

The Anatomy of Church

sermon digest

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1 Corinthians 12:4-13,24b-27

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The painting featured on the cover of *The Inclusive Pulpit Journal* which Carolyn and I edit each year, "In His Image," was created by artist William Zdinak. The abstract face of Jesus is formed by arranging faces of people you may recognize—Dr. Jonas Salk, Robert Kennedy, Mahatma Gandhi, John F. Kennedy, Pope Jon XXIII, Martin Luther King, Fulton Sheen, Pope Paul VI and Alexander Graham Bell—but also faces you would never recognize, like members of the artist's family. The story behind the painting is as curious as the finished portrait (<http://www.printsforinspiration.com/story.html>).

According to the Artist's own account, Zdinak had forgotten his commitment to provide a painting for a religious art show when the voice on the phone jogged his memory with a request for his offering for the show that began the next day. Zdinak pled for one more day and went to work. After numerous failed sketches, at 2:00 A.M. he threw his brushes in the floor in frustration. Then came the vision of the faces; Zdinak scrambled around his house looking for every face that he could find to form the face of Jesus, just in time to keep his promise.

Zdinak called it "In His Image," the image of God in the face of Jesus formed by the faces of humankind. I wonder how Paul would have seen this painting. Is this what he imagined in his metaphor of the church as the body of Christ? In spite of the abundance of Christian art attempting to capture the face of Jesus, no one really knows what he looked like. I recall the pretended shock of history professor Ralph Lynn back in 1959 at Baylor U. He had seen a black Jesus in the art glass of an African-American church in Waco and found both amusement and satisfaction that people clearly viewed by white Christians as inferior saw themselves in the face of Jesus. Bible scholar Rodney Sadler, Jr., got my attention in a 2009 Bible study in St. Louis. He suggested that Jesus was probably dark skinned like the typical Palestinian Jew of his time, more like the dark African skin than the Caucasian portraits that we have come to accept as photographic images of Jesus, more like Sadler than like me. But the point he made was well taken. The skin was relatively unimportant. The Gospels only contain verbal portraits that attempt to tell who he was, not how he appeared.

According to New Testament scholar Frank Stagg, the folks who first read Paul's Corinthian letter were somewhat familiar with human anatomy from the fragmented human bodies left on the amphitheater floor after the gladiatorial slaughter in the Roman Circus. The Roman circus was not the Ringling Brothers variety. There were no clowns or daring young man on the flying trapeze. The circus was a horrible display of human violence designed to appeal to the most primitive, sadistic appetite for blood—something like today's TV or movies. Corinthian Christians had probably seen people devoured by wild animals and gladiators chopping one another into fragments in a fight to the death. Writing to churches struggling to exist in the center of violence and struggling with their own dysfunctional tendencies, Paul tapped the collective Roman memory of body parts strewn on the amphitheater ground. Hands, feet, ears, eyes, and heads do not function very well severed from the rest of the body. Writing to a divided, dysfunctional church, Paul was concerned with the fragmented body lying in pieces on the ground.

The circus was a graphic illustration of the principle that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. All of the parts of the human body can be present and accounted for; they can be appropriately connected to one another without the slightest sign of life. Likewise, all of the members of the church can be present and accounted for; they can even be functionally connected to one another in an enviable organizational scheme—without the slightest evidence of life. Paul's conclusion? A living body consists of diverse members working together in harmony with every member doing it's own individual thing to the best of his/her ability without envy or resentment of the other more celebrated members.

The anatomy of church as the body of Christ addresses the most common church problem—conflict and dissension. The first Christians struggled with two major threats to the survival of the Christian movement, heresy and schism, distortions of Christian faith and fragmentation of Christian community. Heresy was wrong belief. Bart Ehrman's book *Lost Christianities* is a recent account of the many conflicting ideas in early Christianity, some borrowed from Greek and Persian sources, while others were fabrications created by the human imagination. Schism grew out of heresy with each Christian community claiming to own the truth and condemning any and every Christian who held to a different belief. The first big division came in 1054 with mutual excommunications between the legates of Pope Leo IX and Patriarch of Constantinople Michael Cerularius. Thus, the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century was neither the beginning nor the culmination of conflict. The ecumenical movement to

reunite Christianity dawned in the early twentieth century as Christian missionaries discovered the confusion in the non-Christian world when they encountered competing missionaries representing different denominations of the same religion each claiming to have a corner on truth.

Some leaders of denominations saw the answer in institutional merger. When two denominations joined together to form one body of Christ, invariably they ended up with three, the new denomination plus members of each of the old groups who would not change. In Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church amended her language from calling Protestants heretics and schismatics to “separated brethren”; but the basis of unity continued to be an acceptance of papal authority. When Baptists divided over slavery with the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845, Baptists in America continued to be divided long after the Emancipation Proclamation became the law of the land. As a Baptist, I always winced at our commonly held image as the Hatfield and McCoys of Christian denominations, known by our fights. When Baptist historian Walter Shurden wrote about the “controversies that have shaped Southern Baptists,” he concluded that Baptists are “Not a Silent People.” The celebration of Christian freedom and the absence of a central institutional authority other than the Bible led to a history of divisions so that the word *Baptist* is about as conceptually diverse as *Christian*. In history, the very word *Baptist* came to mean divisive and combative to the point of separation: “my way or the highway!”

My favorite story from my years in Kentucky came from Spencer’s history of Kentucky Baptists. During the frontier days, Kentucky was a vast wooded wilderness with a few communities scattered across the state threatened by the hostile Indian tribes that viewed the settlers as intruders. The Long Run Baptist Church, located outside the present city of Louisville, had an all day dinner on the ground with a log-rolling contest and a favorite church activity, the discussion of a controversial issue of the day. The question posed was whether a Christian could ever tell a lie. The proposition posed before the brethren and sisters: in the event of a raid by hostile Indians and the threat of imminent death could a Christian lie about the location of their hidden children? The ensuing debate became so heated that the church split. One group claimed the name Whole Truth Baptist Church, while the schismatics formed a new congregation down the road that became known as the Lying Baptists.

I would like to share a confession and a discovery. The longer I have lived and widened my experience of church life, the more I am convinced that the church is not and never has been a monolithic, perfect unity. Even as the people of God, the church has always been populated by *people*. In more than fifty years of pastoral ministry, I have been privy to about every problem that Paul describes in the troubled church at Corinth: personality cults attached to former church leaders, arguments over behavior at church socials, morally offensive behavior ranging from children being children to adult church leaders behaving as children, dissension over the Lord’s Supper and disagreements about theology—shall I go on?

You are the body of Christ! The word of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount is a declaration, “You are the salt of the earth!” “You are the light of the world.” Jesus does not make salt and light contingent on any requisite. It is a declaration of the essence of discipleship. You don’t have to earn salt and light. You do not grow up to become salt and light. You *are* salt and light.

Paul does not try to avoid the issues confronting the church by denial of differences in the congregation. Instead he offers the metaphor of the human body to illustrate that different organs, performing different functions, are equally essential to the life of the body and equally valued by the whole body for what they do. He does not call for the church to work to become the body of Christ. He declares that the differences in the congregation are normal. Indeed, they are the direct work of the Holy Spirit in the congregation. They should not be the source of conflict; they ought to become a harmonious symphony as the church lives in the world as church. Like Christ, Paul does not call for the church to strive to become something we are not or hope some day to be; he declares to this messed up bunch of people fighting and feuding over who is the greatest, “*you are the body of Christ!*” His challenge to the church of every age, even to us, is to be what we are rather than to fight over what we are not.

A story from the annals of Louisiana Governor Huey P. Long: he encountered the pastor of one of the large downtown churches on the sidewalk one day in Baton Rouge. After the exchange of a few niceties about the weather, Long felt obligated to offer his expert opinion about the church. He told the pastor, “I would like to attend your church, but I have found that the church is full of hypocrites.” To which the pastor replied, “You know, Mr. Long, you are right, But there is always room for one more.”

I think Paul’s vision of the perfect body of Christ was affected by his experience with reality: the church is never going to be a marching band in uniforms playing their instruments in perfect harmony as they walk

in lock-step across the field. But when we come together in community to express our Spirit-given gifts to the best of our God-given ability, we can be who we are and at the same time be the body of Christ in the world.

Being theologically correct is much like being politically correct. A perfect theology, if indeed anyone knows what that is, does not necessarily create the perfect church. Salvation is the foundation of the people of God, but being saved is not enough. Though Pentecost seemed to have given birth to the church, being filled with the Spirit is not enough. Individually and isolated, even our spiritual gifts do not serve the life of the church. Only when we come together and complement each other's gifts and form a bond of fellowship (*koinonia*) in the holy love (*agape*) of God, only when we live in harmony with one another, are we the church. The refrain from the hymn to love in chapter thirteen, which follows in sequence to Paul's lesson on Spiritual gifts, echoes through the centuries: "And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." (13:13)