

Working Together?

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1 Corinthians 12:14-26

“But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.”

Baptist Principles – Associations

Movement 1 – The Scripture Revealed

I offer hope for all those churches which are struggling, all those churches which are rife with conflict, and all those churches whose closets are full of so many secrets that the doors are ready to burst. I offer hope for all those messy churches, those hurting and conflicted churches. I offer hope for all those churches which wish they could be better behaved, cleaner and have their act together. I offer hope in these words, “you are not alone.” You are not alone, for look at the example and the witness of the Corinthian church. Find hope through the Corinthian church, for that was a church which was torn, which was conflicted, which was messy, which had too many secrets, and was far from the perfect, well behaved church.

The Corinthian church was a church that was struggling; it was a church that was challenged. Within that church one would find a disparity between rich and poor with little effort put forth towards eliminating that disparity. Within that church one would find a loose approach to ethics and morals as many of the members believed their salvation saved them in the here and now. Many members believed this and thus acted in any way which they wanted to, to the point of one man sleeping with his father’s wife. Within that church one would find a hierarchy of members and of spiritual gifts, with some members putting other members down because they could not preach, teach, or most importantly, speak in tongues. Within that church you would find a rejection of Paul’s teaching and authority; the very one that started this church was being rebuked. It was a messy, messed up church. It was a church full of division and conflict and it should make us all feel good.

The Corinthian church should give us all hope; it should make all of us feel good because even though it was a mess, even though it was conflicted and contorted as a community, Paul still had hope. This broken church was still considered by Paul as a church with potential and possibility; it was still for Paul a gathering of believers following Christ. Paul would not give up on this seemingly haphazard gathering of believers. Paul would not walk away and say it is hopeless and that should give us all hope in our own situations. We find hope because if Paul could find promise in the Corinthian church, than surely there is hope for us as well. If Paul believed that the Corinthian church could be a community of witness of Christ to the world, than we can believe that we can be a witness with all of our faults and failings. So with the hope that we find from Paul’s encounter and encouragement let us delve into the instructions, the guiding and the comforting that Paul has offered to the Corinthian church in this letter. We should read these letters closely and take them to heart, looking for wisdom, looking for truth, and looking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the text speaks to us.

This hope which I proclaim is not directed only at the church, but also at you and me. For if Paul believed in the church and had hope for the church, which was broken and messy, then can we not also as individuals find hope? Can we not also claim to the

faith that God will still call us and bless us even when we are messy, even when we are broken, and even when we feel distant from the world? Find hope.

With compassion and caring Paul guides the Corinthians to a vision of what the church could and should look like. With a gentle, guiding hand, Paul turns the eyes of the Corinthians to the metaphor, the vision of the church as a body. Paul makes the obvious point that every part of the body is important. From the hand to the eye to the thing hanging in the back of the throat (the uvula), everything is important. Paul paints this picture of the church as the body of Christ and then reminds the people that they are a part of that body. It is a body of diversity, a body of unique gifts all connected for Christ. The members of the church, the Corinthians are a part of the body of Christ, and thus each part of them is essential and important. Paul is reminding those who emphasize and argue for a hierarchy of gifts that they are in no place to claim that one gift is better than another. As Paul says, “indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.” Paul is reminding those who speak in tongues that those who set up and serve are just as important as they are. Paul is reminding those who can speak and preach that those who listen are essential. Paul is calling the Corinthians to remember that they are all a part of something bigger, they are a part of the body of Christ.

What does this mean to us? How does this scripture speak to us, inspire us and guide us in our faith. I am inviting you to think about this idea of the body. Think about this idea that we are a part of something bigger. We are a part of a team, and as the cliché goes, there is no “I” in team. Think about the idea that no one person is more important than anyone else. Think about the idea that you are a part of the body. What does this mean of you individually? What does this mean for us as a church? What does it mean to be a part of the body of Christ?

Movement 2 – The Body of the Church (Local)

Where can the body of Christ be found? Perhaps the easiest place to find the body is in the church. The place where we find our wounds and our messes the closest, in the place where we encounter the reality of humanity is where we encounter the fullest of the church. Last week when I spoke about the church, I suggested that we need the church because we cannot be Christians on our own. This is what Paul is getting at with his image, his metaphor of the body. We need each other in the church. The church is the body of Christ.

This past week a number of us were in West Kensington working at a church. Not many of us had professional experience with construction. Not many of us had experience with improvements. You could look at that group and say that some of us were more important than others. You could look at that group and say that some of us had more to offer than others. But everyone there was important and necessary. This became most clear when we had to move a radiator. It was a long, lead, solid radiator. We cut it out of the floor, we cut it in half, and it was still heavier than one or two people could handle. When it came time to move the radiator we needed everyone. We needed the 13 year old who hangs out at the church, we needed the pastor, and we needed everyone to lift and carry and move the radiator. It was a striking example of a moment when everyone was important and necessary for the work to be done.

The church is the body of Christ and we are all a part of that body. The work of the deacons is important as is the work of the trustees as is the work of the board of

Christian Education; they are all important for the sake of the work of Christ. Each person in the church is important, from the pastor to the secretary to the ushers to those who sit in the pews to the smallest child. Each person is an important part of the body of Christ. The gifts are all a part of the work of the body. Some preach, some teach, some witness, some build, some support, but all are a part of the body of Christ. In the church, in our connections, we become fuller and better Christians because we can do more. It is what some scholars like Richard Gilarditz call an ontology of relationality. Basically this notion claims that in the relationships we have and cultivate our being, who we are is cultivated. If we have relationships with others in the church out of respect, out of mutuality and common work then our identity as a Christian grows. If we have relationships of looking to the other as essential, then our identity as a Christian grows. Each person in this church is important and essential.

There is a town in the Midwest, Racine Iowa, that each year treats the prom as a major event. They have television cameras, they have the red carpet, they have a host interviewing each couple as they arrive. It is a big, Hollywood type event. The special and wonderful thing about this event is that each person who shows up to the prom is treated as special. Each person is treated as important in this whole event. This is how the church is supposed to be. Each person is important, each person is special. We as a church are the body of Christ, and we need each other to live and exist as that body. We are the body of Christ.

Movement 3 – The Body of the Denomination

The body reaches beyond the church. The body of Christ goes beyond these walls. Do we really think that we are it as the body of Christ? Do we really believe that we can make such a difference as one church so that the whole world can change? The body reaches beyond the walls of this church.

The body of Christ encompasses our denomination. As American Baptists we gather together so that we can be the body of Christ together. This started with folks like Luther Rice and John Mason Peck. Rice and Peck traveled around America in the mid 1800s preaching to different Baptist churches and calling them gather and work together. It was a climate of every church for itself when Luther Rice came on the scene. It was a climate of such autonomy that there was seldom any working together for the sake of ministry and for the sake of Christ. Luther Rice came onto the American Baptist landscape, just back from Burma, just back from spending time with Adnormian and Ann Judson and was looking for support and help for his dear friends. So Luther Rice called on the Baptist churches to work together. He went to all churches, regardless of the size, regardless of where they were and called on them for help. With Peck's help Luther Rice began to call the Baptists to work together. Baptists were called to support each other with education, with missions in the nation and missions across the world, and the body of Christ grew.

Early Baptist churches in England looked to each other for guidance and support as they were all growing in a hostile environment. Confessions were circulated giving doctrinal focus and pastoral guidance to struggling churches. Baptist churches came together and the body of Christ grew.

We need to connect with other Baptist churches to continue to be and exist as the body of Christ. We are a part of the Philadelphia Baptist Association because we cannot

reach out to people on our own. We cannot reach out to people in West Philly, South Philly, North Philly, Kensington, Center City on our own while we reach out to folks in Bryn Mawr, Ardmore, Havertown, Wynnewood, and other places. The ministry is so overwhelming that we may become paralyzed as we consider the work we have to do.

We are not the body of Christ on our own, and so for many of the same reasons that we need the church we need the association and the American Baptist denomination. The body of Christ is found in our denomination, and so we gather together for the sake of doing ministry. Yet we still maintain our identity as a church. Just as individuals in the church are called to be true to their own gifts and identity, so are the particular churches called to stay true to their own identity as they exist as a denomination. We, as Lower Merion Baptist Church has particular gifts, and we are to hold onto those gifts. We worship a specific way, and that is true to who we are. Our theology, our identity is unique and important to the denomination, just as other Baptist churches are important to the body of Christ. Just as we do not want to call other churches to change and conform, nor should we expect to change or conform. We are independent, but inter-dependant upon each other. As Paul says, some of us are feet, some of us are ears, but we are all essential to the body of Christ.

As Baptists, as a denomination, as a movement, we are a part of the body of Christ in our gatherings and our identity. The body grows beyond the church.

Movement 4 – The Body of the Church (Broadly Construed)

The body continues to grow. The body grows beyond even the denomination, and the gathering of Baptists. I have been focusing on Baptist ideals and distinctives, but we need to broaden our view and look at other churches. The body of Christ is larger than one denomination; the body of Christ reaches out to other types of Christians.

This past week we have been in Kensington doing some powerful work. Everyone knows this already. We you may not know is that we have been working at a Presbyterian church. We have been working at a church that follows a different structure, that baptizes infants, and has a slightly different view of communion. Some may wonder if it is appropriate for Baptists to be helping out Presbyterians. Some may wonder if we should have instead reached out to the Baptist church. After all, we were helping out a Presbyterian church that has been left dormant for years. We were helping out a church that had a small number of members. We were helping out a church that looked like it was struggling to survive. I am sure that the Baptist church has work to do, I am sure much could have been done; yet at the same time consider what we did. We worked in a church that was reaching out the community. We helped to create a worship space for the small but growing members of that church. We helped a church that every Friday night would open its doors and have an open mike for the kids of the neighborhood. Every Friday night 60 to 70 kids would come in the church, off the streets and hear scripture read, hear about Jesus, and then share their gifts. This small, struggling church is an important part of the body of Christ. This small, struggling church is doing ministry that we could not do. Baptists, Methodist, Presbyterian or whatever, it is an important part of the body of Christ doing essential work of the body of Christ.

The body of Christ goes beyond the Baptist denomination, and we need each other. It reminds me of the United Way, NFL collaboration, this is a collaboration that goes beyond teams. This is a collaboration that reaches towards a common good –

helping people in need. Eagles are working with Patriots, who are working with Packers, who are working with Bills, who are working with Dolphins. Football players look beyond their team identities and work together toward a common good.

Here in Bryn Mawr we need other churches to reach out to the community. What do we want but for people to come to Christ. If they come to Christ via the Methodists, or the Baptists, or the Episcopalians, or the Catholics does it matter so much, or should we just rejoice that they have become Christians? Remember the relational ontology I mentioned earlier? This also holds true across Christianity. When we gather with other Christians from other denominations we grow as Christians. Our identity is effected and strengthened as we work with other Christians. This is the whole body of Christ in the fullest sense; across the world, with other Christians from different denominations and different walks of life. The body of Christ continues to grow.

Movement 5 – The Members of the Body

We reach the world when we work together. We work together as a people, as a collective body of Christians across denominations. We work together ecumenically, reaching across the walls of doctrine, the walls of particularity.

Yet the body is only realized, the body is only actualized when denominations stand together. Only when denominations work as one, only when denominations gather together to work for the sake of Christ, for the sake of spreading the Gospel can the church in the world make a difference. Only when we gather as Baptists, when we support each other as Baptists, can we work with others. We need to be supportive and active and passionate as a denomination.

Yet the denomination rests upon the church. For only when local churches gather together can the denomination do the work it needs to do. Only when local churches gather their resources, their prayers can the denomination support missionaries, offer aid, and spread the gospel on our behalf. Only when the local church gathers together can the denomination live into the likeness of the body of Christ.

Yet the local church rest on the member and this is what is most important. Only when the individual says “yes” to God, only when the individual accepts the gifts of God can the local church thrive.

Here is the rub, the world wide movement of Christianity, the denominational movement of the Baptists, the actions and ministry of Lower Merion Baptist Church rests upon you. It rests upon your gifts, your actions, your prayers, and your ministry. You are an essential part of the Body of Christ in the church, the denomination and the world.

As Paul says, “those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect.” You may say that you are not as important as such great leaders as Dismond Tutu, as Roy Medly, our General Secretary, as Billy Graham, but Paul is saying that is far from the truth. You are clothed with greater honor, because you are an essential part of the body of Christ.

A little church in Kensington is struggling in its ministry. A little church in Bryn Mawr is struggling in its ministry. Yet these churches came together, lifted each other up and worked for the sake of Christ. We are essential, you are essential for the body of Christ. We are not less important than any other church. You, as a Christian are not less important than any other Christian. The work of the body, the work of Christ begins with

you, with your gifts and your ministry. You are a part, an important part of the body of Christ.

Movement 6 – Following Jesus

We are united as a body by Christ. We are all following Christ in all that we do. Christ is the head and we are all a part of the body. We each have our important place; our own important part to play, but we all follow Christ. When we work together for the sake of Christ, when we rely upon others and offer our own gifts, then the church will change, and the world will change. Let me offer you a vision. We were working on a new worship space in Kensington. We were replacing the walls, and we installed three new windows. This was a room with windows which could not be opened. This was a room where the air in the room hung, heavy and stale. Yet we worked together, we worked with another church, and now the windows can be opened. Now the breeze of the morning can come through bringing a new, a fresh feeling into the space. Now the breeze of the day can come through offering a refreshing feeling and a new vision to people following Christ. We are trying to open the windows to the church and to the world. When we work alone, when we keep our eyes on our own concerns, our own interests we become stale as a church. When we keep our doors closed, our windows, the room, our faith becomes stale and heavy. Yet when we work with others, when we reach out to others it is like opening up the windows. It is like opening up the windows of our church, the windows of our faith and feeling the strong breeze of the Holy Spirit rush through lifting us up and bringing a new air, a new feeling, and a new Spirit into the space.

We are a part of the body, not bound by our churches, not bound by denominations, but by our one Lord, our one Faith, and our one Baptism. Keep your eyes on Christ, on your faith, your Lord, through your baptism and live as a Christian, as a part of the body of Christ, letting the Holy Spirit in, letting the Holy Spirit guide you and transform you.

We are a part of the body of Christ, each one of us. Yet the body is not complete without others, without other Baptists, without other Christians. Let us be a part of the body, let us live and minister as the body, let us be the body of Christ.

AMEN