

“Building Up the Body”

1 Corinthians 3:1–3, 10–13; 1 Corinthians 12:12–26; John 17:20–26
(NRSV)

All for one and one for all! As true for Christians as it was for the musketeers.



Start reading through Paul’s letters in the New Testament and one quickly finds out that he has a lot to say on a wide range of topics. Even when we rightly remember that we are listening in on only one end of these conversations, there is still a lot to understand. So, let me help.

A good way to understand Paul’s advice and instruction is to read it through a lens that has four parts:

1. Do what builds up the body of Christ.
2. Do what is a good witness to Jesus.
3. Avoid what tears down the body of Christ.
4. Avoid what is a bad witness to Jesus.

I came across this simple interpretation aid years ago (though I can’t remember where!). It has stood the test of time. Why does Paul want all public speaking in tongues to be interpreted (see 1 Corinthians 14)? Here’s why. How can the practice build up the body (the church) if no one besides the tongues speaker knows what is being said? Similarly, why does Paul want the believers to be orderly and controlled when they gather to worship (also 1 Corinthians 14)? Because the chaos will make the believers look crazy to outsiders. How could that be a good witness to our Lord?

So, the obvious and appropriate questions are: (1) how can we do all we could to build up the body of Christ, in our case, the local church called First United Methodist? and (2) how can we better witnesses to Christ? This is what we’ll be considering for the next couple of weeks.

Making ourselves ready

If we are going to do all we can to build up the body of Christ and be a good witness to Jesus, then we need to make ourselves ready. At a minimum, that means we have to grow in our Christian maturity. That is Paul’s point in today’s passage from 1 Corinthians 3. These new believers in Corinth are infants in the faith, and in Paul’s metaphor, able to only drink milk – the barest minimum of the Gospel. Should we then be surprised that the Corinthians are having all sorts of problems living out the Good News? 1 Corinthians is a very long letter that addresses a long list of problems.

Paul wants the Corinthians to grow up in their faith and in their understanding, so that they can eat the solid food of the Gospel. Without that, they will be like the believers in Ephesus, “blown around by every wind that comes from teaching with deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to mislead others” (Ephesians 4:14).

In Corinth this immaturity is being demonstrated by, among other problems, divisions among the believers. Some follow Paul and others follow another leader called Apollos. Paul rightly sees that such divisions will tear apart these fragile communities. So he pushes them toward unity. They are to use their many and diverse gifts to build up the body of Christ, but without surrendering their oneness in Christ.

One body, many members

Steve Martin and Lily Tomlin’s 1984 movie, “All of Me,” is a funny movie. Lily Tomlin plays Edwina Cutwater, a very rich woman who doesn’t want to die. She finds another woman willing to accept her soul, but a mistake during the “operation” sends Edwina’s soul directly into the body of Roger Cobb, a passing lawyer. To make matters worse, she takes over only half of Roger’s body. Thus, Edwina controls one arm and one leg while Roger controls the other arm and leg. Needless to say, with Edwina and Roger in charge, the poor fellow’s arms and legs are not all pulling in the same direction. Steve Martin’s gift for physical comedy is on full display as he portrays a man whose limbs have minds of their own.

I wonder if the apostle Paul would find the movie all that funny, or if it would hit a little too close to home. Today’s second passage from 1 Corinthians reveals that the believers in Corinth were too much like Edwina/Roger, with the various parts/limbs/members¹ pulling in different directions. Paul doesn’t see unity in Corinth, much less unity of purpose. Instead, he sees a community divided.

Most of us quickly grasp several of Paul’s points in this passage.

1. First, we humans are a diverse bunch. Though there is much in our humanness that we share, we all know quite well that there is a wide range of personalities, experiences, and values that threaten to divide even the smallest groups.
2. Second, we know that God has given us a variety of gifts. Whether we call them gifts or talents,² we know that some are good at one thing, others at another. I’m pretty good talking in front of groups. My wife is the one that you’d want caring for you during a difficult time.
3. Third, I think we understand that these various gifts make our community stronger. To use Paul’s body metaphor, the eye needs the hand that needs the foot. The body needs them all. Our diversity is a benefit – so long as it is lived out in love and in unity of purpose.

¹“Member” is used in some translations. Our modern use of the word “member” as in “one who belongs to,” is based on this older meaning of a body limb or organ.

² A biblically derived word that comes from Jesus’ so-called parable of the talents (see Matthew 25:14-30)

We know all these things, but sadly churches too often allow their inherent diversity to pull them down into discord, instead of striving for harmonious unity that truly honors and glorifies God.

“That they may all be one”

In emphasizing unity, Paul is merely following Jesus’ lead. On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus met with his disciples for one last meal. He began it by washing their feet and concluded it with his lengthy prayer to the Father (John 17). Of course, Jesus praying is not quite like you and me praying. Jesus is the Divine Revealer in what he does, what he says, and who he is. To put it another way, Jesus is the complete and definitive revelation of God. Thus, Jesus is not only praying to the Father, he is also addressing us with a prophetic word that we need to hear.

There are several themes in Jesus’ prayer: the glorification of the Father through Jesus’ death and exaltation, Jesus’ obedience of the Father, the revelation of God in Jesus, setting the disciples apart from the world, the disciples’ protection, and their mission.³ First and foremost, though, Jesus’ prayer is for unity among the believers. Unity in Christ. Unity in truth. Unity in purpose.

We live in the United States. We give to the United Way. Our coins bear the Latin phrase, *E Pluribus Unum*, “out of many, one.” As Americans, however, we are not united in our values or ethnicity. We are not united in our religion or beliefs. We are united in our laws. But what does Jesus mean when he prays that the disciples, then and now, will be one?

Here is how Jesus describes this unity in his prayer. The Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father. Jesus prays that we will also be in Jesus and the Father (v. 21). We are to be one, as Jesus and the Father are one (v. 22). Jesus is in us and we are in Jesus so that we, the disciples then and now, may be completely one (v. 23).

Whew! That is enough to set any head spinning, so let’s unpack it a bit. Jesus and the Father are one but they are still distinguishable. The Son prays to the Father; Jesus isn’t praying to himself. The Son is obedient to the Father, who sends the Son into the world. Yet when people saw the Son, they saw the Father (John 12:45). What Jesus does, the Father does (14:10). One . . . but distinguishable.

Perhaps the best way to understand Jesus’ meaning is to look ahead to Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit, aka the “Spirit of Christ” and the “Spirit of God,” arrives to dwell not only in the fellowship of believers but in each believer. There is even a Pentecost moment in John’s gospel when, after Jesus’ resurrection, he breathes on the disciples, saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22). The Spirit, who is also one with Father and the Son yet distinguishable from both and from us, forms us into one body. We often affirm this in the benediction taken from one of Paul’s letters: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Cor. 13:13).

“That the world may believe”

Why are we to be united? Or to put it more carefully, why has God set us apart as a single body, grounded in God’s truth? Why does Paul believe that unity is absolutely necessary if we are going to build for God’s kingdom?

First, Jesus has given us the glory that was given him by the Father (v. 22). “Glory” is often a misunderstood word. It refers to the manifestation of God’s being or character through an act that reveals it. Glory is about showing that God is God. Jesus revealed the love and faithfulness of God in his suffering and death. We too are to reveal God’s love and faithfulness in what we do. The world is to see who God is through us.

Second, we are one so that the world can know that the Father sent Jesus and loves the world just as the Father loves Jesus. There could hardly be a more striking evangelistic appeal. We are not formed into God’s people for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world. God’s purpose is that every person might come to know God and know God’s love. Our mission, as believers, is to carry forward that purpose.

There can be no sitting on our hands, no comfort with the status quo. Are there people who do not know that God loves them and that Jesus is their Lord? Are there believers who have only begun to taste the riches of God’s faithfulness?

Whether it is reaching out to children or to youth, to white or to black, to the rich or to the poor . . . we can never forget why God has blessed us by calling us to him and setting us apart for his work.

This is why we at FUMC strive to be evermore outwardly focused. There are always more children to introduce to Jesus. More youth to help understand what it really means to be a believer. More adults to teach and to help grow in their own discipleship. More people to care for. More who need to be invited to the Lord. More poor to feed and to clothe. Always more. Always more.

None of this is a burden or an obligation. Rather, revealing the love and faithfulness of God is a privilege, a profound and energizing privilege. This is not only who we are to be, it is who we are. God has formed us into a fellowship, empowered by his Spirit, to do and to be more than we would ever imagine. By the grace of God we are united. Who says so? Jesus -- and Paul!

So then, let’s work for the good of all whenever we have an opportunity, and especially for those in the household of faith. (Galatians 6:10)

³ From D.A. Carson’s commentary on John in the *Pillar New Testament Commentary* series, Eerdmans, 1991.