

BROTHERS AND SISTERS

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What did the first Christians call one another before the term ‘Christian’ came into being? For it was only some time down the track that at Antioch that “**the believers were first called Christians**” (Acts 11.25). The implication is that this was a term given by others, rather than chosen by themselves. How did the first Christians describe themselves? To use the technical term, what was their chosen group designation?

The NT shows that the first Christians used a number of terms to describe themselves

- Believers
- Saints
- Disciples
- Followers of the Way

But their favourite term was “**brothers**” – or rather “**brothers and sisters**”.

To use the self-designation of one modern Christian denomination, Christians were the ‘Brethren’.

Incidentally in those days the Greek term for brothers (*adelphoi*) was an inclusive term referring to brothers and sisters. Today, however, it is not – for that reason all so-called inclusive English Bibles translate the Greek word ‘*adelphos*’ as ‘brother and sister’.

This term “brothers and sisters” in the metaphorical sense of ‘followers of Jesus’ is found 271 times in the NT. It occurs in all the books of the NT with the exception of Titus and Jude.

To us this term ‘brothers and sisters’ sounds frightfully old-fashioned.

How would you feel if we were to call Leesa ‘sister Leesa’ or you were to call me ‘brother Paul’?

And yet undoubtedly that was the way that it was – and in some countries that is the way it is still is. Amongst German Baptists, for instance, traditionally every sermon begins with the following words: “Dear brothers and sisters, and friends of the church’.

This evening I am not advocating that we should all call it each other brother and sister.

In today’s culture that does sound a little strange.

However, I do believe that as we do need to treat our fellow Christians as brothers and sisters.

We are family – that is the glory of the church.

What’s more, we are members of a world-wide family. It’s an amazing experience to turn up at a church in a foreign country and suddenly find yourself surrounded by brothers and sisters.

However, we can never take our relationships with our fellow Christians for granted.

We need to work at that sense of family within church life.

We need to ensure that nobody is left out.

Well, enough of generalities. Tonight as part of Word Alive I want to look at the way in which Paul used the term “brothers and sisters” – then see how Jesus used the term.

BROTHERS & SISTERS - PAUL'S FAVOURITE TERM FOR FELLOW CHRISTIANS

The Apostle Paul constantly uses the term “**brothers and sisters**”.

Look at one of his earliest letters, 1 Thessalonians – in this short letter the term appears 18 times.

- 1.4: **Our brothers and sisters, we know that God loves you** (literally: ‘brothers & sisters beloved by God’)
- The same phrase appears in 2.1; 2.9; 2.14; 2.17
- 3.2: “**Timothy, our brother**”
- ‘**Brothers and sisters**’ appears again in 3.2; 4.1
- It appears also in the singular in 4.6, save that the GNB translates it as “fellow-Christian”
- Yet again we find the expression in 4.10; 4.13; 4.18; 5.1; 5.12; 5.14; 5.25
- It appears also in 5.26, save that strangely the GNB translate it as “believers”; and in 5.27 where again we have the translation ‘believer’

“**Brothers and sisters**” was the standard form of address

What was true of 1 Thessalonians is true of all his other letters, although in some of his letters the description is less frequent.

- For instance, we find the term only twice in Ephesians: 6.21: “**Tychicus, our dear brother... will give you all the news about me**”; and 6.23: “**May God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give to all [Christian] brothers and sisters peace and love with faith**”

In Paul’s key letter to the church at Rome the term appears 18 times:

- 1.13: “**You must remember, my brothers and sisters, that many times I have planned to visit you, but something has always kept me from doing so...**”;
- In Rom 7 he twice calls his readers “**my brothers and sisters**” (7.1.3)
- In Rom 8 the phrase is found in 8.12 “**so then my brothers and sisters**”; 8.29 he describes Jesus as “**the firstborn among many brothers**”
- Rom 10.1; 11.25; Rom 12.1 (So then, my brothers and sisters)
- In the context of the weaker brother argument, the term appears six times: 14.10, 13,15, 21; 15.14,30
- Twice in Rom 16 speaks of brothers and sisters in general (14,17); specifically he speaks of “**our brother Quartus**” (16.23) ad also “**our sister Phoebe**” (16.1)

And so I could go on. If you want to find more references, check out a concordance.

The conclusion is clear: ‘brothers and sister’ is a standard way of the Apostle Paul describing his fellow Christians.

The question then arises: How does Paul envisage brothers and sisters behaving toward one another? How should the family behave?

1. BROTHERS AND SISTERS LOVE ONE ANOTHER

For Paul, family love is paramount. Brothers and sisters should love one another.

So in 1 Thess 4.9 Paul writes: “**Now concerning love of the brothers**” (NRSV: Philadelphia): “**you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another**”

Love is fundamental to life in the family of God.

So Paul writes to the church at Rome: "**Love one another warmly as Christian brothers & sisters**" (12.10). Literally Paul says "*love one another with the kind of brotherly and sisterly love that you would find within a family*".

The Greeks had a number of words for love: *eros* (erotic or sexual love), *philia* (love between friends), *agape* (the word most often used in the NT for Christian love); and there was 'storge' love – love experienced within the family. It's that word which Paul uses here

"Love one another warmly as Christian brothers and sisters" (GNB)

"Love one another with mutual affection" (NRSV)

"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love" (NIV).

Peterson misses the mark when he translates: "*Be good friends who love deeply*", because this isn't friendship love – but family love - the kind of love you find between a brother & a sister. In the words of William Barclay: "*The Christian church is not a collection of acquaintances; it is not even a gathering of friends; it is a family in God*".

This makes all the difference in the world.

We may pick and choose our friends, but we cannot pick our brothers & sisters.

What is true in natural world is also true in spiritual world.

God has given us one another: we have therefore a duty to love one another - yes, even Brother So-&-So who rubs us up the wrong way; even Sister So-&-So whose sentimentality we cannot stand.

2. BROTHERS AND SISTERS HONOUR ONE ANOTHER

Brothers and sisters honour one another.

Indeed, in Rom 12.10 this appears to be a key consequence of loving one another. For after saying that we should 'love one another warmly as Christian brothers & sisters', Paul immediately goes on to say: "**Be eager to show respect to one another**" – or as the NRSV puts it: "**Outdo one another in showing honour**". Or as Peterson put it: "*Practice playing second fiddle*".

To quote Barclay again: "*More than half the trouble that arises in churches concerns rights & privileges, places and prestige. Someone has not been given his/her place; someone has been neglected or not thanked; someone has been given a more prominent place than someone else*".

The fact is that Christians have no rights - only duties. Our duty is to love one another - to "**outdo one another in showing honour**" (NRSV).

3. BROTHERS AND SISTERS OPEN THEIR HOMES TO ONE ANOTHER

Brothers and sisters open their homes to one another. This too is an extension of loving one another. For within the same breath of saying we should 'love one another warmly as Christian

brothers and sisters', Paul says: "**Open your homes to strangers**" (Rom 12.13). Or in the words of NRSV: "*extend hospitality to strangers*".

Incidentally, almost certainly the '**strangers**' in question were 'brothers and sisters' new to the local fellowship.

We find the same idea in Hebrews 13.1-2, where after the writes says: "**Keep on loving one another as Christian brothers and sisters**" (literally: let *philadelphia* flourish!), he goes on immediately to say: "**Remember to welcome strangers in your homes. There were some who did that and welcomed angels without knowing it**".

In the NT hospitality is not a gift for some to exercise, but a duty for all to fulfil. Hospitality is not about lavish parties or extravagant dinners – that's entertainment. It's about opening our doors to one another – it's about inviting people home. Yes, it may involve a meal, but it could just as well involve a cup of coffee. The essence of hospitality is simply opening the door, and say '*Do come in*'. It doesn't need money – it needs an open door.

Notice too that love for brothers and sisters is opportunistic: it constantly it looks for opportunities to welcome new brothers and sisters into one's home.

Literally Paul writes: "**Pursue hospitality**" like a hunter pursues his prey.

- In the words of one commentator: "*Go out and look for those to whom one can show hospitality*" (Cranfield).
- Or as Origen, the great theologian of Alexandria who lived at the end of the 2nd century & the beginning of the 3rd century: "*We are not just to receive the stranger when he comes to us, but actually to enquire after, and look carefully for, strangers, to pursue them and search them out everywhere*".

I.e. we are to be enthusiastic opportunists – looking for any excuse to welcome fellow Christians into our home. Indeed, according to Peterson, we should "*be inventive in hospitality*".

4. BROTHERS AND SISTERS HAVE A DUTY TO CARE FOR ONE ANOTHER

As brothers and sisters, we have a duty of care to one another.

This comes out clearly in Rom.14.13-21.

There we discover that the church was divided on a number of practical issues

- **food**: "**Some people's faith allows them to eat anything, but the person who is weak in the faith eats only vegetables**" (14.2 GNB). This had nothing to do with modern vegetarianism. It is possible that some may have been influenced by the problem of "meat offered to idols". Alternatively, some might have refused meat on the ground that it had not been slaughtered according to Jewish standards - the food was not 'kosher'.
- **drink**: "**The right thing to do is to keep from eating meat, drinking wine, or doing anything else that will make your brother or sister fall**" (14.21). It would appear that for some drinking wine was an issue. Why, we don't know. The temperance movement itself is a modern phenomenon. [NB Cranfield believes = a hypothetical example]

- **sabbath observance:** "Some people think that a certain day is more important than other days, while others think that all days are the same" (14.5). Almost certainly this issue had its roots in Judaism. Some of those who had been Jews or Jewish proselytes before they became Christians, clearly still observed the Sabbath.

For Paul none of these issues were a problem.

Like Jesus, he was "**certain that no food is of itself ritually unclean**" (14.14).

Furthermore, Paul was convinced that none of these issues were central to the Christian faith.

With a degree perhaps of sarcasm he writes: "**God's Kingdom is not a matter of eating & drinking, but of the righteousness, peace and joy which the Holy Spirit gives**" (14.17).

Nonetheless, the fact that these issues weren't a problem to Paul didn't make the problems go away for others. Paul was concerned for his brothers and sisters. "**We must always aim at those things that bring peace and that help to strengthen one another... The right thing to do is to keep from eating meat, drinking wine, or doing anything else that will make your brother and sister fall.... We who are strong in the faith out to help the weak to carry their burdens. We should not please ourselves. Instead we should all please our brothers and sisters for their own good, in order to build them up in the faith**" (14.19,21; 15.1-2)

Paul goes on: "**If you hurt your brother or sister because of something you eat, then you are no longer acting out of LOVE**" (14.15). The word "hurt" is perhaps not strong enough. Other versions use the term "injured". It is possible that we can use our freedom in such a way as to harm the spiritual life of another person. If that happens you are not acting in love

Remember, says Paul, with who you are dealing - you are dealing with a "**person for whom Christ died**" (14.15) Yes, it is a bind when we have to live with people who to us seem to have unjustifiable scruples. They may be wrong. But the fact that they may be wrong does not mean to say that we are right in exercising our freedom. For the right to exercise our freedom it always subservient to the needs of our brother and sister.

In the words of one distinguished American commentator, Paul Achtemeier: "*That there is a limitation placed on my freedom, my rights, by my active concern, my responsibility for your good (i.e. my love for you) is a point most church congregations... need to hear*"

5. BROTHERS AND SISTERS SORT OUT THEIR DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE FAMILY

From time to time members of the family fall out with one another.

That's true of any human family – it is true too of the Christian family.

Indeed, it has been said that wherever two or three are gathered together in Jesus' name, disagreements are always about to arise. And what then?

We should sort of our differences in the family.

Unfortunately sometimes Christians go public with their differences.

Indeed, there are times when Christians take one another to court – but this should never be.

Look at 1 Cor 6.1-11. We discover that some of the Christians at Corinth were taking out lawsuits against each other in a public court (6.1) as a result of their disagreements with one another (6.6-7).

Paul is appalled: **“If any of you have a dispute ‘against another’ [NRSV], how dare you go before heathen judges instead of letting God’s people settle the matter?”** (6.1).

For Paul it was fundamental that Christian brothers and sister should settle their differences within the family. **“Shame on you! Surely there is at least one wise person in your fellowship who can settle a dispute between fellow-Christians [literally, between brothers and Christians]. Instead, one Christian [brother] goes to court against one another [another brother], and lets the unbelievers judge the case”** (6.5).

As far as Paul was concerned, it would be better for Christians to allow themselves to be defrauded rather bring differences out in such a public way (6.7).

I believe that Paul’s teaching still remains highly relevant.

But enough of Paul. Let us turn to Jesus.

For Paul did not invent the expression ‘brothers and sisters’ as a description for those who followed Jesus – the term owes its origin to Jesus.

Indeed, I would argue that first and foremost, for Jesus we are not disciples, we are brothers and sisters.

‘BROTHERS AND SISTERS’ – JESUS’ KEY TERM FOR HIS FOLLOWERS

There are a number of occasions in the Gospels where Jesus calls his followers his ‘brothers and sisters.’

For instance, there was the occasion, reported in all three Gospels. when his mothers and brothers came to see him (Mark 3.31-35 with parallels in Matt 12.46-50-; Luke 19.21).

They sent a message to him saying that they were outside waiting for him. But Jesus replied: **“Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?”** He then went on to say: **“He looked at the people sitting round him and said, “Look! Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does what God wants him to do is my brother, my sister, my mother”**”

This was radical stuff. It is not exaggeration to say that at this point Jesus redefined the family. For him family was defined by a new relationship with God, in which blood relationship could no longer take precedence.

Incidentally, do notice that Jesus doesn’t just talk about his brothers and his mother – he talks about his **sisters** too. In the words of one commentator: This is *“a dominical witness for the role of women in Christian fellowship, and without distinction from ‘brothers’”* (James Edwards).

For Jesus women have a role to play in the church; what is more that role is just as important as that played by men. Indeed, Jesus here makes no distinction between their roles.

Jesus put the family of faith before the family of birth

We see this on another occasion, when Jesus said: "**Those who come to me cannot be my disciples unless they love me more than the love their father & mother, wife & children, brothers & sisters, and themselves as well**" (Lk 14.26). I.e. God comes first.

For Jews such teaching must have been revolutionary.

They equated God coming first with the family coming first.

The Rabbis, e.g. placed limits on how long a man might abstain from intercourse with his wife.

Not bearing children was equal to shedding blood and diminishing the image of God.

Procreation was an obligation.

Rabbi Abba declared that one question sure to be asked at the judgment would be: "Did you engage in procreation?"

But Jesus' concern went way beyond the biological family.

For him the family of the Kingdom is the first family.

Jesus established a 'surrogate' family, made up of his followers

So in Mark 10.29-30 we hear Jesus saying: "**I tell you that anyone who leaves home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and for the gospel, will receive much more in this present age. He will receive a hundred times more houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields....**"

The followers of Jesus are put of a new, large family, which takes precedence over biological family ties. This is the explanation of the somewhat shocking incident we find in Matt 8.21-22 (also found in Luke 9.57-62) where a would-be disciple of Jesus says: "**Sir, first let me go back and bury my father**", and Jesus replies, "**Follow me and let the dead bury their own dead**" To quote NT Wright: "*This is, quite frankly, outrageous. Many scholars have pointed out that Jesus is here advocating behaviour that his contemporaries, both Jewish and non-Jewish, would have regarded as scandalous: the obligation to provide a proper burial for one's immediate family was so great as to override almost all other considerations. The only explanation of Jesus' astonishing command is that he envisaged loyalty to himself and his kingdom-movement as creating an alternative family*"

The church is the first family. Christianity is not the religion of the family - that's Judaism. It is the religion of the church. In this respect let me quote to you two "declarations" from a book entitled *Families At the Crossroad* by Rodney Clapp.

1. The negative declaration: "*The family is not God's most important institution on earth. The family is not the social agent that most significantly shapes & forms the character of Christians. The family is not the primary vehicle of God's grace & salvation for a waiting, desperate world*".
2. The positive declaration: "*The church is God's most important institution on earth. The church is the social agent that most significantly shapes & forms the character of*

Christians. And the church is the primary vehicle of God's grace and salvation for a waiting, desperate world".

These declarations are implicit in the words of Jesus here: "**Whoever does what God wants him to do is my brother, my sister, my mother**". Jesus displaced the biological family.

Here we find the origin for Paul and his contemporaries calling one another "brothers and sisters". They belonged to a new family, created by Jesus himself. And so too do we!