



FAMILY RESEMBLANCE

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We've all had the experience of someone saying, "You look just like your mother," or "Your son/daughter has your/your husband's/your wife's eyes." Sometimes, we can see the similarity, and sometimes it surprises us: "Do you really think so?" My brother and I are easy to identify as brothers (well, we both have beards and wear glasses), but I don't see the similarity with my sister so easily. However, others do. Of course there will be family resemblance: we share the same gene pool.

Looking at Christian Churches of different denominations, we may experience something similar. Some times, we see the likeness quite clearly; at other times, it may take someone "outside the family" to see the similarities. But, ultimately, we all share the same gene pool: we are descended from the small community that continued to remember and celebrate Jesus after his death and Resurrection. We share the same spiritual DNA.

Christian denominations are like branches of the family tree. However, there are branches that stem off of branches that stem off of other branches: like large families, some members are more closely related than others: there are parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins. We might think about these groups as clans: groupings of denominational families.

The Christian family can be grouped in many ways, of course, and different people might group us differently. For example, while Catholics see the Orthodox as "sister Churches," sharing the seven Sacraments, apostolic succession, and the use of images in worship, the Orthodox are quite likely to think that Catholics and Protestants look more like each other than either looks like the Orthodox. Why? Because they can clearly see the Western attributes that seem so foreign to traditional Orthodoxy. Protestants who confess the Nicene Creed, for example, are likely to say that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son," while the Orthodox (and Eastern Rite Catholics, for that

matter) confess that the Spirit "proceeds from the Father." Again, Anglicans may see the similarity between themselves and the Orthodox: bishops, priests, deacons, and no pope. Many times, what similarities we see depends on what similarities we are looking for.

Let's take a look at one way of understanding Christian Churches: "high," "middle" and "low" Churches. By "high," "middle" and "low," we do not mean higher or lower class, higher or lower value, or even higher or lower dedication to the Gospel. By these words, we mean a combination of the structures of the organization, common worship and beliefs about the sacraments. In this schema, Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Lutherans tend to fall into the "high church" clan. Catholics might go to Anglican (in this country, Episcopalian) or Lutheran services and know every liturgical response. Catholics and Orthodox celebrate seven Sacraments, or "Holy Mysteries," and, though there are differences of opinion in the Anglican Church, many Anglicans, also, practice seven. Lutherans, on the other hand, accept two sacraments as instituted by Christ—baptism and the Eucharist—though they also celebrate other rites that are not ranked as Sacraments. All of these Churches practice infant baptism, believe that sacraments are vehicles for grace, and that Christ is really present in the Eucharist.

"Lower" Churches have a less structured service, usually composed of hymns, spontaneous prayers, and focus on preaching the Word. Sometimes, these Churches identify themselves as "Evangelical," from the Greek word for "Gospel," but Evangelicals do not all agree theologically. Some Evangelicals believe in the literal inspiration of the Bible: they identify themselves as "fundamentalists," but not all Evangelicals are fundamentalists. Lower Churches include Baptists (and there are many different types), Nazarenes, Church of Christ, and Pentecostals (again, of various denominations: United Pentecostals, Assemblies of God, and so forth). Typically, only baptism and Communion are celebrated (though they do celebrate marriage, it is not considered a sacrament). They practice "believer's baptism," which is usually understood as a sign that you have accepted Christ as your Savior, and Communion is understood to be a memorial meal, remembering that Christ died for our sins. Middle Churches, like the name implies, fall somewhere in between. Presbyterians, Methodists and United Church of Christ are typical middle Churches. They have a simpler liturgy, sometimes very informal. They celebrate two

Sacraments, Baptism and Communion. Unlike most of the low Churches, they practice infant baptism, believe that baptism is actually a vehicle for grace, and though they do not believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist in the Catholic sense, they do hold that through receiving Communion, you are really encountering Christ spiritually.

This is only a very general introduction to our larger family. There are many, many other members of the family, and many differences among them. In fact, it is important to remember that there are probably as many approaches to Methodist belief and practice, for example, as there are Catholic approaches (after all, Franciscans and Dominicans do not agree on everything). However, whatever differences there may be, they all believe in the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of Jesus, and are trying to understand the implications of that belief in their lives. I hope this very short and general introduction helps to inspire you in your own dialogue with your spiritual kinfolk.