hate to do this and I certainly don’t mean to insult anyone’s intelligence, but it is necessary to review a little basic grammar before we can continue.

How would you answer the question, “Do you interpret the Bible literally?” I would imagine most people reading this would answer, “of course!”

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<sup>2</sup> Scott Brown. “National Center for Family Integrated Churches.” <http://www.visionforumministries.org/sections/ncfic/default.asp> (10 August 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Our church is kind of a hybrid of this and a “traditional” Sunday School model. I like having our daughter in the main service with us, but will admit there are some practical issues that need to be worked through.

Now with a literal method of interpretation in mind, how do we understand the following:

1. Psalm 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4; Ezekiel 16:8 describe God as having “wings.”
2. Matthew 23:37 & Luke 13:34 Christ compares Himself to a mother hen.

The process/science/art of interpreting Scripture is called hermeneutics. I would like to suggest that what we mean by a “literal” hermeneutic does not mean we conclude that God has literal wings or Christ has literal physical characteristics of a mother hen.

The reason I can say this and still fall squarely within the definition of a “literal hermeneutic” is that by literal we really mean **literary**. We understand that the writers of Scripture often employed various literary devices in their writings. **We interpret Scripture literally while considering the use and interpretation of various literary devices.**

The Word of God being such a diverse Book, having One Author and many authors offers a variety of literary features. Some are very unique to Hebrew, or Greek while others are quite common even for modern English.

In the two examples above, #1 would be a [metaphor](#), while #2 would be a [simile](#).

A metaphor is defined as:

In language, a **metaphor** is a [rhetorical trope](#) where a comparison is made between two seemingly unrelated subjects. Typically, a first object is described as being a second object. In this way, the first object can be economically described because implicit and explicit attributes from the second object can be used to fill in the description of the first. Some (particularly in [cognitive linguistics](#)) see metaphor as a basic cognitive function, while others prefer the term [analogy](#) for [this concept](#). However, metaphor is not always used for practical description and understanding; sometimes it is used for purely aesthetic reasons.<sup>4</sup>

A simile is defined as:

A **simile** is a [figure of speech](#) in which the subject is compared to another subject, for example, Frequently, similes are marked by use of the words *like* or *as*,<sup>5</sup>

This understanding of literary devices and our interpretation of them will be critical in the evaluation of Vision Forum’s teaching on the church to follow.

### [Vision Forum](#) & [The National Center for Family-Integrated Churches](#)’ Use of Key Texts

The following statements have been taken from the above organizations’ websites (emphasis mine):

ARTICLE VI -- Church is a Family of Families

*We affirm* that our Heavenly Father designed His church to be a spiritual "**family of families**" where members know one another intimately, the shepherds understand the sheep effectively, and the various body parts function interactively (1 Tim. 3:15).

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<sup>4</sup> “Metaphor.” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphor> (10 August 2005).

<sup>5</sup> “Simile.” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simile> (10 August 2005).

## ARTICLE VII -- Family is a Building Block

*We affirm* that the biblical family is a scripturally ordered household of parents, children, and sometimes others (such as singles, widows, divorcees, or grandparents), **forming the God-ordained building blocks of the church** (2 Tim. 4:19).

WHEREFORE, in light of this our faith, we do hereby resolve to...

- Recognize the church to be a spiritual "**family of families**" who value intimacy and interaction and grow by the multiplication of family-like congregations;
- Acknowledge **families** (which include singles, widows, divorcees, grandparents, etc.) as **God's building blocks for the church**, and maintain family-integrated rather than family-segregated meetings;<sup>6</sup>

### VI. The Church is a Family

1. Terminology of family: "household," "brothers," etc. (Heb. 2:11,17; Eph. 2:19; 1 Pet. 2:17)
2. Family life is the pattern for church life. (Acts 2:42-47; 1 Tim. 5:1,2)

### VII. Other metaphors that show the organic nature of the church.

1. The church is a *body*. (Rom. 12:4,5; 1 Cor. 12:12,13; Eph. 1:22,23)
2. The church is a living *building*. (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:19,20; 1 Pet. 2:4,5)<sup>7</sup>

## An Exegetical Analysis of a Few of the Above Proof Texts

As we proceed, let's remember we are trying to keep this discussion simple. How does Vision Forum define the church and is their definition hermeneutically and exegetically defensible?

Vision Forum's definition is rather clear. The church is a "family of families," where family is defined as "scripturally ordered household of parents, children, and sometimes others (such as singles, widows, divorcees, or grandparents)."

They then list several passages of Scripture in attempt to defend their definition. We will look at the following passages used by Vision Forum in their above statements (The verses are quoted from the New King James, emphasis mine):

1 Timothy 3:15 "but in case I am delayed, *I write* so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the **household** (*oikos*) of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth."

2 Timothy 4:19 "Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the **household** (*oikos*) of Onesiphorus."

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<sup>6</sup> "A Biblical Confession for Uniting Church and Family." <http://www.visionforumministries.org/sections/ncfic/confession.asp> (10 August 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Phil Lancaster. "Seeking the Family-Integrated New Testament Church." [http://www.visionforumministries.org/sections/ncfic/articles/new\\_testament\\_church.asp](http://www.visionforumministries.org/sections/ncfic/articles/new_testament_church.asp) (10 August 2005).

Ephesians 2:19 “so then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's **household** (*oikeios*),”

First notice that Ephesians 2:19 uses a different Greek word compared with 1 Timothy 3:15 and 2 Timothy 4:19.

Let's look at each of these words individually.

*Oikeios* “persons who are related by kinship or circumstances and form a closely knit group, members of a household....with focus on association in common cause or belief...of the Christians.”<sup>8</sup>

*Oikos*: Literally “household or family;” figuratively “the Christian community as the spiritual temple of God”<sup>9</sup>

### 2 Timothy 4:19

It seems rather obvious that *oikos* is being used in 2 Timothy 4:19 literally to simply refer to a particular family's household. It is rather amazing that anyone would even try to use this as a proof text in the defense of the church being made up of families.

Paul is concluding his letter with a series of greetings, very typical of first century letters and of Paul. In this list of people he wishes to greet he lists both individuals and a household (i.e. a group of people). He obviously could have listed each member of that household individually, but this would seem unnecessary. It would be very similar to someone sending a letter to our church and at the end saying, “please say ‘hi’ to John, Bill, Sue and the Fleeners.”

Paul is certainly not attempting to add criteria for the doctrine of ecclesiology in this greeting!

However, this does bring up an interesting question which will apply to the rest of our discussion and is important to ask when trying to interpret Scripture. What was a “household” in Paul's day? In other words, when Paul said greet the “household of Onesiphorus” who all could that have included?

### What is a Household?

As we saw in part #2 of this series, in Ephesians 5-6 Paul uses a very typical first century literary structure to give teaching to the recipients of the Ephesian letter on how to conduct themselves within in their household. This structure is often referred to as a “household code.” These household codes often contained three parts (sometimes more): Husband/Wife, Parents/Children, Master/Slave or Servant. In other words, it was almost certain that in a first century household there would be servants/slaves. Not only that, but since Paul includes instruction to both the masters and the servants in the household code found in Ephesians 5, both the master and the servants were, very likely, members of the same church!

In other words, in the first century a household was much more than a nuclear family.

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<sup>8</sup> W. F. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Chicago, 1999. *BibleWorks 6.0* BibleWorks, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> W. F. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Chicago, 1999. *BibleWorks 6.0* BibleWorks, 2003.

## *1 Timothy 3:15 and Ephesians 2:19*

Although these two verses use two different Greek words, they are being used in a very similar fashion with very similar meaning. This takes us back to our grammar lesson. It is clear that in these verses Paul is using metaphor to describe the church. He is not saying the church is a “family of families,” rather the church has similar characteristics to that of a household.

In Ephesians 2 Paul is painting the beautiful picture of our salvation in Christ.

In verses 1-10 he is clearly referencing individuals who were “dead,” individuals who were “made alive,” individuals who were “saved through faith.”

Beginning in verse 11 Paul starts to reveal the mystery of how God is reconciling individual Gentiles and individual Jews in Christ into a new relationship: “fellow citizens,” “God’s household” – verse 19.

To say that Paul uses this word “household” to refer to this new group of once alienated Gentiles and Jews who have been brought together in Christ as a “family of families” is actually quite dangerous. They have now changed the entire discussion of Ephesians 2 from dealing with **individual** salvation and reconciliation in Christ to **family** salvation and reconciliation in Christ.

In 1 Timothy 3 Paul is outlining the qualifications of elders and deacons to Timothy so he is better equipped to appoint qualified men for these positions. When we get to verse 15 Paul states that he is giving all of this instruction (which includes the instruction all the way back in chapter 2) so that “you (singular) will know how one ought to conduct himself (singular) in the household of God...”

Paul is giving instruction to an individual for individuals on how individuals ought to conduct themselves in God’s household. This household is a **family of individuals**, not a “family of families.”

### **How is the Church a Household?**

It is very unfortunate that Vision Forum has insisted on using such poor exegetical and hermeneutical methods to arrive at their definition of a church as “a family of families.” Just as they would recognize a metaphor when the Bible says God has wings, or the church is a body, they ought to recognize a metaphor when Scripture describes the church as a household. One may argue that they are still seeing this as a metaphor, I would disagree. Nonetheless, it is clear from the above passages that their interpretation of the metaphor is incorrect. In doing this they miss out on the real picture that is being painted and it is a beautiful picture.

I would like to suggest that the church is a household. This household is a **family of individuals**. Some (certainly not all) of the ways this is seen are the following:

1. The church is made up of individuals who have been regenerated and made alive in Christ – Ephesians 2:1-10.<sup>10</sup>
2. Each member is an adopted son of God and a fellow heir with Christ – Romans 8:15-17.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In their vision for the church, Vision Forum sees the church being a “family of families,” which for them includes even infants. To claim that individuals who are biological members of a family are part of the building blocks of the church even if not having accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior is a clear violation of Scripture’s teaching on the church and once again a distortion of the Covenant Theology they claim as their heritage.

<sup>11</sup> Although I am my daughter’s biological father, in Christ she is my sister!

3. Each individual member has been given gifts and is to minister those gifts for the benefit of the whole – Romans 12:4-8.
4. God has given individuals to lead His church – Ephesians 4:11, 1 Timothy 3:1-15, Titus 1:6-9. This is not in opposition to a plurality of elders, for even a plurality of elders is made up of individuals.
5. There are various positions within this figurative household and responsibilities that go with each position, just as there are in literal households – Hebrews 13:7, 17 & 24; 1 Timothy 5:17ff.
6. It is this family/household/body of individuals which is the pillar and ground of truth and which God is and will use to spread His gospel – 1 Timothy 3:15.

This picture gives us the beauty of God’s church. It is a “collection” of sinful people, saved by Grace and serving their God and savior together for God’s glory and the benefit of others. Each person has a role and function. There is no one more or less significant. In the church, the slave and master are equal, the single and married, the child and parent.<sup>12</sup> There are different roles and functions, but they are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

## Conclusion

As I opened part #1 to this series, I am gravely concerned for the wellbeing and spiritual condition of the families in our churches and particularly the fathers. I am also convinced that the church today is not doing all it can do to address these issues. I also believe that a contributing factor to this is the “way we do church today,” which does often take parents away from their children rather than drawing them together.<sup>13</sup>

However, I cannot allow my concerns for the family to drive me to misinterpret and misrepresent the teaching of Scripture so as to emphasize this need more. This is what Vision Forum has been and is doing.

In order to address a great need in our churches, Vision Forum has developed a definition for the church that is not exegetically or hermeneutically defensible.

We must address the spiritual condition of our families in our church. However, to accomplish this we must address the spiritual condition of each and every **individual** in our churches and not emphasis one “group” at the expense of another.

We must be faithful with the text. Interpreting it accurately and then “preaching the whole counsel of God.”

*2 Timothy 4:2 “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”*

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<sup>12</sup> I look forward to the day when I will sit in the pew (or chair) and learn from my son as he teaches a lesson or preaches a sermon, if God so leads him in that direction.

<sup>13</sup> I recently heard of a church that was having a “family camp.” This camp was actually a series of evening services where they would have separate services and activities for the parents and children!