

FRATERNITAS



CHRISTIANA

KEYSTONE AND *KHESED*

Christian Brotherhood in the Greek System

TULIO HUGGINS

Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday evenings at Dartmouth have a predictable social rhythm. At around 10:00 PM, Greek houses hold “tails,” small-scale parties usually hosted by at least one fraternity with at least one sorority. Drinks are provided liberally—Keystone Light beer becomes a common sight and “batch,” mixed drinks with names ranging from “Green Machine” to “Moscow Mule,” flow freely. Tails typically end at around 11:00 PM, when houses open to the entire campus for either a band, a DJ, or most commonly, Dartmouth pong.

It is hardly a secret how important Greek life is for Dartmouth’s undergraduate character and social sphere. Any time spent around students on campus reveals how much social life revolves around these spaces. According to *The Dartmouth*, the student newspaper, about 60 percent of eligible students are affiliated with a Greek house.¹ From terms like “on night” to “tails” to “semis” to “golden tree-d” to “darty” to “rho gam,” Greek-inspired language permeates the Dartmouth vocabulary. Greek houses are carriers of ancient traditions, representing a deep connection to

Dartmouth’s history: the College’s oldest Greek house was founded in 1842.² Nonetheless, polarized opinions around the system abound. From an onlooker’s perspective, the night-to-night life of our campus’s Greek life may appear filled with debauchery, drunkenness, and dangerous practices, along with the systemic issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, and elitism. I contend that these issues are real and pervasive, and they are worthy of investigation because Greek life has such a hold on Dartmouth’s society. Since they are so real, is Greek life even worth keeping? Is it worth interacting with at all?

As real as these problems are, I do not believe that they irrecoverably condemn the system or its future. In fact, I will contend that the system may receive a redemptive hope in an understanding of brotherly love informed by Christianity. In this article, I will first identify the legitimate problems with the manifestation of brotherhood in Dartmouth Greek life. Then, I will introduce the idea of brotherly love as presented in the Christian tradition. Next, I will identify how the Greek houses already incorporate love into their creeds and practice. Ultimately, I will conclude that despite

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PROBLEMS WITH BROTHERHOOD IN GREEK LIFE

The reputation of Dartmouth's Greek system often precedes it, particularly in relationship to sexual assault, excessive drinking, and the marginalization of vulnerable people. Tragically, anecdotal evidence of sexual assault at Dartmouth fraternities are far too common. Survey data regarding Greek life on campus corroborates this grim reality. According to a Dartmouth sexual misconduct survey in 2021, 10.8 percent of students on campus have experienced "completed or attempted nonconsensual sexual conduct" since coming to campus.³ This figure may be an underestimate: a 2015 survey reported that 63% of assault cases were not reported to campus authorities.⁴ Not only that, but the 2015 survey identifies Greek houses as one of the main places where assaults take place on campus.⁵

Further, the Greek life drinking culture encompasses Dartmouth as a whole—one only has to look at the College's unofficial mascot, Keggy the Keg.⁶ Aside from this satirical illustration of campus drinking culture, the empirical evidence points to regular excessive drinking in the student population. A recent study on binge drinking on campus showed that "41 percent of Dartmouth undergraduates responding to The Dartmouth Health Survey reported having had five or more alcoholic drinks in a sitting at least once in the last two weeks."⁷ According to the same study, fraternities are among the most common locations to drink.⁸

Similar to how binge drinking is prevalent across Greek spaces at any college, Dartmouth's Greek system also has an extensive history of racism. Most of the fraternities remained segregated well into the 1950s, and most went local under the risk of losing recognition by the College, though not without much opposition from the alumni and national representatives of Dartmouth's fraternities.⁹ The fraternities were all desegregated decades ago, but instances of racism still pervade these spaces today. Since the summer of 2020, an Instagram page called @blackatdartmouth has existed

for students of color to anonymously pen their experiences at Dartmouth—particularly with regards to racism. Multiple entries have dealt specifically with racism in fraternities. One notable instance was when a black woman wearing long braids had her hair used by a white man to clean up a sprayed drink.¹⁰ Stories like these show a general distrust between people of color and Greek life.

Each of these dysfunctions too common in the Greek system—sexual assault, substance abuse, and marginalization—is often protected and perpetuated by a committed sense of loyalty expected among house members. In an infamous *Rolling Stones* article and subsequent 2014 book, *Confessions of an Ivy League Frat Boy*, a former Sigma Alpha Epsilon brother named Andrew Lohse describes the culture of loyalty like this: "What happens in the house stays in the house. Trust the brotherhood. Always protect your pledge brothers." In the book, Lohse gives the public an in-depth look at Dartmouth's now-derecognized Sigma Alpha Epsilon chapter (it is now a local fraternity operating officially under the name Scarlett Hall).¹¹ Lohse examines its hazing, drug abuse, and rampant binge drinking.¹² He dictates the story of his ostracization from the brothers of SAE, which was partly a result of him speaking out about the incidents of hazing and debauchery that happened in the house. These stories exposed a dark yet well-known side of Greek life, where hedonism and group acceptance comes at the cost of self-dignity, one's health, and relationships with others, most particularly in the hazing initiation process. Hazing can come in various forms, from the humiliation of pledges to dangerous levels of drugs and alcohol consumption, or both.¹³ Lohse includes examples from the obscene to the innocuous, from eating an omelet made out of a mixture of vomit and eggs to bringing a stuffed animal to class and having to recite a specific phrase if asked about it. This type of bonding through shared hazing creates loyalty to a house.¹⁴ This deep house loyalty can be twisted to protect members from facing the consequences of the most denigrating activities associated with Greek life, including sexual assault, substance abuse, and marginalization.¹⁵ Naturally, all of this brings us back to the initial question: given its deep flaws, is Greek life irrecoverable?

CHRISTIAN BROTHERHOOD

Christianity and the Greek system often appear far from compatible. First, these clear but hardly unique flaws of the Greek system are legitimately opposed to the traditional teachings of Christianity. Of course, self-identified Christians have committed every sin one could find in the Greek system—including sexual assault, substance abuse, and marginalization. Jesus’s message clearly condemns these shortcomings within and outside of the Greek system. Nonetheless, key foundations of Dartmouth’s Greek system arguably oppose its own shortcomings too, particularly in the house creeds and the best manifestations of its brotherly ethos. Analyzing how the concepts of love and brotherhood in the Christian tradition overlap and challenge those Greek houses can help identify how Greek life’s own principles can be redeemed to resolve its faults.

The concept of love is foundational to the Christian tradition, especially in reference to God’s identity. In his first epistle, the apostle John describes God himself as “love,” emphasizing that God does not simply have qualities of love, but that he embodies it.¹⁶ Therefore, since Christians should follow God, they have a responsibility to embody his identity of being loving. The specific words translated as “love” in the Biblical texts vary across the canon. Additionally, the languages of the Bible often had multiple words for love, unlike English.

Examining the *khesed* love of the Hebrew Bible is particularly useful for considering Greek life. *Khesed* is often translated from Hebrew as “loyal love” or “loving-kindness.”¹⁷ According to Bible scholar Tim Mackie, the circumstances accurately described as *khesed* love are when someone is “keeping a promise.”¹⁸ This promise, or perhaps more accurately, covenant, is what makes the person giving *khesed* love, in the words of Mackie, “go above and beyond and be super generous more than what you would expect.”¹⁹ This type of love is a behavior and an action. Practically, *khesed* is displayed in relationships throughout the Hebrew Bible. *Khesed* love can be thought of as showing commitment in relationships. It is present in many biblical narratives and chiefly demonstrated by the character of God, particularly in how he relates to his people in the Hebrew Bible. For example, in the book of Exodus, God describes himself as “overflowing in *khesed* love” when he talks with the people of Israel.²⁰ Further, God’s relationship with Israel in the book of Hosea is described in the language of marriage, and in God’s “vows,” the word used is *khesed*.²¹ Using this word in the vows, *khesed* is established as a word revolving around covenants and loyalty to them. God further exhibited *khesed* in the book of Genesis through his covenant with Abraham, promising to make Abraham the fa-

ther of a great nation.²² Many biblical figures implemented God’s example of *khesed* in their relationships, forming a community based on loyalty. Thus, as the early Christian community illustrated, *khesed* love is more than a feeling. It is a continuous action of loyalty to someone or something. Loyalty, the basis of *khesed* love, is essential in Christian brotherhood, since it holds those in relation with each other through times of troubles or disagreements by way of a common bond. In Christianity, this bond is not drawn on family lines but on the identification of being a Christ-follower in one body.²³ The concept of the Christian church being a “body” stems from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, where he emphasizes that each member is critical to the community’s functioning, paying special attention to the low-prestige roles that appear to contribute little.²⁴ When we open ourselves up to relationships in community, our ability to “acknowledge, appreciate, and love each person” increases, in the words of Pope Francis’s “Fratelli Tutti” encyclical.²⁵ Brotherhood then becomes a critical desire for Christians because they can love people more while in community, becoming better followers of God’s example of *khesed* love. In today’s world, Christian brotherhood manifests in various forms: from “LifeGroups” in the evangelical





megachurch Life.Church, where groups of Christians gather weekly to grow spiritually and support people through their difficulties, to the Dominican Order in the Catholic Church, an order of priests that focuses on evangelizing, caring for the poor, and living in community.²⁶ All of these organizations focus on bringing a group of Christians closer in the bond of *khesed*. From the Hebrew Bible to the modern day, the Christian story demonstrates the foundational nature of *khesed* in its bonds of brotherhood.

GREEK BROTHERHOOD REFLECTS CHRISTIAN BROTHERHOOD

Khesed love deeply influences Christian brotherhood, yet it is also reflected in the Greek system, particularly in the house creeds. Though the Greek system and Christian groups are different expressions of community, both are established with the similar goal of binding members together and developing members' characters. God ultimately

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calls Christians to community in Heaven by following his teachings, which is unlike the Greek system's final goal. Jesus instructs his followers to "love the Lord your God with all your heart" and "love your neighbor as yourself."²⁷ At its core, Christ's message of love is a fully realized version of the exhortations found in Greek house creeds. Most houses have an oath or creed new members must pledge. Scarlett Hall mentions in its creed—"The True Gentleman"—that: "The True Gentleman ... thinks of the rights and feelings of others, rather than his own; and who appears well in any company."²⁸ The true gentleman is called to care for others through committed action and remain loyal to this charge. In other words, he is instructed to demonstrate the principles of *khesed* love.

Sigma Nu, the fraternity on campus that I call home, also describes *khesed* in their Creed:

To believe in the Life of Love,
to walk in the Way of Honor,
to serve in the Light of Truth -
This is the Life, the Way, and the Light of Sigma Nu.
This is the Creed of our Fraternity.²⁹

To live a "life of love" could mean conducting philanthropic works with house members or simply investing time to deepen relationships as Jesus's teaches, by exhibiting *khesed* love. The loyalty to loving people in relationships is encapsulated in the start of Sigma Nu's creed. "Life of love" is one of the guiding principles of the fraternity. These "lights" are supposed to guide brothers and the chapter as a whole in how they act. They allude to a lifelong loyalty to such lights.

Many of these creeds have a similar goal of guiding Greek members to support one another and develop their character. Though indirectly, *khesed* love is the primary concept the creeds speak of in establishing Greek communities.

The guiding theme in both cases is to love, not only your fellow brother, but your entire house. *Khesed* love then

forms both the pillar of the Christian and Greek life community. It creates a bond of brotherhood for each, something the current Sigma Nu president Max Breuninger '23 describes as "the soul of the fraternity."³⁰ Yet just as a foundation does not describe the full architecture of a house, a creed does not reflect the full reality of an organization.

Khesed helps form brotherhood in both the Christian community and the Greek system, and Greek members often live out *khesed* in their communities, even amidst the smell of stale beer and the sounds of house music. House leadership provides *khesed* under the direction of the house "chaplain." The chaplain, or the functional role of a chaplain, exists in many houses under various titles. This position is a non-biased mediator, as well as a friendly and anonymous ear for the brothers in the house.³¹ Chaplains are a form of emotional and mental support in the house and their use by the brothers in the house demonstrates their importance. During the beginning of my pledge term, I reached out to our chaplain to inform him that I was considering dropping the pledge term. I was overwhelmed. He comforted me, validated my concerns, shared advice, and provided himself as a constant resource. He emulated *khesed* through his acts of loyalty to the people in the house and showed a type of devotion to build his brothers up.

Beyond Greek house leadership, *khesed* love is expressed through smaller supportive actions. Lucas LaRoche '24, a rising junior and brother at Alpha Chi Alpha, described loyal love as being there for your brothers when they need it. It isn't necessarily "as advertised in fraternity culture."³² LaRoche continued, saying that fraternal care means "taking time out of our busy schedules to go support one of the brothers," such as at a social event, or simply being a shoulder to cry on "when life brings its challenges."³³ The institutional structures of Greek life facilitate spaces otherwise strangers to care for each other: two members do not have to be close for them to display *khesed*. For Elizabeth Hadley '23, a sister at Chi Delta, "even if you aren't super close, you are still a part of the house, and you are family."³⁴ It is common for sisters to attend one another's sporting events or acapella performances, or for a brother to assist another brother in completing his problem set in the library. *Khesed* love abounds because of this bond of brotherhood in a Greek house. The same *khesed* love that united early Christians as they lived out their faith in the Roman Empire fuels Greek members caring for and supporting each other in a house basement.

Unfortunately, the ideals written in Greek house creeds and the loyal love that Greek members display paint an

incomplete picture, obscuring the damage that unhealthy behaviors in the Greek system cause. And although *khesed* love is the base for the Greek system, it is also present in varying degrees depending on the house. Considering *khesed*

love requires work, and the Greek houses' creeds present their members with a high standard of *khesed*. House members should focus on aligning themselves with these ideals, encouraging other members to strive towards them. Moreover, we must shift away from protecting brothers from deserved consequences. Fraternities are known to protect their brothers after issues such as hazing or sexual assault. For example, in the Beta Theta Pi Penn State hazing death of 2017, one of the many brothers involved was charged with deleting security camera footage. This footage would have incriminated the house for giving pledge Timothy Piazza a lethal amount of alcohol in 2017.³⁵ Brotherhood should not involve covering up others' wrongdoings.

As the teachings of Jesus and the Greek system creeds both express, brotherhood is built on *khesed* love, exhorting us to loyally support and facilitate growth for those around us. To help one another become the best version of ourselves, we cannot accept or even encourage harmful behaviors. Instead, Greek members and those in Christian communities both need correction. Correction of community members is strong in the Christian tradition. This is particularly evident in "The Rule of St Benedict," a set of guidelines written in the sixth century by St. Benedict for "a practical guide to Christian monastic life."³⁶ In it, St. Benedict describes how monasteries can correct unhealthy behavior. For example, if a monk broke any of his vows, he would be punished to hold him accountable. St. Benedict's rule is one of the oldest used in today's monastic traditions.³⁷ Discipline is not the antithesis of brotherhood but the actualization of it. By this logic, fraternity members should seek to hold their brother accountable to best support them and realize the creed of the house. Loyal love

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requires recognizing what is unhealthy in a relationship partner—whether it be binge drinking, sexist comments, or unacceptable actions—and helping him to repent, face necessary consequences, and change. We need loyalty to the ideals of the house and not to the house itself.

CONCLUSION

Greek life at Dartmouth generates undeniable harm while simultaneously creating a supportive community that, at its best, reflects Christian brotherhood. There are many problems with our system, and though there have been improvements over time, our Greek system still upholds sexism, substance abuse, and racism. Yet just as *khesed* love orients Christian communities towards loyally supporting and improving their community, so it does for the Greek system. As stated in their creeds, Greek systems are constructed on the notion of *khesed*. Despite its problems, members of each house still endeavor to represent a Christian *khesed* in their relationships with each other, whether in small gestures like showing up to acapella shows or in larger commitments like helping a brother or sister heal from trauma. These acts of love illuminate the positive aspects of the community of students who call Greek letters their homes. Lastly, if a Christian or Greek member truly subscribes to *khesed* love, then they are called to be loyally committed to improving the unhealthy behaviors in those around them. If a person truly loves another, he or she wants what is best for that individual, not necessarily what is easiest. Biblical *khesed* love permeates the Greek system in ways we do not often notice. By realizing this and aligning more with the biblical view of brotherhood, the Greek system can be reformed to be a space where genuine brotherhood and love abound.³⁸ ✠

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