

**PUTTING FAMILY LANGUAGE
BACK INTO THE FAMILY OF GOD**

by

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Christians are those who have been adopted into the family of God and as such, believers are now brothers and sisters in Christ. This language of “brothers and sisters” seems clear on the surface, but do twenty first-century North American Christians really understand the first-century concept of brother- and sisterhood? Would my relationship with my brother, whom I email occasionally and I talk with on the phone even less, be acceptable in the eyes of Paul and his first-century audience? My answer to these questions is a resounding “No.”

Our English Bibles are also culprits in aiding our misunderstanding of siblingship.¹ In Romans, the Greek word, ἀδελφοί, is used 13 times. A quick look at the New American Standard Bible indicates that the English word “brothers/brethren” is used 5 times in Romans. In the New International Version, the English word “brothers” appears 13 times and in the New Revised Standard Version, it appears 10 times. In 1 Corinthians, ἀδελφοί occurs 24 times in the Greek. In the NAS translation of 1 Corinthians, the English “brothers” is used 8 times, while in the NIV it is used 27 times and 22 times in the NRSV.² Obviously something has been lost (or added) in translation. Most of the other translation equivalents of ἀδελφοί are translated as “believers,” or “friends,” instead of “brothers.” These other terms hint at Paul’s intended meaning, but, in my opinion, fall short of what Paul wanted his audience to understand. When reading the English text alternatives, we lose some of the family emphasis that Paul had

¹A term used by Reidar Aasgaard in his book *“My Beloved Brothers and Sisters!”: Christian Siblingship in Paul*, Early Christianity in Context, ed. John M. G. Barclay, JSNTS, ed. Mark Goodacre, no. 265 (London: T & T Clark, 2004).

²I. Howard Marshall, ed., *Moulton and Geden’s Concordance to the Greek New Testament*, 6th ed. (London: T & T Clark, 2002), 19; John R. Kohlenberger, III, *The NRSV Concordance Unabridged* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 188; Edward W. Goodrick and John R. Kohlenberger III, *The NIV Exhaustive Concordance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 160-161.

originally intended in his writing. In this paper, I reinstate the full potential of Paul's family language back into the concept of the "family of God" by giving attention to the concept of sibling relationships. Briefly, I will (1) examine the Greco-Roman concept of brother-/sisterhood in order to describe the foundation on which Paul's letters were written; (2) investigate Paul's use of sibling language in two letters, 1 Thessalonians and Romans, concentrating on both the context of and Paul's use of φιλαδέλφια; and (3) contrast Paul's use of sibling language with Plutarch's in his treatise "Περὶ Φιλαδέλφια."

The first-century Greco-Roman family is quite different from our day. While many North Americans today would define "family" as a mother and father living with their children, "first-century people, however – and still members of most cultures today – would think of 'family' rather as the entire network of people related to each other by blood, marriage and other intimate social ties, such as clientage."³ "Apart from referring to the slaves and freed slaves attached to a married couple, [the term 'family'] was also used with reference to the kin as well as to the property or family estate. . . . thus [it] included more than just the nuclear family."⁴

There were two dynamics key to family life: harmony and honor. If either of these were missing or weak within the family, the whole family was looked badly upon by its fellow stratum members of society. Harmony was "a balance in the relationship between family members in which all acknowledged their proper place [and] was considered a fundamental condition for a

³Carolyn Osiek, "The New Testament and the Family," in *The Family*, ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill and Dietmar Mieth, Concilium, no. 4 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 1.

⁴Stephan Joubert, "Managing the Household: Paul as *Paterfamilias* of the Christian Household Group in Corinth," in *Modelling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in its Context*, ed. Philip F. Esler (New York: Routledge, 1995), 214.

successful family life.”⁵ Honor was “a claim to worth and the social acknowledgment of that worth. To honor someone means to acknowledge publicly that his/her actions conform to social obligations.”⁶ “Family is the main source of honour, and consequently it becomes important to uphold the family honour, to behave according to the family honour.”⁷ In a society where everything revolved around honor and shame, maintaining one’s honor was very important. One of the simplest ways to bring honor to one’s family was by treating those in the family appropriately, especially parents, but almost as importantly, siblings. “Brothers [and sisters] were raised to give honor freely to all their siblings and to refrain from responding in kind to an honor challenge from any member of their family.”⁸

Due to the high mortality rate of children, the number of siblings was usually low. Also the life-span of adults (compared to adults today) was short, so that many children grew up without one of their parents, usually their father.⁹ Older siblings would become models of appropriate behavior to younger ones. In regards to his sister, the older brother would defend her honor by exacting revenge if she was dishonored in any way. If the father died before his

⁵Aasgaard, *Beloved*, 54.

⁶Barth L. Campbell, *Honor, Shame, and the Rhetoric of 1 Peter*. Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 160 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 12.

⁷Halvor Moxnes, “What is Family? Problems in Constructing Early Christian Families,” in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (New York: Routledge, 1997), 28.

⁸S. Scott Bartchy, “Undermining Ancient Patriarchy: The Apostle Paul’s Vision of a Society of Siblings,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 29 (1999): 68.

⁹Aasgaard, *Beloved*, 40.

daughter was to be married, the oldest brother would arrange her marriage.¹⁰ Once the sister was married, it became the duty of the new brother-in-law to help in the careers of his wife's younger brothers, usually getting them a good spot within the military or politics.¹¹

Responsibilities toward one's siblings did not stop once siblings reached adulthood. Brothers would help out their sisters's children financially if need be.¹² It was a brother's duty to praise publicly the deeds of not only his brothers but also his brothers's children and it was never acceptable to voice the faults or secrets of a sibling.¹³ If a brother was murdered, the surviving brothers were expected to avenge his death.¹⁴ If there were lawsuits, brothers were suppose to side with brothers, never to testify against one another.¹⁵

Sisters also had important roles to play within their siblings' lives. They "could . . . serve as a broker between quarrelling [sic] brothers, or between a deviant son and an irate father."¹⁶ While maternal aunts could arrange marriages for their sisters' children,¹⁷ paternal aunts were

¹⁰Ibid., 63-64.

¹¹Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 32.

¹²Aasgaard, *Beloved*, 64.

¹³Plutarch, *Mor.* 21.492.C (Helmbold, LCL); Joseph Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 45.

¹⁴Hellerman, *Ancient Church*, 45.

¹⁵Ibid., 43.

¹⁶Aasgaard, *Beloved*, 86.

¹⁷Ibid., 66.

“expected to engage actively in the marriages and divorces of [their] brother’s children.”¹⁸ There were also religious ceremonies, the *Leucaothea* especially, where aunts would offer sacrifices not for their own children, but for their nieces and nephews.¹⁹ Finally, the most important thing a sibling could do for another sibling was to ensure that he/she had a proper burial. A decent burial not only brought honor to the one who had experienced the ultimate expression of weakness or helplessness—death itself, but also brought honor upon the family.²⁰

Of course not every family was the ideal Greco-Roman family and sometimes there would be infighting, usually centering around inheritance. There are many examples of brothers dishonoring one another while they sue the other for more of their father’s estate. Another occasion for strife would be the frequent remarriage of a parent, and the new children that would be brought into the family because of this new marriage. Adoption in order to have an heir was quite common. Julius Caesar’s adoption of his sister’s child Octavius is a famous example. On account of this it was quite common, especially within the higher strata, for there to be full, step, and/or half siblings within the family.²¹

There was a widespread conception that there was a decline in morality among humanity compared to the men and women of old. This worsening of the human nature trickled down into family life, so that the contemporary family was seen as morally inferior to the family of the

¹⁸Ibid., 64.

¹⁹Plutarch, *Mor.* 21.492.D (Helmbold, LCL).

²⁰Hellerman, *Ancient Church*, 50.

²¹Aasgaard, *Beloved*, 45.

former ‘golden age.’²² This supposed breakdown of the family caused many a moralist to write and express their views on the matter, reminding the children of that generation how the revered men of past generations lived proper, honorable lives.

Plutarch, a moralist dating from ca. 50-120 C.E., wrote “Περὶ Φιλadelphias” (“On Brotherly Love”) within his multi-volume work *Moralia*, which is “the only *systematic* presentation of what antiquity had to say about the ethics of ‘brotherly love.’”²³ It is obvious from the beginning of the treatise that Plutarch’s task is one of psychagogy.²⁴ He has witnessed the demise of sibling relations and wants “to guide the souls of his readers to recover the upset harmony,” to attain the proper balance of honor and respect that brothers of old had.²⁵ Plutarch states that “through the concord of brothers both family and household are sound and flourish.”²⁶ All of Plutarch’s teaching on brotherly love revolves around keeping harmony and honor within the family. Brothers should share not only their father’s estate, but also the same nature, friends,

²²Aasgaard, *Beloved*, 57.

²³H. D. Betz, *Plutarch’s Ethical Writings and Early Christian Literature*, Studia ad Corpus Hellenisticum Novi Testamenti, ed. H. D. Betz, G. Delling, and W. C. van Unnik, no.4 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 232.

²⁴Psychagogy is the umbrella term for activities that include “psychotherapy, psychological and pastoral counseling, spiritual direction or soul care, and the most general exhortation.” Abraham J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, Library of Early Christianity, ed. Wayne A. Meeks, no. 4 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 48.

²⁵Reidar Aasgaard, “Brotherhood in Plutarch and Paul: Its Role and Character,” in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (New York: Routledge, 1997), 168.

²⁶Plutarch, *Mor.* 2.479.A (Helmbold, LCL).

slaves, and even their father's anger.²⁷ If one brother is at odds with his father, a good brother would deflect his father's anger off the first brother and absorb it himself, making "the anger lighter for his brother." An older brother should be a model citizen that his younger brother could emulate, not necessarily a father figure, but more a comrade. The younger brother should not look at this emulation as rivalry, because the younger brother should not envy his older brother, but should imitate him, since one who imitates is one who admires.²⁸

The family metaphor, along with its concept of sibling relationships, is by far the one most commonly used by Paul. The most common family term Paul uses is ἀδελφοί. Though technically this is a masculine plural noun, there is no Greek word for "sibling" and the consensus of scholarship is that both men and women were included in ἀδελφοί.²⁹ Ἀδελφοί is the term most often used when Paul is addressing his whole audience. The singular "ἀδελφός" or "ἀδελφή" seems to have a more technical nuance, referring to those who fill a specific role within Paul's ministry: his co-workers, fellow prisoners, or other bond slaves of Christ.³⁰ The term for brotherly love, φιλαδέλφια, is found only twice in Paul's writings: first in 1 Thess. 4:9

²⁷Plutarch, *Mor.* 2.478.F; 1.478.C; 9.482.E (Helmbold, LCL).

²⁸Plutarch, *Mor.* 16.486.F-16.487.B (Helmbold, LCL).

²⁹S. Scott Bartchy, "Secret Siblings," *Sojourners Magazine* 33 (2004): 34, 36; Karl Olav Sandnes, *A New Family: Conversion and Ecclesiology in the Early Church with Cross-Cultural Comparisons*, Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity, ed. Richard Friedli, et al., vol. 91 (Bern: Peter Lang, 1994), 74; Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Cultural Setting*, rev. ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 51; Carolyn Osiek, "Women in House Churches." In *Common Life in the Early Church: Essays Honoring Graydon F. Snyder*, ed. Julian V. Hills, et al., (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1998), 305.

³⁰Vincent Branick, *The House Church in the Writings of Paul*, Zacchaeus Studies: New Testament, ed. Mary Ann Getty (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1989), 16.

and then Rom. 12:10.

For many new believers, Christianity was a major paradigm shift into a whole new worldview, with the conversion experience at the forefront of the shift. Paul's use of family language was a way to ease the transition in identity formation following conversion. Bernard Lategan discusses a four-step process someone goes through in the conversion experience: (1) "conceiving of an alternative symbolic universe;" (2) "redescription of reality in terms of this universe;" (3) the naming of this new reality in order to realize it fully; and finally, (4) acting in terms of their new self-understanding.³¹ Paul's contextualization of the gospel in light of family language indicates that some parts of the new believer's life shared elements with his/her old life. "By using [the family] metaphor he says something about Christian relationships, what they are like, and what they should be like..." he gives his audience a clearer understanding as to what the family of God looked like.³²

Φιλαδέλφια was a technical term, having its roots in both family ethics and friendship ethics.³³ This love between brothers was not just an attitude, but "involve[d] a purposive act of will . . . it expresse[d] itself not in mere feeling or inclination but in concrete acts of service."³⁴ In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he says that the believers do not need to be told anything about φιλαδέλφια because they have already been taught by God how to love one

³¹Bernard Lategan, "Intertextuality and Social Transformation: Some Implications of the Family Concept in New Testament Texts," in *Intertextuality in Biblical Writings: Essays in Honour of Bas van Israel*, ed. Sipke Draisma (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1989), 109, 110.

³²Aasgaard, *Beloved*, 3.

³³Betz, *Plutarch's Ethical Writings*, 236.

³⁴Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 54.

another.³⁵ But then Paul goes on to remind them what φιλαδέλφια entails. 1 Thess. 4:9 is found in a carefully constructed paraenetical section of the letter, namely 1 Thess. 4:1-12 and 5:12-22, where “elements of *philadelphia* emerge in concrete terms.”³⁶

Paul exhorts his hearers to be “the model of harmonious relations among a respectable family in the surrounding culture.”³⁷ They were not to defraud a sibling, like a dishonorable brother would, but they were to live quiet lives, working with their own hands and presenting a united front to the outside world.³⁸ They were to love and respect those that gave instruction, to live in peace with one another, to admonish the unruly, encourage and help the weak and be patient with one another (1 Thess. 5:12-14). All of these actions making up φιλαδέλφια would have brought honor and harmony to the family of God and would have been a strong witness to non-believers.

The second time Paul uses the term φιλαδέλφια is in Romans 12:9. In the letter to the Romans, Paul is striving to create solidarity between the Gentile and Jewish believers after the Edict of Claudius had been revoked.³⁹ It is apparent that there is some strife within the

³⁵1 Thess. 4:9.

³⁶Philip Esler, “‘Keeping it in the Family’: Culture, Kinship and Identity in 1 Thessalonians and Galatians,” in *Families and Family Relations: As Represented in Early Judaism and Early Christianities: Texts and Fictions*, ed. Jan Willem van Henten and Athalya Brenner, *Studies in Theology and Religion*, ed. Jan Willem van Henten, vol. 2 (Leiderdorp, the Netherlands: Deo, 2000), 171.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 172.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹James Walters, *Ethnic Issues in Paul's Letter to the Romans: Changing Self-Definitions in Earliest Roman Christianity* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press, 1993), 56-66; Francis Watson, “The Two Roman Congregations: Romans 14:1-15:13,” in *Romans Debate*, rev. ed., ed.

community and one of Paul's methods to create solidarity and harmony is to use family language. Paul's argument in chapters 11-15 revolves around φιλαδέλφια, namely, (1) loving one's Jewish or Gentile brother and sister because they too are part of God's family and (2) loving one another, neither despising one who has more amazing spiritual gifts than another, nor one who is spiritually weaker than another, but welcoming one another just as Christ welcomed each one.

12:9-21 is a definition of φιλαδέλφια, which strikingly includes many of the elements from the example found in 1 Thess. 5:12-22. Verses 9-13 seem more directed to "internal relationships within the body of Christ"⁴⁰ and could be "considered a definition of the brotherly character of the Christian fellowship."⁴¹ Believers are to practice φιλαδέλφια by outdoing one another in *giving* honor, rather than receiving it, which went against the common cultural practices of the time. Πιλαδέλφια also entailed contributing to the needs of other believers and practicing hospitality. 12:14-21 "seem to focus more on relationships with the wider world."⁴² Paul calls his audience to be of the same mind, to have harmony with one another, never to repay evil with evil or to take revenge. These are concrete expressions of φιλαδέλφια that can be shown to outsiders.

Although there are similarities in the concept of first-century siblingship as portrayed in Plutarch's treatise "On Brotherly Love" and in Paul's teaching on φιλαδέλφια, there is a main

Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 204.

⁴⁰James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David Hubbard and Glenn Barker, vol. 38b (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 738.

⁴¹Sandnes, *A New Family*, 116.

⁴²Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 741.

difference: the motivation behind their writing. Plutarch's motivation is to restore the concept of the family within society and one of the ways he thinks this can be accomplished is by concentrating on building up the family's honor. Rather than receiving honor, Paul wants believers to *give* honor to one another. He would agree that honor is an important element to have in a family, but rather than focusing on ways to attain it for oneself, like building up the number of clients one has, or the amount of money one has donated for building projects around the city, the focus should be on honoring others, to the point of it becoming a competition as to who can give the most honor away (Rom. 12:10).

Another way the difference in motivation is played out is the discussion of the older/stronger brother with regards to the younger/weaker brother. Plutarch claims that there is not supposed to be equality between siblings. If there are multiple siblings within a family, there will always be an older, stronger, sibling, it is a fact of nature. No matter how much the younger sibling would want it, there is no way for him/her to become the older sibling, so he/she might as well forget trying to change the situation and strive to be the best sibling he/she can be.

Paul would argue, especially in Romans 14 and 15, that though there are stronger and weaker brothers and sisters in the faith, there can also be equality among them. All are equal in the eyes of God and if we practice *φιλαδέλφια*, equality will be found. There could always be a sibling that has a stronger faith than another sibling. The stronger sibling should not despise the weaker sibling for being weak and the weaker sibling should not despise the stronger for being strong. Instead they should welcome one another just as God welcomes them. If there are disagreements between stronger and weaker siblings, the focus should not be on judging one another but instead on finding peace and building one another up, realizing these are issues that

the individual has to deal with, not the community. When believers put these issues in right perspective and strive to deal with their siblings with a welcoming attitude, they are practicing φιλαδέλφια.⁴³

The first-century concept of siblings is quite different from the twenty first-century concept. Greco-Roman siblings were expected to maintain the honor of their family at all costs, even if it meant killing someone else in order to restore it. Both brothers and sisters had specific roles in relation to their siblings, both as children and as adults, up to the point of death. Due to the supposed breakdown of the Greco-Roman family, philosophers and moralists strove to teach their generation how siblings ought to act in order to restore and keep honor within the family, the building block of the Roman Empire. Paul picks up on this theme of φιλαδέλφια, but gives it a twist: Paul's motivation was not to sustain honor within the human family, but, with the use of family language, to show the true place of honor within the Christian family.

Attention to Paul's family language and his concept of siblingship offer new and interesting perspective on his letters. To illustrate, consider the following two inquiries with regard to Romans 12-15. First, chapter 13 of Romans ("be subject to the government") fits into the discussion of φιλαδέλφια. If the cultural setting of the letter to the Romans is the eviction of the Jews and Jewish Christians due to the Edict of Claudius, it seems striking that Paul would include a pro-government teaching, unless we look closely at verses 7 and 8. Paul charges his audience to pay their taxes, to honor whom they are suppose to honor, and to owe nothing to

⁴³Rollin A. Ramsaran makes practical suggestions on how the Church today can make progress toward overcoming differences and welcoming one another within the believing community in his article, "'In Nonessentials, Liberty': A Key Ministry Context from Romans 14:1-15:13," *Leaven* 8, no. 4 (2000): 167-168.

anyone except ἀγάπη. Second, consider the elements of “welcoming” and φιλαδέλφια, two themes that are woven throughout chapters 12-15 of Romans. It would be interesting to see if these two concepts show up in other texts together and to see how the different types of welcoming (father-child vs. sibling-sibling) fit into the φιλαδέλφια discussion.

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