

Blest be the ties that bind: Churchly belonging

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

While I never suffered the childhood trauma of parents getting divorced, I know as an adult what it is like to suffer with a divided family. That is because I am an Episcopalian. As everyone knows—the late-night arguments and breaking of dishes have been audible since spring 2003—the Episcopal Church teeters on the edge of a breakup.

If you zoom in from the denomination level to individual parishes, you see that divorce has already occurred in many parts of the family. According to at least some of the people who have separated from the Episcopal Church, there isn't a single parish in America unaffected by the turmoil. And surely it's on the parish level that the family fight hurts the most. That is where it really comes, well, home.

A while ago someone suggested to me that the best way to choose a congregation is to ask oneself: Are these the people I want to bury me?

And I thought, Yes, there's something deeply right about that. But I have probably 20 or 30 years before my death. Will there then still be an Episcopal Church, or my particular Episcopal church, to bury me? What a shame that such a thought might be the first to occur. Children need a parental union that will undergird their childhood, and a Christian needs a church that will outlive him or her.

Some may think I am making too much of the marriage metaphor in applying it to ecclesial life and commitment. But I wonder if we have made too little of it. Yes, the church universal and church catholic will continue whether or not the Episcopal Church or a single one of its parishes survives. But we could say the same about the institution of monogamous marriage. It survives divorces. Yet we still worry about high divorce rates. We don't talk about how the "invisible" and "spiritual" reality of marriage is still strong, though half of actual marriages crumble. Why, then, should we regard church splintering and promiscuity in church membership with comparable glibness? Especially when the church splintering and promiscuity in

membership clearly isn't confined to Episcopalians?

Casting aside subtlety for the moment, I think there are two basic attitudes to church membership or commitment. One is the Protestant attitude. It focuses on the individual choosing a compatible and right "mate." It emphasizes that work and vigilance are required to keep the relationship alive and well. It allows that a marriage can die, and that if it does, it's best to dissolve that marriage and seek a new, more vital one.

The other attitude to church commitment is the Roman Catholic one. It assumes that marriage has already been arranged for the individual. There is no choosing. In fact, traditionally the Catholic Church assigns people to the parish in which they dwell. The Catholic attitude is not oblivious of the reality of weak or dull marriages or incompatibility, but it is loathe to admit or allow the death of the ecclesial marriage. It regards divorce from the church as at best a tragic absurdity.

The chief weakness of the Protestant attitude is obvious enough. It can cheapen commitment and allow church membership to degenerate into a matter of fickleness and subjective whim.

But the Catholic attitude is not without its problems. A friend recently got engaged and since her fiancé is Catholic, she started visiting his church. She was astonished to hear the priest declare that each member should consider tithing one or two dollars a week. Afterward, like a good Protestant, she challenged these low expectations. The priest said, "You don't understand. One or two dollars a week would be one or two dollars more than most people now give."

My friend's story reminded me that the chief weakness of the Catholic attitude to churchly belonging is that it can take commitment for granted and render individual members passive or even indifferent. After all, one way to live with an unsatisfactory marriage is to ignore it and channel your energy—and your money—elsewhere.

This much is certain: American Christians would profit from taking church commitment at least as seriously as we take marital commitment. One pastor of my acquaintance includes an interesting exercise in premarital counseling. She has the couple plan each other's funeral. She finds that this makes the spouses-to-be think about what kind of person their lover may be years or decades later. And then the two start talking about how they might best take care of each other and their marriage right now. By asking how their marriage may end, they discover how it

may best begin and be sustained to its end.

Something of the same quality pertains to one's marriage or commitment to a church. Maybe churches (and their ministries) really are about nothing more important than marrying and burying. Maybe marrying and burying are more closely connected than we think.