

## CHAPTER FIVE

# The community as a family

### SOME METAPHORS FOR COMMUNITY

Paul frequently resorts to metaphors in his discussions on community. He thinks not just in terms of the logical development of arguments, but also of the illuminative significance of images. This was a characteristically Jewish way of proceeding — one which leaves its imprint everywhere in the biblical and intertestamental writings. Among the many metaphors applied to the Christian community by Paul, that of a 'building' comes before us several times in his letters. Sometimes an ordinary building is in view, sometimes the Temple — the latter being the building *par excellence* to a Jew. The more general use of the metaphor refers either to the work of the apostles in founding local communities — Paul describing himself as the 'master builder' in charge of operations<sup>1</sup> — or to the interdependence of the members of the community and their growth to maturity.<sup>2</sup> When Paul describes the community as a Temple, he is emphasizing its relationship with God through the Spirit and, as a consequence of this, its holiness and the wholehearted service it should render to God.<sup>3</sup>

Once again there appears to be a difference between the earlier and later writings. In the former the whole building represents the

1. Gal. 2: 18; 1 Cor. 3: 10-14; 2 Cor. 10: 8, 12; 13: 10; Rom. 15: 20; compare Eph. 2: 20 and 4: 12

2. 1 Cor. 14: 5, 12 and 26; Rom. 14: 19; Col. 2: 7; Eph. 4: 16

3. 1 Cor. 3: 16-17; 2 Cor. 6: 16; Eph. 2: 21-22

community and it is the local community which is in view. In the latter the corner-stone of the building is said to be Christ himself and the heavenly church is under discussion. (Christ is described as the 'foundation' of the building in the earlier writings, but that is not quite the same thing. In Ephesians it is the apostles and prophets who occupy that position rather than simply laying a foundation.) The metaphor can be applied to individual Christians as well as the community to which they belong. In a quite striking way they are described not merely as 'stones' in God's building, but individually as 'the Temple of the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor. 6: 19) himself.

A further set of metaphors comes from the world of agricultural labour rather than material construction, the community being described as a 'field', a 'grafting' (on an olive tree) and a 'planting'.<sup>4</sup> Other metaphors, such as the comparison of the church with 'dough' and of the offending member within it with 'leaven', are drawn from the domestic sphere.<sup>5</sup> But analogies with the world of nature (like the agricultural metaphors) or inanimate objects (such as the building metaphors), despite the presence of human participants, lack the dynamic element characteristic of human and divine-human relationships. This leads Paul on several occasions to follow traditional practice and link or mix his metaphors, so that the deficiencies of one may be remedied by the advantages of another.<sup>6</sup> Paul also shows a distinct preference for the 'body' metaphor, drawn as it is from the sphere of human existence, though even then (as we shall see) he has to portray and employ the metaphor in different ways to express his views. In the long term however, the inadequacy of the organic unity of the 'body' metaphor leads Paul to utilize the language of human, and especially family, relationships.

Although in recent years Paul's metaphors for community have been subjected to quite intense study; especially his description of it as a 'body', his application to it of 'household' or 'family' terminology has all too often been overlooked or only mentioned in passing. This presumably stems from the fact that terms like *oikeioi*, 'household', occur so rarely in the Pauline writings. But, alongside this term, a number of related expressions are present which must be taken into account. So numerous are these, and so frequently do they appear, that the comparison of the Christian community with a 'family' must be regarded as the most significant metaphorical usage of all. For that reason it has pride of

4. 1 Cor. 3:9; Rom. 11: 17-24; Col. 2: 7; Eph. 3: 17

5. 1 Cor. 5: 6-7; compare Gal. 5: 9

6. E.g. 2 Cor. 9: 10; Col. 2: 7 and 19; Eph. 2: 19-22, 3: 17 and 4: 12-16

place in this discussion. More than any of the other images utilized by Paul, it reveals the essence of his thinking about community.

#### A KEY IMAGE: FAMILY

##### (a) Description of membership

All Paul's 'family' terminology has its basis in the relationship that exists between Christ, and as a corollary the Christian, and God. Christians are to see themselves as members of a divine family; already in his earliest letters Paul regards the head of the family as being God the Father.<sup>7</sup> In a unique sense Jesus is his Son, and it is only through his identification with men, and actions on their behalf, that they are able to 'receive adoption as sons' (1 Thess. 1: 10; Gal. 4: 4-5). As a result, says Paul in Galatians, 'God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts' so that, along with Jesus, we are able to address him in the most intimate terms as 'Abba! Father!' (Gal. 4: 6). This privilege, he adds in Romans, confirms to our own spirit the fact that we are indeed 'children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ' (Rom. 8: 14-17). This fellowship of Christians with God the Father and Jesus his Son is not at all like the calling of a royal court in which the king holds audience with his citizen subjects. Nor should we think of it in terms of the assembling of a household in which the master is surrounded by his loyal slaves. It is not even like the gathering of an ordinary family in which the head enters into relationship with his infant children. The meeting of Christians with their God is more analogous to the encounter between *adult* children and their father, where they are able to relate to him not only in the most intimate, but increasingly in the most mature, fashion.<sup>8</sup>

Paul sees implications from this for the life of the local communities. Those who belong to them should see one another primarily as members of a common family. So in Galatians Paul encourages both himself and his readers, as they have opportunity, 'to do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith' (Gal. 6: 10). According to the letter to the Ephesians, the fellowship of Christians between Jews who were members of the covenant race and Gentiles who were previously aliens to the divine promises, experienced in the heavenly *ekklēsia*,

7. 1 Thess. 1: 1 and 3, 3: 11 and 13; 2 Thess. 1: 1-2 and 2: 16

8. Gal. 4: 1ff. and compare later Eph. 4: 13ff.

is to be viewed precisely in these terms. Referring to Christ, the author points out that 'through him we have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers or sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God' (Eph. 2: 19). Both the local gathering and heavenly 'assembly' are to be regarded as nothing less than God's family.

As well as *oikeioi*, a whole cluster of terms applied to the Christian community are drawn from family life. Some of these are among the most frequently used terms in Paul's vocabulary and, as much as anything, it is their very familiarity that has led to their unfortunate neglect. For example, the term *oikonomos*, 'steward',<sup>9</sup> which Paul uses of himself and other apostles, is drawn from the circle of 'household' personnel. It describes the responsible and accountable task which he has been given *vis-à-vis* his communities. But this word, used only twice, is drawn from the business side of family affairs, not from its more intimate side, whereas most of the terms Paul employs come from this latter sphere. True, we also have an occasional use of the term *doulos*, 'slave',<sup>10</sup> or *hupērētes*, 'servant' (1 Cor. 4: 1), underlining the kind of behaviour that should govern relationships between Christians in the community, just as it does his own behaviour towards them. But again this is not his most characteristic way of speaking. The term *adelphoi*, 'brethren', in paragraph after paragraph of his letters is far and away Paul's favourite way of referring to the members of the communities to whom he is writing. In spite of its frequency and its occasional use in a more technical sense, with respect to those who are colleagues in Paul's mission,<sup>11</sup> the term 'brethren' has not yet lost its basic meaning and become a mere formal description. There are many passages in Paul's writings where it is clearly expressive of the real relationship that exists between Christians,<sup>12</sup> not least when they come together as church. While some of the following examples are drawn from the sphere of relationships outside the actual gathering itself, they are no less pointers to the quality of relationship that should characterize it, as other passages more directly testify.

Paul for instance speaks movingly in 1 Corinthians of the concern that the stronger Christian should have for his weaker neighbour. The latter is described by him not only as 'the brother for whom Christ died' but quite personally as 'my brother' for whom

9. 1 Cor. 4: 1-2 and 9: 17; Col. 1: 25; Eph. 3: 2

10. 2 Cor. 4: 5; Rom. 1: 1; Phil. 1: 1; Col. 1: 7, 4: 7 and 12; Eph. 6: 6

11. Gal. 1: 2; 1 Cor. 16: 20; 2 Cor. 9: 3 and 5; Col. 1: 2 and 4: 15

12. Especially 1 Cor. 15: 58; Rom. 15: 14; Phil. 3: 1 and 4: 1; Eph. 6: 10

he has a direct responsibility (1 Cor. 8: 11 and 13). This kind of personal commitment to others is further illustrated by the way in which Paul talks in the warmest terms about certain fellow Christians, co-workers in his mission as well as members of local churches, with whom he had a close relationship. Tychicus, for example, is spoken of not only as a 'faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord' but as 'a beloved brother' (Col. 4: 7; Eph. 6: 21). Paul refers to others, such as Sosthenes, Apollos and Quartus,<sup>13</sup> as 'our brother' in a similar fashion. 'I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother', he says to Philemon and also writes of Epaphroditus in a personal, brotherly way (Philem. 7; Phil. 2: 25).

Terms descriptive of other family-type relationships are also used by Paul in his writings. Onesimus he regards as 'my child whose father I have become in my imprisonment', though he is also spoken of as 'the faithful and beloved brother' (Philem. 10; Col. 4: 9). 'I have no one like him', he says of Timothy, reminding the Philippians 'how as a son with his father he has served with me in the gospel' (Phil. 2: 22; Col. 1: 1) — though elsewhere he also designates him 'our brother' (1 Thess. 3: 22; 2 Cor. 1: 1). Then there are 'Apphia our sister' (Philem. 2), and 'our sister Phoebe', the latter being described as one who has been 'a helper of many and of myself as well'.<sup>14</sup> There is also that unnamed woman for whom Paul reserves one of his tenderest messages: 'greet Rufus, eminent in the Lord,' he begins, 'also his mother and mine' (Rom. 16: 13). Here we are given a glimpse, all the more significant for its incidental nature, into the quality of relationship that could exist between the apostle and his acquaintances. Indeed the whole of Romans 16, from which this reference comes, as well as the closing sections of many other Pauline letters, witness to the strong 'family' character of the relationships built up by Paul and various members of the churches amongst whom he moved. Here we also need to remember the way in which Paul speaks of his relationship to various communities as a whole by means of analogies drawn from family life, e.g. 'father', 'mother', 'nurse' and so on.<sup>15</sup> All these are quite clearly not merely relationships in name only, in some purely theological or superficially pious sense, but relationships of a very genuine and personal kind.

13. 1 Cor. 1: 1 and 16: 12; Rom. 16: 23

14. Rom. 16: 2, compare also 1 Cor. 7: 15 and 9: 5

15. 1 Cor. 4: 14-15 and 10: 14; Phil. 2: 12

*(b) Quality of relationship*

An inspection of other terms that spring from, or are most naturally located in, a family context confirms this conclusion. There are those, for example, whom Paul refers to as 'beloved' — among them Epaenetus, Ampliatus, Stachys, Persis, Tychicus, Onesimus and Luke.<sup>16</sup> Even whole churches — the Philippians for instance and, surprisingly, the Corinthians — are sometimes addressed by him in this way. 'How I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ', he exclaims to the Philippians (Phil. 1: 8; compare 2: 12), while his closing wish to the Corinthians, that most recalcitrant of communities, is that 'my love be with you all'.<sup>17</sup> He clearly expected Christians in their various local churches to enter into the same kinds of loving relationships with one another. He prays that the Thessalonians will 'increase and abound in love to one another as we do to you' (1 Thess. 3: 12). The Christians at Rome are reminded that in a very genuine way they should 'love one another with brotherly affection' (*phila-delfia* here possessing a more intensive meaning than in earlier usage).<sup>18</sup> What such love involves is spelled out in the well-known passage from his first letter to the Corinthians:

*Love is patient and kind;  
love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude.  
Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable  
or resentful;  
it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.  
Love bears all things, believes all things,  
hopes all things, endures all things.  
Love never ends . . . (1 Cor. 13: 4-8a)*

It has to do with fundamental attitudes: patience, humility, tolerance, kindness, resilience, generosity, confidence, perseverance, optimism — attitudes that both here and elsewhere are discussed not so much in the context of the individual's relationship with God, as his interaction with his Christian brothers and sisters. These attitudes should not only accompany their communication with one another, but lead them into a real depth of relationship with one another.

So the Galatians, having been informed that 'love' is the chief 'fruit of the Spirit', are encouraged not merely 'to do good . . . to those who are of the household of faith' but also to 'bear one

16. Rom. 16:5, 8-9 and 12; Col. 4:7

17. 1 Cor. 16:24; compare 1 Cor. 4: 21 and 10: 14

18. Rom. 12: 9-10 and see 2 Macc. 15: 14 (LXX)

another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ' (Gal. 5: 22 and 6: 2). In 1 Corinthians Paul speaks of the need for the members to 'have the same care for one another' as well as suffer and rejoice with one another in their humiliations and triumphs (1 Cor. 12: 25-26). In Romans he urges his readers not to please themselves but for each to 'please his neighbour for his good, to edify him' and 'to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus' that God might be unitedly acknowledged (Rom. 15: 1-2 and 5-6). In Philippians, there is to be mutual affection, sympathy, love and harmony, with each unselfishly looking 'not only to his own interests but to the interests of others' (Phil. 2: 1-4). In Colossians, they are to 'put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other . . . And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony' (Col. 3: 12-14). In Ephesians all this is summed up in the injunction to the brethren to 'be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another'; thus 'walk(ing) in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us', and being 'imitators of God as beloved children' (Eph. 4: 32-5: 2).

The centrality of *agapē* explains why Paul can sum up his understanding of Christian responsibility as 'faith working through love' (Gal. 5: 6b) and how he can conclude that members of the community are to 'owe no man anything except to love one another' (Rom. 13: 8). So basic is love that even the sacrifice of one's life is worthless unless motivated and informed by it (1 Cor. 13: 3). Indeed love itself is the sacrifice God really requires (Eph. 5: 2). Although it should govern all social relationships, it has pride of place within the community's internal life: it is the 'crown' of its endeavours, for it is above all love which 'binds' its members together into a true unity.<sup>19</sup> Far from being a human possibility however, it has its origin in God. Only through the Spirit has it poured out into Christians' lives (Rom. 5: 5 and 15: 30). Far from being merely an attitude towards others, it involves a purposive act of will. It is, as Paul says in one passage, 'a labour'<sup>20</sup> and it expresses itself not in mere feeling or inclination but in concrete acts of service. While it delights in reciprocation, love gives itself to others irrespective of the reaction it receives.<sup>21</sup>

It is precisely at this point that *agapē*, love, shows its difference from the Greek ideal of *philia*, friendship, in which reciprocity

19. 1 Cor. 16: 14; Col. 2: 8 and 3: 14; Eph. 4: 1-3

20. 1 Thess. 1: 3; compare 2 Cor. 8: 24

21. Rom. 13: 10 and 20: 21

played such a central part. The concrete actions which characterize this community of love may be described as acts of identification on the one hand, or substitution on the other. Identification, the solidarity of the members with one another, goes beyond mere sociality, for each is inextricably involved in the life of the other. Prayer made by one member of the community for another, and especially suffering undergone by one member on behalf of another, are just two examples of what is here in view.<sup>22</sup>

#### EARLIER USES OF FAMILY TERMINOLOGY

What, then, of family terminology in general prior to Paul's use of it? It is not as common as might be imagined. Reference to Israel as a 'household' (Amos 5: 25; Jer. 38: 33), and to its members as 'brothers',<sup>23</sup> occurs earlier in Jewish literature, but nowhere in the Old Testament is Israel called *God's* family as such. The Greeks sporadically referred to members of the same political unit, or friends, as 'brothers'.<sup>24</sup> At Qumran both terms are more consciously used of the community created out of the broader society, but play only a minor role in comparison with other ascriptions. The Qumran community is depicted as a 'household', but of 'truth', 'holiness' and 'perfection' and members are described as 'sons', though of 'light', 'truth', 'righteousness' and 'heaven'.<sup>25</sup> 'Love of the members for one another is demanded, though only within the framework of a highly regulated life.'<sup>26</sup> In one passage the overseer of the members is said to act as a 'father' to his 'children'<sup>27</sup> — echoing the intertestamental wisdom literature and its Old Testament antecedents.<sup>28</sup> The Pharisees too have their 'sons' and a rabbi is occasionally described as a 'father'.<sup>29</sup> But fraternal language does not seem to be particularly prominent and, among the Pharisees, references to love are again obscured by their preoccupation with the Law.<sup>30</sup> It is precisely the prominence of such language in Paul, along with

22. Compare Gal. 4: 19; 2 Cor. 4: 10-11; Rom. 9: 3; Col. 1: 24; Eph. 3: 13

23. E.g. Lev. 10: 4 and 19: 17; Dt. 15: 3; Philo, *De Specialibus Legibus*, II, 79f. and compare Mt. 5: 22-24 and 10: 6; Acts 2: 29 and 36, 13: 26

24. Plato, *Meno*, 239a; Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 7, 2: 25

25. IQS 1: 9, 3: 13, 20, 22 and 25, 4: 5-6 and 22, 5: 6, 8: 5 and 9, 9:6; CDC 3: 19 and Josephus, *The Jewish War*, II, 122

26. IQS 1: 9, 2: 24, 4: 4-5 and 5: 25

27. CDC 13: 9

28. Prov. 3: 12; Eccclus. 3: 1 and 6: 23-29

29. Makk. 23: 9; Eduy. 1: 4 and B.M. 2: 11

30. Ab. 1: 2; Sot. 5: 5



personalization by means of other words such as 'my', 'beloved' and so on, that distinguishes his understanding of community from these others. He also breaks convention by talking, in a virtually novel way, about 'sisters' as well as 'brothers'.<sup>31</sup> He can speak as intimately of them as of his 'brothers' and 'sons'.

In the mysteries, initiates do not seem to have been described as 'children' of the deities with whom they were joined, though there is talk of a father-son relationship between the initiate and his priestly guardian. The Cynic philosopher is also sometimes portrayed as a 'father' or 'nurse' to his hearers.<sup>32</sup> The Stoics often talk in terms of 'friendship' with the gods and one another. On the other hand their belief that all men were the 'offspring' of the gods and 'brothers' of one another, also frequently comes to expression.<sup>33</sup> Since this encompassed all men, and did not lead to the formation of communities even among one's Stoic neighbours, this does not have the same concrete ring about it as the Pauline conception. There are, in the papyri and inscriptions, occasional references in brotherly terms to members of the same religious society or guild. Here again though, family terminology and the language of love do not occupy the central position or possess the intensive meaning that they do in Paul's writings. Yet Paul was not the first to talk in this manner. It is Jesus who stands behind Paul's usage here — the one who looked at those sitting around him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brother! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister and my mother'; the one who placed 'love' at the heart of his whole teaching about personal behaviour (Mk. 3: 34-35 and 12: 30-31).

#### THE RELATION BETWEEN 'FAMILY' AND 'FELLOWSHIP'

The metaphor of the family was a vital one to Paul. Paralleling the household *context* of community gatherings we have the use of household *language* to describe the relations between members. The correlation of the two may be accidental in Paul. Christians may not have had anywhere else to meet, especially since the synagogues soon became closed to them, and the rooms attached to local temples would have possessed unsavoury connotations. But

31. But see Num. 25: 8 and Cant. 4: 9

32. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, XI, 26; Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes*, IV, 73ff. and 77-78

33. Epictetus, *Dissertationes*, 1, 13: 4; Dio Chrysostom, *Orat.*, III, 100ff. but also Cleanthes, *Fragment 537* (Barrett, p. 63) and Epictetus, *Diss.*, III, 22: 77ff.

just possibly the practical necessity for their use blended with a further, theologically-based consideration. For given the family character of the Christian community, the homes of its members provided the most conducive atmosphere in which they could give expression to the bond they had in common.

Before moving away from these various terms, all of which in one way or another stress the close relationship existing between Christians, we need to look at another term commonly believed to point in the same direction. Though not a family term, *koinōnia*, frequently translated 'fellowship', occupies a large place in many popular discussions of Paul's understanding of community. Paul uses the related adjectival noun *koinōnos* a few times in the sense of 'partner' in a joint activity<sup>34</sup> and the verb *koinōnein* five times, meaning either 'having a share' in some external activity<sup>35</sup> or 'making a contribution' of a financial or other kind (Rom. 12: 13; Gal. 6: 6). *Koinōnia* itself occurs some thirteen times but, as with these related terms, the sense of participation in some common object or activity is uppermost, e.g. participation in the Spirit, in someone's faith, in Christ and his sufferings, in the work of the gospel, in a financial contribution,<sup>36</sup> but not in the sharing of the people concerned directly with one another.<sup>37</sup>

Certainly Christians do associate with one another in these activities and experiences, but Paul's emphasis is upon their participation *alongside* one another in such things, not *in* one another as the term 'fellowship' suggests. Paul does talk about fellowship with one another in this more personal and intensive sense, but uses words other than *koinōnia* to express it — as we are about to see.

34. 1 Cor. 10: 18ff.; 2 Cor. 1: 7 and 8: 23; Philem. 17

35. Rom. 15: 27; Phil. 4: 15 and see Eph. 5: 11

36. Phil. 2: 1; 2 Cor. 13: 13; Philem. 6; Phil. 3: 10; 1 Cor. 1: 9; Phil. 1: 5; Gal. 2: 9; Rom. 15: 26

37. 1 Cor. 10: 14ff. (3 times); 2 Cor. 6: 14, 8: 4 and 9: 13