

Doing the right thing (Galatians 6:1-6, 7-16)

by [Mary W. Anderson](#) in the [June 17, 1998](#) issue

The family is a funny institution. We make much of being related to each other, of sharing common ancestors, common history, common DNA. We speak of fierce loyalties with phrases like "Blood is thicker than water." As parents and children, brothers and sisters, we have bonds that go beyond words. We love each other even if we don't particularly like each other. What's funny is that in a culture in which having choices is viewed as a God-given right, we have such strong ties to people we do not choose. Who our mother is, who our brother is, who our great-grandfather is--these relationships are out of our control and our choosing. They are simply God's gifts to us. We accept this as a part of life that gives us both pain and pleasure.

The Christian community is often called the family of faith. We call ourselves brothers and sisters in Christ. We understand ourselves bound together in a mystical way, not by blood, but by water--the water of baptism. Just like biological families, we do not choose one another. Anyone who leaves the baptismal pool wet behind the ears is automatically in the family, and we are expected to act as family toward them. This means we love them (yes, even if we don't particularly like them), we practice hospitality, speak words of forgiveness, perform acts of kindness and mercy. In other words, we get along!

Family relationships are often difficult because these people we did not choose, even if they are flesh of our flesh, can be so different from us--worlds apart, sometimes in ideas and ideals. If this is true in each biological family, it's overwhelmingly true in our baptismal family.

The apostle Paul was the first to suggest that the gift of baptism be extended to those outside the family of Israel. This adoption by baptism allowed the family circle to stretch beyond the blood and covenant of the Jews. Paul took the gospel message, which had been birthed in rural Palestine, and carried it to the major cities of the Roman Empire. He preached Christ to people who spoke unknown languages, who subscribed to unknown philosophies and worshiped unknown gods. Suddenly the Christian family was filled with strangers with strange ideas. It was a lot to expect regular human beings to manage. Yet here we are, all part of the Pentecost

family.

Paul's letters to his mission churches reveal the pains and pleasures of being the family of faith. To the churches in the territory of Galatia we overhear Paul giving advice on how to be a functional family. *So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvesttime, if we do not give up.* We can almost feel Paul's arm around our shoulders, giving us a squeeze, and his pastoral words of encouragement: Don't grow tired of it all and for goodness' sake, don't give up!

Paul had been around the block a few times. He knew the problems in bringing together a multicultural, multiracial, multipolitical church and expecting it to be one big happy family. We have never quite managed it. Paul advises us not to grow weary in doing what is right.

The opportunities for growing weary of doing right are many. We think we are doing what is right when local clergy decide to plan an ecumenical Thanksgiving service for the entire community. What a wonderful symbol of unity this could be! But then they find themselves weary worship planners as differences over liturgy, music, appropriate service leaders and what to do about the offering come crashing in. We wonder why just believing in Jesus isn't enough to gather us together. Sometimes we want to quit the family.

Ethical issues and community debates which pepper the local and national news give us more opportunities to demonstrate publicly our differences within the family of faith. People quote scripture on both sides of an issue. One man will stand up at the microphone at a city council meeting and say, "I'm a good Christian person, therefore I'm opposed to this policy." The woman who follows says, "Because I'm a woman of faith I can't imagine the council not passing this policy for the good of us all." It's wearisome, as Paul warned us. He also encouraged us.

Paul was the first Christian to attempt doing the right thing in a pluralistic society. He not only attempted it, he believed it could be done. He believed in the family concept. He accepted the notion that very different people could coexist in one family, that they could love one another, and that they could work for a common good. He believed diversity was not a curse but a wonderful blessing of creation.

What makes us weariest, Paul teaches us, is not that we are different, but that we act as if our way of functioning in the body is the best way. This causes family fights like nothing else. We do right when we understand our differences as gifts of God

and not devices of the devil. We do the right thing when we publicly acknowledge that left to ourselves we can do nothing right. We do right when we keep Christ in the center.

All of this is hard work. We crave the instant gratification of Christian consensus. It doesn't come about in big splashes to make even the local news most of the time, but it does come. Think of the times in your family or your family of faith when the right thing was actually done, even if it was hard won. When you are weary and when you are ready to give up, think of the times when for a brief moment you glimpsed the kingdom of God. Let these moments preach to you, then feel your weary soul soar.