

The nature of the Church is far more significant than we typically treat it.

The church is a people group whose foundational bond, that is, what pulls them and holds them together, is not that of common habit, history, homeland, or hobby, but that each one has received a call from God, been born of the Spirit of God, to believe in the Son of God and to joyfully submit themselves to His rule over them. In our faith in Jesus we are united to one another as well into a “new humanity” (Eph 2:14-16), having all of our animosities and causes for contention swallowed up and destroyed by the Cross of Christ Jesus equally necessary and equally adequate for all.

God has determined from all of eternity to have a people that are His very own, distinct from all other peoples and from the rest of creation. It is a divine institution with its roots in eternity, not a man-made collaboration formed by mutual consent for a humanly reasoned purpose.

Just as I believe that Paul has alluded to the book of Genesis regarding the graces of His Spirit, as I alluded to last week, so I also believe that he takes this analogy of our beginnings to mind as he continues to show that each one of us in the church *belong* to Christ and to one another in a divinely constituted way, just as life was breathed into Adam’s body at the beginning.

It is this divinely designed physical body which Paul uses to show how dramatically different the Church is, in its very nature, than any other institution or group. **You have been made one.** This oneness of the church is far deeper than the oneness of college alumni, citizens of a country, or even members of a family. There is an intense, indivisible connection between Christ and His people, and between every member of His people, just as there is an intense, indivisible connection between the head of the body and the hand, the head and the foot, etc. Our life, and thus our living, is divinely ordained to be connected not only to God, but also to one another in the Body of Christ. Oneness implies a far deeper reality than merely attending services on a Sunday, or occasionally attending a small group Bible study.

And so, in Christ Jesus, we are knit together by more than social contract or even genetic code. We are one body, bound by mutual ligaments of grace, the lifeblood of the same Spirit of God flowing through us all, nourishing and cleansing and strengthening each

one. Yet, we are not all the same, but have distinctions in our works of service which God has assigned to each one as He sees fit. Some speak well, some craft utensils or art, some share their homes or cooking skills, some weep alongside others, but all play a part in the great mission of the church: to make disciples of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit in the proclamation of the gospel to the glory of God. But we are all one body.

Look at the words the apostle uses in verse 13 to declare the unity which we all have:

*Baptized and Watered.*

*Baptized.* All have been baptized into one body. That is, we have all been immersed into one body by the Spirit of God, identified now with the entire Body of Christ. When you believed in Christ Jesus, you were baptized into Him, and were identified with His death and resurrection. But, Paul tells us through the Spirit that you were not only baptized into Christ Jesus, but you baptized into His Body! You were also identified with His people, the redeemed and chosen. Thus, your first identification is no longer your physical surname (Roberts, in my case), nor your physical citizenship (American), but rather you are foundationally, eternally, deep-at-the-root-of-who-you-are *Christian*. And, your identity as Christian is not merely individual, but communal. You are baptized into one body of many members. This is who you are: one Body together. This is not achieved by us or attained by us through some subset of laws which one Christian might attain and another might not. No! The Spirit of God baptizes us all into this one new humanity, this new people, by His sovereign grace. In this body, race doesn't privilege, economic power doesn't privilege, social status doesn't privilege, gender doesn't privilege. ALL were equally destitute in our sin and required the exact same repentance, no matter how noble or ignoble your former way of life, and the same faith in the same Christ on the same Cross. ALL who come to Christ Jesus by faith, receiving Him as Lord over them, were brought into this body and equally held in this body by the same divine purpose and power. You were brought in by God, all of you who belong to Christ Jesus by faith, for salvation belongs to the LORD.

*Watered.* The ESV has "made to drink of one Spirit", but I think that in our vernacular that misses the point. The point of the Greek word is to be watered, the giving and sustaining of life by the presence of life-giving water. So it is used in Genesis 2:6 of the mist which watered the ground and gave life to the plants which God created. So it also used in chapter 3 of 1 Corinthians regarding the proclamation of the gospel: one plants the seed, another

waters, but God causes the growth. It is the seed and the water which bring life by the power of God. Thus, to “drink”, in this sense, is be given life, the flourishing of the life consistent with the content of the drink. With what are we all watered? The Spirit of God! Therefore, everyone who is in Christ has not only been brought in, baptized, by the Spirit of God into one body, but also given the same life, enriched by the same Spirit, sustained and growing from the same Spirit of God. There are not spiritual Christians and carnal Christians. All are watered by the same Spirit of God! By nature we are now one with one another, under Christ, and we live according to the same source, the Spirit of God who works all things according to the counsel of His own will.

Continuing the analogy to the Corinthians in his first letter, chapter 12, verse 12, the apostle Paul explains through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the glorious truth of what it means to be in Christ is to *belong* to Him and to one another. The Church is not an event that you attend, it is what you are a part of, a member of, an indivisibly connected body part through which the lifeblood of God’s Spirit flows in grace upon grace for the mutual flourishing of the entire body. **You belong to one another.**

There is a great need for belonging. God created us to belong to one another, and but for the corruption of sin, our belonging would be unquestioned and unharmed. It is sin which has broken our belonging, bringing in its stead alienation and betrayal, the common human frustration of being cast out because sin is a common human experience. But, in the Church God is redeeming and reconciling these alienations and frustrations by uniting us all into one body by the same Spirit through one powerful means, the Cross of Christ Jesus, with one sovereign Head, Jesus. He rules us all with sovereign love and holiness. When you belong to Christ Jesus by faith in Him, you belong in His people.

So, if you are in Christ, having repented of your sins and depended upon Christ Jesus to rescue and rule you, then you belong here. You have a right to be here. You have the obligation to be here. Simply because you are not serving like another does not imply that you do not belong, or that you belong in a lesser sense, or that you are right to minimize your commitment or participation in the life and ministry of the Body. Hence, the analogy: Simply because you might say, “I am not a hand” does not imply that you don’t belong to the body, does it? Is the foot a part of the one body even though it is not a hand? Of course! The

enemy may tempt you to disbelieve this, but you belong. And not only do you belong, but you belong to one another. What does this mean, to belong?

Well, let us follow the apostle's reasoning. **Belonging means that you are necessary.** You belong and you are necessary in whatever works of service you may bring by the Spirit of God. If we only had preachers, how would we express mercy to one another? Who would show hospitality? Who would craft the beautiful things which express the grandeur and glory of God? If we only had healers, who would declare the truths to our sorrowed hearts? Who would proclaim the gospel verbally? Thus, Paul uses the analogy of the Body: if we were all eyes, how would we hear? All ears, how would we smell? In other words, you and your committed work, as one who belongs to the body, is necessary for the health of the body and the glorification of Christ together with all the saints. Your work is necessary for the preaching of the gospel. You may not be gifted to preach, but you may be gifted to cook. How can you use your cooking gift to further the proclamation of the gospel? Maybe your cooking provides mercy to the hungry while those verbally gifted share the gospel. Not every gift is verbal, but every gift can support the work together. Do you love numbers and accounting? How can your accounting skills help build the kingdom? We all play a part which is necessary for the entire mission to proceed. No military mission is all infantry, or all cavalry, or all air power. It takes every division operating together to fulfill the mission, and so it is with the life-giving ministry of the gospel among us and by us to the glory of Christ.

And it is God who has arranged every part to function in the manner which He has deemed fit for the benefit of the entire Body, the mutual accomplishing of the purpose of the Head, and the glorification of Christ Jesus. God has included you and gifted you for the ministry of the Body of Christ and the mission of Jesus. You are connected and empowered, so how shall you now serve? You are necessary. The Church needs you to fulfill its mission because God has redeemed you and graced you to serve one another so that we can fulfill our mutual task of proclaiming that Jesus is Lord over all. What part shall you play in this great goal?

Next, **belonging means that you are honored**, no matter how "visible" your works of service. Paul goes to great lengths to counteract the power-appropriating attitudes that were present in Corinth and that are often present in our church as well. That attitude that magnifies the honor and significance of certain gifts, usually the most visible gifts like

preaching, teaching, healing, and tongues, over and above the other “less public and ‘powerful’” gifts. The fact that it is God who has assigned each member to his/her place, and it is God who empowers each grace for every member for the flourishing of the whole body, indicates that each member and each corresponding grace of God for the work of ministry is equally honorable.

One of the things which harms the church and which militates against the Church is the great individualism which we find both in our culture and therefore in our own assumptions and values. We think in starkly individualistic terms, making the concept of belonging, of obligations to one another, of dependence upon one another, of mutuality itself very, very hard to conceive.

One of the cultural idols of our day is the approval of man. We feel the need to be recognized, lauded, appreciated, approved by other people. This fear of man, desperation for approval, leads to many, many relationship sins and corruption, including, but not limited to: unforgiveness, blame-shifting, unrighteous anger, punishing with silence, demanding control, anxiety, people-pleasing, lying, covering up other people’s sins, gossip, belittling others, cheating, and despair. When we are not appreciated, or do not feel respected, we feel the need to demand it, to defend it, to seize it by force. However, here we see that our honor, our glory, is not tied in man’s approval, or even in whether or not people even see our work or worth, but rather in God’s sovereign oversight and purpose. That is, it is He who assigns each work, whether visible or hidden, and it is He who approves and delights and rejoices and recognizes when one’s work is done. In fact, He delights in it. He rejoices in those things which nobody else cherishes, those acts of mercy to the powerless grieving soul, those extra minutes with a child who needs help gluing stuff to other stuff, those patient tongue-holding prayers with a difficult neighbor, or those hard gentle words of rebuke to a wayward brother. These works, and these gifts, are not less honorable because they are less visible or less seen by man. They, too, are necessary for the flourishing of the Body of Christ and the glory of Christ Jesus. They delight God because He placed them there, and placed you there. In fact, Paul says, isn’t it the most important parts of the body that we cover up so as not to see? Honor and visibility, significance and sight, glory and gaudy, are not the same things. Our honor is tied to God’s delight, and He has gifted you and appropriated each member of His body right where He wants it and empowered it to do His work for His glory. Honor one another in every place.

In fact, the Corinthians were being told to “seek the greater gifts” as a means of importance, of making themselves important by the apparent significance of the outwardly visible gifts of speech, healing, tongues, etc. Verse 31, I believe, is Paul quoting them. Paul is not commanding us to seek the greater gifts, for he spent the preceding 20 verses showing us that there are not greater gifts, each one being necessary and glorious for the Body’s flourishing. Rather, he contends against that statement of seeking and seeks to show a more excellent way, the way of love for one another and mutual honoring.

This way of love and mutual honor, consistent with the contextual themes of this letter, are part and parcel of what it means to belong. For, **belonging comes with both privileges and obligations**. Just as in a family, there are certain privileges to belonging to a family. The children receive an intimacy with the parents that no other children receive, as does the husband and the wife. The finances are shared. The burdens are shared. And each family member has an obligation to the family, to use their resources for the flourishing of the family. Likewise, as citizens of a kingdom, there are privileges to citizenship and obligations. The privileges of the King’s protection and provision, fellow citizens justice and neighborly love and help. And every citizen is obligated to participate in the flourishing of the city.

In the same way, those in the Body of Christ have both privileges and obligations. We have the privilege of belonging, of sharing, of help when needed, of intimacy and inclusion and not being alone, but treated as an insider. We have the obligations to serve one another, love one another, forgive one another, confess our sins to one another, to mutually honor one another, etc. Therefore, we have functions, those gifts which we are given for the purpose of the “common good”, that is the summing up together of all things under Christ, for the flourishing of the Body in love. **Ephesians 4:11-16** connects these gifts as the exercise of faith that by speaking the truth in love we are growing up into Christ from whom flow all the graces necessary for such growth as each one does his part for the building up of the body in love. Privileges and Obligations as belonging to the Body of Christ Jesus, member of His family, citizens of His kingdom.

Just like the physical body, the Church is the same: every part belongs and every part is needed and every part is glorious and every part has privileges and obligations under the Head from whom flows all that need for life and godliness. We are not merely individuals. We belong to one another. When one member grieves, the entire Body grieves. There is no

more important member than another. All grief and all honor are shared. Mutual. We are one. Individuality, though good in its proper place, becomes monstrous when it is supreme.

It is clear from the Scriptures that we are in a Kingdom, with one King, one majesty, one ruler. We are a family, with one Father, one Lord, one household. We are a Temple, with one God dwelling within her, stones cemented together, bonded by the bond of God's presence. You are fellow citizens under this King, united not by your earthly national citizenship, or your gender, or your ethnicity. You are not grouped together because you have similar bank balances or family histories or talents or abilities or papered educations. You are bound together solely by the righteousness of Christ Jesus and nothing else. And you are bound together. You are siblings under one Father. You are tied by spiritual genetic code of the Spirit of God who bore you from above and placed new hearts within you which long to worship God. You are a body, held together by joints and ligaments upon which flow the love of God and one another, binding you together in the bonds of God's great love. You see, God didn't enter into your life. He didn't come into your body, your kingdom, your family, your house. He brought you into His! Into His body, His kingdom, His family, His house! And as such, you and I are held together, bound together, by the divine Word and divine Spirit, which calls us to walk accordingly.

You see, the Church worldwide simply is united. It is existentially true because God has done it. We don't have to fight for unity. We don't have to prove it. However, we do fight and struggle to maintain this unity in the bond of peace. We work to make sure that our local body, here at EBF, is living consistently with this divine truth. Are we? How do we know?

Are you committed to this kind of life among one another here at EBF? Or, are you merely attending this event on Sunday, the preaching of the Word to edify you and the responsive participation in vocal worship in song which centers you for the week? Oh, brother and sister, there is so much more to belonging to the Body of Christ!

And you do belong! It doesn't matter if you are a hand or a foot or an ear or an eye! Each part belongs to the body under one Head, Jesus Christ.

And you are needed! Every part needs to be functioning for the flourishing of the Body. Every ear needs to hear, every eye needs to see, every hand needs to work, every foot needs to go. Only when every member does its part does the body flourish in power and effectiveness under the direction and sustenance of the Head. Are you working for the flourishing of the

Church? Are you doing what you are able to participate in the mission of the Head? Are you committed to these people around you, these other members of the Body, to see them participate?

Do you know that the person whom you see every Sunday is for you? Do you know that? How do you know? We must move out of the realm of assumptions and into the realm of encouragement. We must labor to see one another flourish in the knowledge of the Son of God, the unity of the faith, until we all reach maturity in Christ Jesus. You belong to one another in this endeavor, both by nature and by choice. You are responsible for your part in the life of this church. You are family, you are fellows, you are members of one another as those redeemed by Christ and sanctified by His Holy Spirit to proclaim the greatness and glory of God and to flourish in the life which He has placed within you, the life like Christ Jesus, bearing the fruit of the Spirit of God.

So, how are we doing living consistently with this truth? Are you fully committed to one another, to use your gifts for the flourishing of faith in Christ Jesus of those around you? Is that your greatest goal in this life? It is, whether you live like it or not, to make disciples together. Are you helping one another worship God by serving one another with the grace which God's Spirit has given you? Not all are called to preach, so don't worry if you're not a preacher. How can you help the preaching of the church? Not all are called to go to another culture, but how can you help send those who are? What do you enjoy creating, working at, etc.? How can you use that passion, that strength, to participate in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God together? How can you use that gift to bring flourishing and beauty to the Body of Christ Jesus under His reign and rule? How can you restore what has been broken by sin and its ensuing corruption and decay? Undo the undoing by the works of your hands, empowered by the Spirit of God for the restoration of His people. Bring it by the power of the Spirit of God, in dependent prayer and dependence upon the King to provide all that is necessary and make it effective.

In the light of these truths, that we are called into one Body, graced by God's Spirit for many different works of effectiveness, and belonging to one another with all the privileges and responsibilities of belonging to Christ, we desire to clarify and exemplify our commitment to one another publicly. We live in a society of fierce individualism in which our relationship to commitment can be called nothing less than allergic. And, because of this, the Body of

Christ is not the normal center of our social relationships. Therefore, the elders believe it to be a valuable and necessary measure to verbally voice our commitment to follow Christ's purpose and desire to make us one, as He prayed in John 17, and to one another as fellow members in His Body. To do this, we have written a covenantal statement and placed in your bulletin. The first side of this document is an explanation of what a covenant is. The second side is what we believe we can affirm and promise to one another at EBF as fully committed followers of Jesus Christ.

Our desire is that you would join us on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, in two weeks, and if you are fully committed to exercising unity and oneness at this local church, to using your Spirit-enabled gifts to build those in this local part of Christ's Body up, and to entering into these relationships in a more than casual way, you would stand together with us, en masse, and affirm and covenant together the promises listed in the covenant. We recognize that our yes will be yes and our no should be no, and this promise would not change that. It should not be any more binding than any affirmation or denial that we might make, but we believe this oneness and commitment to one another needs to be verbalized and not merely assumed together. We also recognize that you may not be conscientiously able to affirm such commitment to this local body, and that is OK, but we do want to recognize the commitment of those who are so that all our hearts may be encouraged that we do belong to the glorious Body of Christ and have brothers and sisters who will point us to Jesus consistently, prayerfully, sacrificially, and affectionately. Our hope is that this affirmation and recognition of devotion to one another will encourage us to follow the commands of Christ in the letter to the Hebrews:

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Heb 10:24-25)