

Are Church Cliques Harmful to Your Spiritual Health?

I just couldn't fit in. I loved the worship. The messages were Christ-centered. The congregation was growing. But try as I might—I served on a team, I joined the Bible school, I went to the **prayer** meetings—I just couldn't fit in.

And I wasn't the only one. It was a common malady among new members. We were welcomed with open arms but then kept at arm's length. The group that had helped launch the church was a near-impenetrable bunch of passionate believers. But they were very selective about who they let into their inner-circle.

This **church clique** even had its own buzzwords. Everything was intense. They were always stoked. Many things were profound. And they did everything in the grace of God. There's nothing wrong with that language, but if you came from another camp in the body of Christ into that one, your speech gave you away—and shut you out of the clique.

It was frustrating, and I had never experienced it before. I was always part of the in-clique and knew the language. But I just couldn't fit in, so eventually I left looking for a place that would not only welcome me with open arms but really embrace me. Since then, I've visited churches of many sizes and denominations and observed the **church cliques** nearly everywhere.

Cliques, Cliques and More Cliques

Recently I found out that church cliques were the object of a study by Balswick and Layne, who identified four types of church cliques. Are any of these present in your church? What does God think about church cliques? And how should we respond to cliques in the body of Christ?

According to Balswick and Layne, there are four typical types of cliques in churches. The researchers have identified them as “clusters.” These are: the conjugal cluster (married couples); the Christian education cluster (the group that typically makes decisions on what is taught in the church); the established member cluster (long-standing members) and the prominent member cluster.

I’m not sure there are only four types of church cliques. I’ve seen cliques of **prophetic** people—and that can be a scary, super-spiritual, nutty group! I’ve seen cliques of worshippers, who feel elite because they are skilled with instruments and vocals. I’ve seen cliques within youth groups, cliques within discipleship groups, cliques within races in the church. Cliques, cliques and more cliques!

Sometimes, church feels more like high school with its in-crowds and out-crowds than a place where you can feel accepted and loved for who you are. There’s nothing wrong with birds of a feather flocking together, so to speak, based on common interests. That’s natural. But when a **church clique** becomes exclusive or elite—setting themselves apart from the rest of the congregation and tightly shutting up the entrance—I believe it is harmful to church culture.

What the Bible Says About Cliques

I don’t think God likes us to form impenetrable cliques. Again, I’m not talking about the groups within the church that meet each week for cooking class or sports events. It’s natural for people with common interests to bond. I’m talking about cliques of people based on leadership status or marital status or spiritual gift status or some other status. These cliques are exclusive and, truth be known, their members are often walking in a measure of pride.

Paul exhorts us to, “Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion” (Rom. 12:16). Paul

urged the Corinthian church to “all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10). James tells us not to show partiality (James 2:1).

Seventeenth-century English Puritan Richard Baxter put it this way: “All other sins destroy the church consequentially; but division and separation demolish it directly.” And the late H.M. Carson, pastor, author and former editor of *The Gospel Magazine*, emphatically stated that, “The communion of the saints means, not a series of loosely related cliques, but an all-embracing and self-abnegating fellowship.” Finally, the late Robert C. Chapman, known as the apostle of love, revealed, “Humility is the secret of fellowship, and pride the secret of division.”

What to Do About Church Cliques

I’m guilty of being in a church clique—in the past. I was in what Balswick and Layne classify as a “prominent member cluster” at a church I once attended. The senior pastors told me I couldn’t be friends with lay members of the church because they wouldn’t be able to receive from me as a minister. That meant I had a pretty small circle of friends while I was there. I only later found out how cliquey the church really was, and I had to repent for propagating the movement.

So what do you do if you are in a church with cliques? If you lead a church with cliques, talk to your staff and encourage them to discourage cliques at all levels. Help them understand the biblical value of developing a true community of believers who share one another’s lives. If you are in a church with cliques and you can’t seem to penetrate any of the groups, **pray** about talking with a leader in the church about what you are experiencing. Don’t go in with guns blazing and blame slinging. Just talk about how you feel. It’s quite possible they have no idea this is happening and that they can help

build a more inclusive community.

Sometimes, if you just don't feel welcome, the only thing you can do is find a church that will not only welcome you with open arms but embrace you. I assure you, there are churches like that. God has a place for you. Don't let a bad experience with **church cliques** cause you to go into your shell and give up on the local church. Local churches are vital to the work of God. When you get planted in the place you belong, you will surely bloom.

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