

Called to be a family: Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

by [Christine R. Bartholomew](#) in the [September 22, 2009](#) issue

Here in America, our family lives present a strange paradox. We often wish that our families would function in an emotionally healthy way and look something like the family on *Leave It to Beaver*. Yet it's normal for a family to be dysfunctional and fractured. There's our ideal of family, and then there's the reality.

The same is true for our church family. We have an idea that we should always be united in Christ, always be singing "Blest Be the Tie That Binds," but the truth is that we fight and are mean to one another. We exclude and do not always love with the love of Christ. Sometimes church life is more like an episode of the *Jerry Springer Show* than like an episode of *Leave It to Beaver*.

Jesus calls us to be one body. "For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, 'I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you'" (Heb. 2:11-12). We use these family titles, greeting each other as brother and sister because we have the same Father, and that makes us family.

Note that the Bible does not say that we are all *friends* in Christ. We choose our friends, but we cannot choose family. This means that when a member of our church gets on our nerves or votes against our proposal in the business meeting, we still love that person, just as we love a brother even though he steals our toys or a cousin even though she gets more attention. We still love them because they are family.

Given that a church family is this important, what does it mean when we decide to leave our church? Is it OK to divorce a church family?

Those of us who have been in a church for a substantial amount of time learn that people leave churches for a host of reasons. They leave because of fights with congregation members or the pastor, or because they prefer the worship style of the church down the street. They leave because of hurts that they cannot overcome or forget, perhaps because they voted for a candidate for pastor who was not hired. We

hear, "I am no longer getting spiritually fed at this church," which sounds a lot like, "It's not you, it's me. I just need to work on myself right now." People break up with churches every day. But when they leave, they don't leave the problem behind. They find another church, but another imperfection manifests itself and they feel the urge to leave again.

All churches are like families: they're imperfect. There is no church where everyone agrees on the style of worship and the structure of power. There is no church where everyone agrees with the pastor 100 percent of the time. Fortunately, the church was not made to be perfect; it was called to be a family.

We bicker, we pout, we hurt. But on Sunday we all gather around the table to eat the bread and drink the wine and remember that Christ unites us. Even though we disagree, we sing, "The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above." We hold each other up while holding up Christ as the example.

I have seen two churches survive conflicts that could have obliterated them. The people who stayed, determined to keep the church family together, are better for the experience. In order to survive, they developed a bond much like a bond between people who have survived a war together. They've fought for the family to stay together, to stay intact. They've worked toward peace and reconciliation for the sake of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Christ preached on unity and not division. He believed in marriage and how two people become one. He told us, through Paul, that we in a church become one body. When asked about divorce Jesus responded, "The two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." We as a church family are joined together by God. We wear white in the baptismal and take vows that unite us to Christ and each other.

Let us be faithful to our church family, faithful to each other in times of adversity and change. Let us love those in the church family even when we can't stand them. There is a reason that these people are part of your life. Under all the struggles, there is a love that will stretch from this world to the next.