

Brothers and Sister in Christ

By [Joseph D. Fantin](#)

“Keep on Loving one another as brothers and sisters” (Heb 13:1; NIV)

The phrase “we are brothers and sisters in Christ” is so common that we often do not give it much thought. We consider our own experiences and draw important analogies from our relationships with our natural siblings. Then we apply these observations to our relationships with other Christians. For some of us, this analogy is more meaningful than it is to others. Those of us who do not find much significance in the analogy do so either because we do not have or we are not close to our siblings. Those of us with significant sibling relationships must acknowledge major changes in this relationship occur as we age. We start our own families, move away, etc. The relationship changes.

Impact of our sibling relationships

Like it or not, our natural sibling relationships influence our understanding of our Christian relationships. Insights from first-century sibling relationships can help us appreciate our relationships with other believers. Although there are many similarities, important differences existed between ancient and modern sibling relationships. An understanding of the ancient context, the context with which the New Testament authors and original readers would have been familiar, will help us appreciate our Christian relationships more fully. This should result in some modification to our relationships with one another.

Modern Marriage

In order to fully appreciate ancient sibling relationships, it will be helpful to consider the relationship that we often consider to be the closest, namely, marriage. We celebrate marriage and the close relationship that results from it. Celebration may be justified. However, over the years we have assumed that our understanding of marriage has been the norm throughout history, including New Testament times.

There is some justification for this. The Bible opens up with the creation of man and woman in which “a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen 1:24; NIV). Further, the New Testament includes instruction about the marriage relationship that includes exhortations to submit and love (Eph 5:21-33).

Ancient Marriage

Passages like this have rightly caused us to uphold marriage as a special relationship. However, although every situation is unique, generally in New Testament times, the marriage relationship was not the close intimate relationship that we assume it is today. There are many reasons for this. First, there was often a large age gap between spouses. Second, marriages were usually arranged. Third, divorce and death during childbirth were common. Fourth, the wife was usually brought into the husband's family and ultimately authority often rested with the oldest male relative in the household which was not always the husband. Fifth, it must be noted that the biblical passages mentioned above themselves do not demand emotional intimacy be involved in marriage.

I am not suggesting that couples in New Testament times were not intimate on various levels. In fact, writing shortly after the close of the New Testament, Plutarch includes in his *Advice to Brides and Grooms*, much instruction that would be useful even today. For example, Plutarch uses a constructed household item as an analogy to warn against serious disagreements early in marriage but once the relationship is mature, the couple is inseparable. Plutarch states, "It is especially at the start that married couples should be aware of differences and disputes. They should observe that jointed articles are easily broken at first by quite trivial accidents, whereas once the joints have become firm over time they can hardly be parted by fire and iron" (3; tr. Russell). Further, he warns of the temporal nature of physical attraction, "...one must realize that the love of the newly married, blazing up quickly out of physical attraction, is not persistent or secure unless it settles in the character, lays hold of the mind, and acquires a life of its own" (4; tr. Russell). Finally, following Plato's advice about a harmonious state, Plutarch suggests that the expressions "mine" and "not mine" should be "banished from a marriage" (20; tr. Russell).

Implications of Differences between Ancient and Modern Marriage

I am also not suggesting that couples today should not strive for a close intimate relationship. Such relationships are important, culturally significant, and personally satisfying. I would even argue that today, if possible, the marriage relationship should be the most emotionally intimate relationship. I simply want to point out that for various reasons this may not have been the norm in the first century.

Closest Relationships

Siblings could be very close and supportive of one another. Due to many factors, some noted above, as well as the importance of one's immediate family, the person closest to a woman may have been her siblings, especially any brothers. Certainly, sisters would

also be close. However, as they entered adulthood and marriage, it is likely that they would become part of another family unit and contact may not be as simple as it once was. Brothers on the other hand were responsible for their households and would be concerned about their sisters' well-being. Thus, if a woman, especially a relatively newly married one, had an issue or a problem in her marriage, it was most likely that she would go to her brother. Marriage was intended to produce heirs; thus, her relationship with her husband may not be of the type that personal concerns can be brought.

I am of course speaking stereotypically. History is full of exceptions and unique situations. However, it would have generally been accepted that one might turn to one's siblings for help even into adulthood. Further, I suspect that this relationship would weaken overtime when marriage relationships lasted for long periods of time with some measure of growth. Nevertheless, culturally important things bound siblings together for life.

So why bring up marriage when I wish to elaborate on the relationships between Christians? In some ways the closeness of modern marriage would have been satisfied in the sibling relationship. The significance of this observation about close sibling relationships cannot be overstated. First, the sibling relationship has a much broader inclusiveness than does marriage. Not everyone is married. Further, we are only married to one individual. Second, the sibling relationship could never be broken by divorce. Third, and possibly most importantly, the metaphor of sibling relationships can be applied to the entire church. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ. Such is not the case with marriage. Further, I suspect that although not all in the first century had siblings, everyone would have understood the significant benefits that such relationships brought. This relationship was assumed. This is reflected by the many times the New Testament simply describes the church in this way (e.g., Acts 1:16; Rom 1:13; 1 Cor 6:8; Phil 1:14; Heb 2:11; Jas 1:2; 2 Pet 1:10; Rev 19:10).

Brothers and Sisters in Christ

The insight from the ancient world can deepen our appreciation for our relationship with one another in the church. Our modern notion of the sibling relationship varies widely. Some are very close. Other are not. However, the ancient sibling relationship was both significant and may have been the most emotionally intimate relationship one would experience in one's lifetime. This may have been especially true early in marriage before children were born into the relationship.

To summarize, it may be worth considering that aspects of the type of relationship that the modern Evangelical marriage attempts to achieve should also be experienced with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Do not misunderstand me. My comparison is intended for rhetorical reasons, namely, to shock and to get us to think outside of our comfort zone. There is a level of intimacy, including physically, that cannot be part of our non-marital relationships. Further, today, I do not think it is healthy for married couples to

have deep emotional relationships with those who are not their spouses. It is important to remember that the close relationship in which we are drawing our analogy from the ancient world, was the sibling relationship. This relationship was one of concern for both the other person and the entire family. There was little worry of abuse in such family relationships.

I do not wish to minimize our marriage relationships. This is not my goal. Rather, my purpose is that by considering the closeness attributed to modern marriage we will elevate our relationships with others in God's family to a level that may not be evident in our modern understanding of the sibling relationship.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).