

Want to leave your church?

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Are you frustrated, fed-up, disappointed, and maybe even angry with your church? Unrealized expectations lead many of us to finally look somewhere else to find what we are looking for in a church. It is true that false teaching, unchallenged immorality, or even unethical/illegal actions may force us to leave a church but usually our “beef” is with people, even leaders. We encounter people who are so arrogant, obstinate and self-serving that we are ready for a new church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his very short book, Life Together, reminds us of some truths that may not sit well with our current frustrations but are, nonetheless, hugely beneficial to our souls. The emphases and parenthetical comments below are mine.

“When God’s Son took on flesh, he truly and bodily took on...our being, our nature, ourselves...Now we are in him. Where he is, there we are too, in the incarnation, on the cross and in his resurrection. We belong to him because we are in him. That is why the Scriptures call us the Body of Christ.” **(What is true of us is also true of those arrogant, obstinate and self-serving Christians who are in our church. We are all “in Christ” and thus part of the same “body.”)** “He who looks upon his brother should know that he will be eternally united with him in Jesus Christ. Christian community means community through and in Jesus Christ. On this presupposition rests everything that the Scriptures provide in the way of directions and precepts for the communal life of Christians.” “(It is) not what a man is in himself as a Christian, his spirituality and piety, (that) constitutes the basis of our community.” (It is not only “nice” Christians to whom we belong.) “What determines our brotherhood is what that man is by reason of Christ. **Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us.** This is true not merely at the beginning, as though in the course of time something else were added to our community, it remains so for all the future and to all eternity. I have community with others and I shall continue to have it only through Jesus Christ.”

“The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and (he will expect to experience that). But God’s grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves... He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial... **The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be**

realized by God, by others and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly... When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure."

"Because God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them, we enter that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients. We thank God for giving us brethren who live by his call, by his forgiveness, and his promise (even when they don't act like it). We do not complain of what God does not give us; we rather thank God for what he does give us daily... **Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the communal life, is not the sinning brother still a brother, with whom I, too, stand under the Word of Christ?** Thus the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably salutary (healing), because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed which really binds us together – the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ."

"It is not the *experience* of Christian brotherhood, but (the solid and certain fact of) brotherhood that holds us together... We are bound together by faith (in the fact of our unity in Christ), not by experience."

I believe Bonhoeffer sets forth accurately the biblical basis of Christian community. When we are born into a human family we are not part of the family by virtue of our personality or conduct but by virtue of our birth. Even weird uncles and cantankerous cousins are still part of the family. So it is with new birth; we are born into the family of God not by virtue of our personality or conduct but by virtue of our new birth by God's grace. And even arrogant leaders and impossibly difficult Christians are still part of the family.

Bonhoeffer doesn't address the still hard questions of how to live out our relationships with those who are difficult or even who have hurt us (and maybe still are hurting us) BUT I think he removes from consideration the idea of dismissing them or ourselves from the family. Again by comparison, I may have trouble knowing how to deal with a wayward child or an impossible aunt but they are still family.

Want to leave your church? After reading Bonhoeffer and especially after reading the New Testament, I'm less certain this is a legitimate question. Maybe the more important question is, "What does God desire to do in me and through me in the community where I now am?" Some days I don't like this new question, I prefer justifying (rationalizing?) my answers to the first one. How about you?