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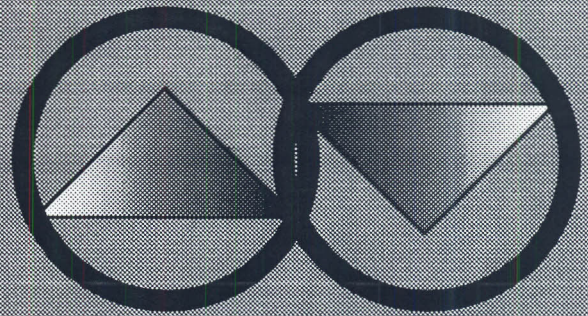
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The Sibling Secret (Revealed)

By S. Scott Bartchy



“What happened to our new sisters? Where did our new brothers go? Why is the faith-based kinship in Christ that played such a central role in our lives among the early followers of Jesus so frequently made invisible?” If it were possible for the first-century Greek-speaking recipients of Paul’s letters to join us in studying the translation of those letters as presented in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV), surely they would ask us such questions.

But why? What did they experience that would lead them to ask us such questions? In light of our own mental and emotional associations with family relationship terms, what was so special about their feeling and thinking about each other as brothers and sisters? And why has it been so easy for modern translators to ignore or play down Paul’s emphasis on sibling relationships and values?

In this article I hope to show the reader why these questions are interesting and important, what Paul hoped to accomplish by using the Greek terms for “brother” and “sister” more often than any other words to refer to the converts in the house-based congregations to whom he wrote, and what all this can mean for Christian family life today.

Rediscovering Paul’s Emphasis on Brother/Sister Relationships

Paul’s strong emphasis on sibling relationships has become a “secret” for later readers of his letters for at least two reasons. First, inadequate translations from the original language have used non-relational terms such as “one,” “another,” and “believer” to render the Greek words for “brother” and “sister.” And second, the often weak sense in our own culture of what it means to be a brother or sister easily blinds us to the social and emotional intensity of those relationships in the culture of Jesus and Paul. In this section, therefore, I summarize the database from Paul’s letters and comment on English translations. In the next section, I present relevant facts from our knowledge about the cultural values and social codes that were generally taken for granted by his first readers.

Paul’s reliance on the brother/sister terms in all his undisputed letters is displayed the chart on the following page.

From the chart you may observe that the Greek words for “sister” (*adelphē*) and “brother” (*adelphos*) share the same root: *delphys* ‘womb’. Thus in the most literal sense, these *adelph* words designate persons

1 Thessalonians	'αδελφος 2x [pronounced <i>ah-del-phós</i>] = "brother"		'αδελφοι 17x [pronounced <i>ah-del-phói</i>] = "brothers/sisters"	Total 19x
Galatians	'αδελφος 1x		'αδελφοι 10x	11x
1 Corinthians	'αδελφος 12x	'αδελφη 2x [pronounced <i>ah-del-phéy</i>] = "sister"	'αδελφοι 27x	41x
2 Corinthians	'αδελφος 5x		'αδελφοι 7x	12x
Philippians	'αδελφος 1x		'αδελφοι 8x	9x
Romans	'αδελφος 6x	'αδελφη 2x	'αδελφοι 13x	21x
Philemon	'αδελφος 4x	'αδελφη 1x		5x

born to the same mother. The plural, *adelphoi*, means "brothers" or "brothers and sisters," according to context, and usually includes all the offspring in a family, male and female, of whatever age. If you prefer a single, inclusive English word for the phrase "sisters and brothers," the only one that I've found so far is *sibling*.

Clearly, these terms were very important for Paul's conception of his readers. Indeed, this was Paul's favorite way of thinking of them: as siblings, based now on faith rather than blood. For Paul, they had been made brothers and sisters of each other by means of their new relationship to God as Father through Jesus Christ. Previously, they had learned in their families of origin what it meant to be a brother or sister. Now, even though they had come together from many different, and usually competing, blood-related families, Paul expected them, as surrogate siblings in faith, to treat each other as they had been

raised to treat their biological siblings. More about this in a moment.

First, notice that in 1 Corinthians Paul used brother/sister words a total of forty-one times. In only one passage (1 Cor 9:5), however, was he referring to persons who were biologically related: "the brothers of the Lord." In the other forty passages, Paul addressed the various persons in the Corinthian house congregations as his siblings and siblings of each other. Yet when most modern readers dip into this letter, these followers of Christ remain "secret" siblings. For example, in thirteen of the forty passages just mentioned, the translators of the NRSV decided to substitute such non-family-related words as "believer" (see 6:5–6; 7:12; 8:11), "friends" (14:26, 39), "beloved" (15:58), or the phrase "one of them" (see 8:13). In Galatians, non-family words are substituted in the NRSV for five of the ten uses of the word for "brothers and sisters." Likewise, in only

four of the eight instances of *adelphoi* in Philippians are the words “brothers and sisters” used in the NRSV.

Nineteen times in his first letter to the Thessalonians, twenty-one times in his letter to the Romans, eleven times in his letter to the Galatians, nine times in his letter to the Philippians, and five times in his letter to Philemon and his house church, Paul refers to his readers and hearers as “brothers,” “sisters,” or “brothers and sisters.” Regrettably, in none of their versions of these letters have the NRSV translators consistently translated literally Paul’s frequent uses of brother/sister words. This fact demonstrates a serious lack of consideration of the social and emotional bonding that characterized sibling relations and the moral obligations among them that pertained in first-century Mediterranean culture.

But before further lamenting the results of these translators’ decisions, I am quick to praise them for their frequent rendering of the plural form *adelphoi* with the contextually correct, inclusive phrase “brothers and sisters.” (By contextually correct, I mean as the Greek language was used in the context of the first century.) At last, contemporary female readers of Paul’s letters no longer have to “translate in their heads” (as I’ve been told) such terms as “brethren” (ASV, NASB) and “brothers” (NAB, NIV) in order to feel included by Paul’s words. Indeed, in a few passages, the NRSV translators emphasize such inclusion by extending the singular *adelphos* in the phrase “brother *and* sister” (see Rom 14:10, 15, 21; 1 Thess 4:6). No doubt, it was the intention to express male and female inclusion by using just one word, in combination with a desire to avoid frequent repetition of the phrase “brothers and sisters,” that led these translators to substitute such gender-neutral words as “friends,” “beloved,” and “believers.”

Unfortunately, the manner in which this positive intention has been carried out has two negative consequences. First, the use of the non-relationship word “believer” plays into the hands of the kind of individualism and lack of concern for others that Paul did so much to resist and transform among his own converts. It is just such individualism and isolation from others that have developed into strikingly unpleasant social norms in Western culture, especially in the United States, where “looking out for number

one” is urged upon us at every turn. Second, such frequent substitution of non-family terms obscures the cultural context and substantially weakens the punch of Paul’s exhortations for all contemporary readers of whatever cultural background.

Rediscovering Ancient Sibling Values

From the big picture created by the totality of his exhortations, it seems clear that Paul chose to rely so much on brother/sister rhetoric because in the ancient Mediterranean world, the tightest unity of loyalty and affection was experienced in the sibling group of brothers and sisters. This fact stands in striking contrast to the family values of modern Western culture, where it is commonly anticipated that such emotional bonds will be found instead in marriage.

In modern Euro-American kinship systems, persons conventionally do find their strongest emotional bonds in marriage; it follows, then, that interpersonal treachery and the breakdown of family values are epitomized in stories of spousal betrayal, adultery, and divorce. Such stories seem to have unending power to captivate the American public—as editors of supermarket tabloids obviously well know. On the other hand, blood-related brothers and sisters in our culture may not have seen each other for years, with no regrets (and no tabloid coverage). And the negative results of childhood envy and disagreements among siblings may continue unabated long into adulthood.

In sharp contrast, in the world of Jesus and his early followers, treachery in its most extreme, despised, and engrossing form and the breakdown of family values were epitomized in stories of strife and betrayal among blood brothers. For example, the story of Cain’s murder of his brother Abel was told frequently by Second Temple Israelites and early Christians to illustrate the extreme possibilities of human wickedness (see 4 Maccabees 18:11; Testament of Benjamin 7:5; 1 John 3:12; Jude 11; 1 Clement 4:17; Josephus *Antiquities* 1.52–66). And in his *Metamorphoses*, the Roman poet Ovid (early first-century C.E.) supported his judgment about the extreme breakdown of social relations during the late Roman Republic by pointing out that “friend was not safe from friend . . . and even between brothers affection

The desired effect of these exhortations would have undermined traditional patriarchal authority, for even fathers in Paul's house congregations were regarded simply as "brothers"...

was rare" (1.127-51). Thus readers of Mark's gospel could grasp immediately the seriousness of the warning that as God's judgment approached, social relations would become so badly broken that "brother will hand brother over to death" (Mark 13:12).¹

Reorienting Our Reading of Paul's Letters

Studying Paul's letters in the context of the cultural values and social codes just described has convinced me that Paul consistently employed forms of *adelphos* as an essential aspect of his strategy for convincing all his readers and hearers to treat each other as biological siblings had been raised to do. The desired effect of these exhortations would have undermined traditional patriarchal authority, for even fathers in Paul's house congregations were regarded simply as "brothers," even of their biological sons and daughters, and of their slaves as well.

This fact has been greatly undervalued in most readings of Paul's famous letter to Philemon, who was challenged by Paul to begin treating his slave Onesimus as his brother, indeed, as "more than a brother." Paul challenged all males to regard each other as surrogate siblings and to overcome their socialization into aggressive competitiveness. Paul urged them to seek to outdo each other in *giving* each other honor rather than *seeking to take it* from each other, as their parents had taught them to do to increase the biological family's honor. And if Paul's converts allowed themselves to be transformed by

the Spirit of God, they could actually function as a family of Jesus' Father, living in relations of mutual trust, practicing truth telling and generalized reciprocity, sharing life and goods with each other, and not keeping score.²

In the blood-related family, such behavior was regarded as essential. Paul asserted energetically that Israel's God expects such solidarity to characterize the lives of all those who have been called by the gospel of Jesus Christ, without regard to their social status in the domestic or public realms. Paul seems to have known that only by a thorough elimination of the expectations that adult males had of themselves in relation to all males outside their patrilineal biological family could the way be opened for the creation of a radically alternative form of kinship, the surrogate sibling relations he so strongly advocated.

An analysis of one well-known passage, 1 Cor 6:1-8, should help the reader to appreciate this point. The topic of this passage is the fact that at least one follower of Christ in Corinth had brought a lawsuit against another follower who had defrauded him or her. The situation filled Paul with indignation, and he responded with expressions of censure, sarcasm, shaming, and pleading. In the words of the NRSV, Paul came to the first climax in his argument as follows:

Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to decide between one believer [*adelphos*] and another, but a believer [*adelphos*] goes to court against a believer [*adelphos*]—and before unbelievers at that? (1 Cor 6:5-6)

Notice that the translators decided to emphasize the contrast between the followers of Christ—the "believers"—and the "unbelievers" (*apistoi*) to whom they had turned to judge their cases. To be sure, that is an interesting perspective, but it does not express the point that Paul sought to make with the use of *adelphos* in this passage: it simply was unthinkable that siblings would take each other to court! The substitution of "believer" for "brother" smothers precisely the point that Paul was seeking to make.³

Any brother or sister who brought a lawsuit against a sibling would declare by that act that the

not only profoundly insult the honor of the one being sued but also devastatingly display the shame brought upon the entire family. This, then, is the social background for Paul's final words on this subject:

In fact, to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud—and believers [*adelphous*] at that. (1 Cor 6:7–8)

The translation works well until it reaches the final Greek word in verse 8: *adelphous*, which is the plural, direct-object form for “brothers and sisters.” To be sure, the translation “believer” might imply for some readers a weak sense of solidarity among those who believed, especially in contrast to the “unbelieving” judges outside the group. But Paul's point was to emphasize as strongly as he could the high degree of moral obligation that each of these followers of Christ had to each other. For this purpose, no word in his Greek vocabulary was stronger than the one that meant “brothers and sisters”!⁴

Reorienting Our Practice of Family Relationships

How, then, can all this information help us in thinking about our lives in families today? First, Paul's words challenge us to reflect on how we think about each other in our roles and responsibilities as wives, as husbands, as partners, as parents, as children. Consciously or not, most of us fill these roles, or expect them to be filled, in imitation of our own parents. And depending on how they treated each other and treated us, such imitation may be beneficial or hurtful to those with whom we live now.

In striking contrast to the dominant, patriarchal family values of his world, Paul's primary relationship framework for all followers of Jesus had become that of sisters and brothers. And Paul's basic model for his communities was a new kind of family of siblings without an earthly father. For Paul, almost without exception, only God was to be regarded as the father of each community.⁵

Thus it cannot come as a surprise that Paul regarded the primary relationship between a wife and her husband not in terms of our general concept of

the nuclear family (and certainly not in terms of the “chain of command” theory of family organization) but rather in terms of their being a sister and a brother to each other in Christ. Such an idea may not be a surprise at this point, but it surely raises some serious issues. For example, this did not mean that the sexual connection between them was to be suppressed. To the contrary (see 1 Cor 7:2–7), the marriage was to be a fully sexual relationship, but now on a completely mutual, non-patriarchal basis (see especially vv. 4–5).

Primary evidence is provided in 1 Cor 7:14–15, where Paul addressed the married male as “brother” and the married female as “sister” (a fact once again obscured by the NRSV).⁶ That is, each had as his or her primary status membership in the body of Christ, and each had received from the Spirit gifts for ex-

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pressing the agape/love that God had given to them—and all of this independent of their marriage to each other. The status of women among Paul's converts had nothing to do with their being either married or single; it had to do with their being “sisters” of all persons in the new community of faith—including their husbands, if they were married. As sisters, they served as full partners in ministry.⁷ When such a sister and such a brother married, each brought to the marriage partnership the respective gifts he or she had already received from the Spirit of God. And it could not be determined in the ab-

stract which of the marriage partners would possess which gifts.⁸

Thus I have come to conclude that it is unhelpful to speak of "Christian marriage," if by that one means that the roles and responsibilities of wife and husband are prescribed in the abstract and that the man and woman must ignore their gifts in order to force themselves into those roles. As brother and sister of each other, each partner has the sacred responsibility of assisting and encouraging the other to mature as quickly as possible to "the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph 4:13). I have known men who radically changed their attitudes toward their wives when it finally dawned on them that their wives were first of all their sisters in Christ.

And this should be the goal as well for parents as they raise their children. That is, everyone in a family led by Christians should be encouraged to become as responsible, as sensitive, and as powerful in the Spirit as possible, as quickly as possible. The family's chief task is to cooperate with the Spirit of God in bringing the fruit of the Spirit to fruition in every family member. The result will be loving and independent children who in Christ become "brothers and sisters" of their human parents. And the reward for such a family will be the receiving and enjoying of lovely spiritual fruit from each other—a blessing of salvation here and now, and a foretaste of heaven.⁹

The sibling secret has been revealed. Now let us seek to excel in making this secret an open reality in all our families and in all our congregations.

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Notes

¹ For further exploration of this theme, see S. Scott Bartchy, "Undermining Ancient Patriarchy: The Apostle Paul's Vision of a Society of Siblings," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 29 (1999): 68–78, and his forthcoming book, *Call No Man Father* (Hendrickson).

² For more detail see S. Scott Bartchy, "Community of Goods in Acts," in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*, ed. Birger Pearson et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 309–18.

³ For illuminating comments about the eschatological perspective of this passage ("Do you not know that we are to judge angels?"), see Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 230–38.

⁴ Note also that in Rom 14:13 the strong sibling obligation is once again obscured by the NRSV translators, who have substituted the pronoun *another* for the noun *brother* when rendering Paul's exhortation "never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a *brother!*"

⁵ Here, he was on the same page with the historical Jesus. See Bartchy, "Undermining Ancient Patriarchy."

⁶ The concept of the wife as "sister" is also obscured by the NRSV translation of 1 Cor 9:5: "believing wife" rather than the literal "sister as wife." The translators apparently decided that the concept would strike modern readers as much too strange.

⁷ Very useful for study in groups is the challenging paperback by Verna J. Dozier and James R. Adams, *Sisters and Brothers: Reclaiming a Biblical Idea of Community* (Boston: Cowley, 1993).

⁸ For example, Priscilla is so often mentioned before her husband Aquila (against cultural convention) that it is difficult not to conclude that she had been given the stronger gifts of teaching and leadership.

⁹ For more detail see the long article in three parts by S. S. Bartchy, "Issues of Power and a Theology of the Family," *Mission* 21, nos. 1–3 (1987).