

WHAT ABOUT THE BODY OF CHRIST?

WHAT'S IT LIKE BEING A CHRISTIAN?

PART II

The essence of being a Christian is not an extended set of correct doctrinal beliefs or even well-formed personal character. To be a Christian is to be connected to Christ in such a unique and special way that all other relationships are defined by that union. The perfect triune fellowship of God as Father, Son, and Spirit from eternity 'past' has been opened to me by the blood of Jesus at Calvary. But I cannot experience their fellowship in isolation from all others who have been called into it.

Having others around is not a nuisance but a necessity for families. These interactions shape us. We sing and read, stand and bow, laugh and cry. And, yes, we certainly eat and drink together. But we do all these things as a network of relationships. A gathering of family members. A church whose identity is not contained in itself but is found in the God who has formed it. We are the Body of Christ!

We are the community of the children of God! We bear His name. We have a great inheritance. Awareness of these things makes a difference in how we see ourselves and function in the world.

Perhaps if more of us saw ourselves as children of God rather than members of the church, we would claim a nobler inheritance. If we understood church as persons in relationship rather than names on the roll, we would function differently as the church. If we saw sin as the breaking of relationships rather than the breaking of rules, we would both live better and deal with one another more gracefully.

If we really love God the Father, we will create churches that are communities of love, accountability and nurture where gradual spiritual transformation takes place over time. We will live gently with one another. Listen to one another's stories. Teach and learn from one another.

Does anyone doubt that the church would have far greater credibility with our not-yet-Christian neighbors if we modeled this sort of behavior consistently? That these positive relational activities count for more than our abilities to sing or preach or prove ourselves correct to those not-yet-Christians? That we have been our own worst enemies over the years in neglecting these relational demands of our faith?

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:12-17).

For me, this describes the New Church for a New World that puts the heart of God on display in the relational life of His family.

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" exclaimed John the apostle. "And that is what we are!" (I John 3:1). There is no greater honor to which a human could aspire. To be part of the Family of God. To have Him as our Father. To sit at the table where there is always abundance. And where there is always room for others.

Should The Church Be Hierarchical Or Sacramental?

Most people know that the earliest Christian church modeled its

life after the Jewish synagogue. Although there was structure to the synagogue, there was nothing that would strike an observer as essentially hierarchical or sacramental in its nature. It functioned through the activity of persons who were neither priests nor clerics in the generally understood meaning of those terms.

The synagogue pattern of praise, exhortation from the Word of God and prayer seems to have been the one followed not only by those first Jewish churches in and around Jerusalem but among Gentile congregations that formed later. In reading Paul's letter to Corinth, for example, there were issues related to worship. It seems that the very simplicity of Christian worship made it susceptible to abuse in certain situations. So the apostle gave guidelines designed less to formalize the church's assemblies than to keep it from becoming utterly chaotic (cf. I Corinthians 14:27-36). But it is interesting to note that anyone in attendance at one of those assemblies was a potential presenter. Thus Paul prefaces his broad "rules of order" with this observation: "What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church" (I Corinthians 14:26).

In the Constantinean Revolution of the fourth century, this changed dramatically and decisively. The worship and life of the Christian church moved away from the synagogue model very quickly to be parallel to the Temple precedent of priest, sacrifice and observers. The Lord's Supper as a meal of communion and thanksgiving became a (re-) sacrificing of the body of Christ; the table became an altar. But if there was now a sacrifice to be placed on an altar, there must be priests. Just anyone can give thanks at a meal or join in communion, but not "just anyone" can lay a sacrifice on a holy altar! So the next several centuries saw functions become offices, saw a distinct hierarchy emerge in the church. "Clergy" officiated at communion and baptism; "laity" observed in silence – except to respond as told to do so. What was true of worship in particular was reflected in all other aspects of the church's life.

A doctrine evolved over the decades following Constantine that the church is the saving institution. Rites such as baptism and the Lord's Supper soon became sacraments. So did marrying

and burying people. And the sacraments became the province of the church – in particular the “ordained” priests who dispensed them. People were granted or denied access to the institution and the sacraments through the mediation of a human priesthood. Power of that sort was immense and heady – and led to abuses of the worst sort. The church became the dispenser of salvation.

When the Reformation Movement protested many of the departures that had taken place between the first three centuries and Luther’s famous theses, one of the emphatic doctrines that emerged was the priesthood of all believers. But the “doctrine” never quite returned the earliest practice of the Christians. The caste system of clergy and laity has continued to dominate the Christian religion in practically all its forms.

The first Christians were Spirit-filled amateurs at their God-given tasks. But they turned the world upside down! The role of “professionals” in the ministry of present-day churches needs desperately to be moved from priestly performance with audience critique to the role of church leaders as Paul understood it. He saw the work of men such as himself as serving “to equip the saints for the work of ministry so the Body of Christ will be built up” (Ephesians 4:12). But we will come back to the responsibility of leaders to nurture, equip, and commission the larger group in a future message. For now, the task is to understand that it is the “larger group” (i.e., a church’s total membership) that has been called to function as Christ’s representatives in the world – not just that group’s professional (i.e., paid) staff. As one writer reminds us, it was professionals who built the Titanic but amateurs who built the Ark.

So our task today is to grasp the New Testament truth summarized in these words: “Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5).

A King of Judah once took the initiative to call the Jewish people to observe the Passover. After the collapse of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. and in connection with the cleansing of the temple at Jerusalem, King Hezekiah called people from both Judah and the Israel to keep the Passover together as brothers in the Holy City. Although many turned a

deaf ear to his invitation, thousands began moving toward Jerusalem.

The Passover lambs were killed and the celebration began. Some from the northern areas arrived too late, however, to perform the purification rituals that required several days for completion. So, although “a multitude of the people, many of them from Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun, had not cleansed themselves, yet they ate the Passover otherwise than as prescribed” (II Chronicles 30:18a). Or, as the New International Version renders the last words of this verse, “they ate the Passover contrary to what was written.” Would the rekindling of faith in Hezekiah’s attempt at reformation be stopped in its tracks by their impurity and unauthorized eating of the sacred meal? Would God destroy those who had violated the Passover rules?

This is how the dramatic story ends: **“But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, ‘The good LORD pardon all who set their hearts to seek God, the LORD the God of their ancestors, even though not in accordance with the sanctuary’s rules of cleanness.’ The LORD heard Hezekiah, and healed the people” (II Chronicles 30:18b-20).**

The violation of the purification laws in Hezekiah’s day was not a matter of cavalier disobedience. The people were not defying God but seeking Him. Precisely because the good king knew the difference between rebellion and the failure of those who “set their hearts to seek God,” he had the generosity of spirit to pray for them to be accepted in their deficiency. And because God ultimately judges on the basis of a seeker’s heart rather than his or her performance, He showed mercy, forgave their shortcomings, and healed them.

Could we lower some of the satan-inspired and human-erected walls that divide Christians from one another? Perhaps live by a broader definition of fellowship within the family of God than some of us have experienced to date? Might we learn that we have misrepresented one another at times and exhibited a shoddy form of religious prejudice toward people different from ourselves? Would it be worth it to abandon sectarian rivalry in order to “be in agreement” for presenting the gospel to the world? Would it make our witness even stronger “that there be no divisions” among us in declaring that Jesus is the hope of our world? Maybe renounce our litmus-test doctrines for the

sake of lifting up Christ? Could we ever learn to be gracious enough to pray – and ask to have prayed for us! – the prayer of Good King Hezekiah for those we see as flawed in certain interpretations and practices? Could we finally become what we are called to be – The Body of Christ!