

Church — Belonging to the Body

Early last year, my friend and I were walking in downtown Nashville on our way to a meeting at the headquarters of the United Methodist Church. Even though we were only going a few blocks from our hotel, we somehow got lost. I saw a stranger standing near the door of an office building, so I walked over to him and said, “Could you please give us directions to the Methodist Church headquarters?” He threw up his hands and said, “Don’t ask me — I’m a Presbyterian!” That’s the way some people define their relationship to the church of Jesus Christ — by denomination. Often we hear people say, “I’m a Lutheran,” or “I’m a Catholic,” or whatever.

One Friday afternoon when I was maybe the only one left in this building, I was standing out by the information desk when a delivery man came with a package and asked if I would sign for it. While I was signing for it he asked, “What’s the name of this church?” I said, “It’s Wooddale Church.” He said, “Wooddale ‘what’ church?” And I said, “It’s just Wooddale Church.” He said, “Oh — it’s a ‘no religion’ church?”

For a lot of people, a church is a denomination or it’s not really a church at all. Those at the other extreme have no relationship with any church, even though they would insist that they are Christians. They’re sort of “independent” Christians. They don’t have anything to do with any other Christians, yet they expect that when they die they will go to heaven and then be part of the church of Jesus Christ.

For those who are non-Christians, church would rarely be considered one of the most important relationships of life. For true Christians and disciples of Jesus Christ, the church is not only one of life’s most important relationships it is an essential part of being a Christian.

The church of Jesus Christ is no ordinary organization. It is supernatural! Jesus said, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it (Matthew 16:18).” The church was founded by Jesus himself. And when we talk about the Christian church it means that we are talking

about something that is mysterious, something that is truly supernatural. It is designed and empowered by God himself.

The New Testament calls the church, the “body of Christ.” That’s a strange expression — the body of Jesus. According to the New Testament, Jesus has two bodies. When the eternal Son of God stepped down from the glory of heaven to be born on Christmas Day, God gave him a human body to live in. It was body number one. It is in that body that Jesus was born, grew to maturity, performed miracles and raised the dead. It was in that body that he taught marvelous truths, walked on water and represented God on earth in everything that he said and did. It was in that body that he died on Good Friday and came back to life again on Easter Sunday morning. And it was in that body that Jesus ascended and went back to heaven again.

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When body number one ascended to heaven, God gave him a second body — the church. It was born on Pentecost

and has been growing for two thousand years. It includes all of us who are Christians. It is this body number two that represents God on earth, speaks God’s truth, communicates God’s love. It is God’s primary representative and spokesperson on earth today.

A powerful evidence of the supernatural nature of the church is its very survival. While many people legitimately point to the sins and stupidity of churches over the last two thousand years, it is amazing that it has survived and thrived in spite of our human inadequacy and our human mistakes. For twenty centuries the church has continued when great empires have collapsed from Rome to China to Britain to Africa and South America. If it were merely a human institution it would have gone out of business long ago.

Instead, the worldwide church of Jesus Christ today has nearly two billion Christians. It is larger than any country in the world — seven times the population of the United States, nearly twice the population of the People’s Republic of China which

is the highest population country in the world today. The church is older than any other organization in history.

The church is supernatural and I am awed by it. I see God in it. The church is Christ's body today and here. I say unashamedly that I love Jesus Christ and I love the church of Jesus Christ. Sometimes when we're close to something we see only the faults. As a Christian I am keenly aware of the problems, inadequacies and criticisms of the church now and in the past. I think I know them well. But I still very much see God in it and love the church with all my heart.

One of God's biggest points about the body of Christ and our relationship to it is one of interdependence. That is very different from the American way. As Americans we value independence, but as Christians we value interdependence.

The Bible compares our relationship to each other to the relationship between the parts of our body. Body parts can't independently function. Your heart, for example, didn't have the option of sleeping in this morning and not coming to church with you. Or what if your fingers really did go for a walk through the Yellow Pages and left the rest of your body behind? To be a body means interdependent parts that need each other to live.

I Corinthians 12:12-27 says:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, everyone of them,

just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is part of it.

The Bible knows no such thing as an independent Christian. In fact, a claim to be independent from other Christians is really to admit to not being a Christian at all.

The church of Jesus Christ is supernatural, interdependent and loving. According to Jesus, love is the distinguishing characteristic that separates it from any other organization or institution. Jesus said that Christians could be identified by their love for one another.

Probably the greatest words about love that were ever written in any language are found in what is called the love chapter of the Bible — I Corinthians 13. It is often read at weddings, but it's really not talking about the relationship between

a husband and a wife, it's about the relationship of Christians in the life of the church.

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The church of Jesus Christ combines these marvelous characteristics — it's supernatural, interdependent and loving. That's a quick overview. But let's get personal and practical. I want to list for you five different areas of a Christian's relationship to the local church and ask you to score yourself and see how you are doing.

The first one is a little more abstract than the other four so let me try to explain it. We are to see the church as an expression of our relationship to God. To understand that, we have to realize that the church is not a building — it is not a typical organization.

On Friday of this week, I got a telephone call from a researcher at Harvard University who is working on a profile of religion in America. At the end of his questions he said, “We’re going to publish this research. Could you send some pictures from Wooddale? Make sure that you send pictures of people.” His last line was absolutely intriguing. You see, he got what the church is — not the building, not the organization, but the people.

Do you see the church as an expression of your relationship to God, as sort of a foundation to what the church of Jesus Christ is all about? Rate yourself. If you see that as a strength, give yourself a ten, if you are growing in this area, rate yourself a seven. If you think that’s a weakness, then five. If it’s a weakness but you’d like to see it grow then a two or three and if you couldn’t care less then give it a zero.

The Christian who wants to have God’s perspective sees his or her relationship to the church as an essential part of a personal relationship with God. It’s easy for me to say that I really love God. But how do you know whether I do or not? The proof of my relationship with God is what I do in the context of the relationships that I have with others who are Christians in the church of Jesus Christ.

So what’s your score? Got it? All right let’s go on to the second one.

Taking responsibility is necessary for any relationship to be good. If you’re married, you know that you can’t just expect the other person to make the marriage succeed. We sometimes joke about it and say that for a marriage to really succeed, **both** partners have to take sixty or eighty percent of the responsibility for the relationship.

Taking responsibility in terms of our relationships to other Christians in the church does not mean that others should be irresponsible. The rest of the church has responsibilities to you just as you

have responsibilities to the church. For example, I can’t say that you are suppose to teach me. I need to say, “I will take responsibility to learn.” Too frequently modern American Christians leave the responsibility to others. Others are supposed to make friends with me but I don’t have to befriend others. Others are supposed to give so I can get, but I don’t take responsibility to give my share.

What about you? Who do you consider to be responsible to give you a good relationship with other Christians and the church? If you take first responsibility yourself, give yourself a ten. If you leave everything to everybody else, then give yourself a zero or a one. By the way, there is an interesting indicator on how you check out on this particular point by considering how you select a church when you move to a new area. Suppose that this summer you’re transferred and you’re going to move to Arkansas or Arizona or Alaska or somewhere else and you need to look for a new church home when you get there. Is the main question on your mind what that new church can do for you or what you can contribute to that church? **That’s** the issue of responsibility. Are they responsible to me or am I responsible to them? Score yourself and we’ll move on to number three which has to do with getting connected.

Think of your relationship to the church as being like Velcro. Velcro has two sides — one side is a set of little hooks and the other is a set of little eyes. If two pieces of Velcro are in the same room but completely separate from each other they will never stick. If you just sort of touch them together you can get a slight connection, but they can be easily torn apart. But if you press them together so that there are scores, in fact, hundreds of connection points, then it’s almost like a zipper, it’s hooked up and compressed together.

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How well are you connected to other Christians in the body of Jesus Christ? Do you know people

by name? How many people do you pray for? That’s a good indicator of how you are connected. The idea and design of God is that I pray for others and they pray for me. Have you worked with other people on projects and do you have Chris-

tian friends? Are you a member of your church? I tell people if you attend the same church for six months or longer and believe that God wants you there, you should join the church. Church membership is a tangible way of showing your commitment to the body of Christ and your willingness to take responsibility.

If you're well-connected, give yourself a high number; if you're a loner give yourself a low number.

The fourth test has to do with doing one's part. I Corinthians 12 says that every Christian has a part in the church. There's only a partial list there, but some are teachers, some are evangelists, some are helpers, some show mercy to others, some are encouragers. By the time a person has been a Christian for let's say twelve months, that person should have a pretty clear idea of his or her part in the body of Christ. Just as an eye needs to know it's an eye and a foot needs to know it's a foot in the body, each of us should have a pretty clear picture of what God has called us to do in the body of Jesus Christ. And then we need to do that part.

Doing our part is an essential expression of devotion to Jesus Christ. For it is something less than devotion to Jesus Christ to be a part of the body and not be able to identify what our part is in the body or to do nothing about it. Christians by God's design are never intended to be swamps — stagnant ponds that merely take in water. We are intended to be rivers that feed into each other, with water flowing both in and out.

So again, how do you rate? What is your part within the church that others can depend on? Do you regularly contribute financially? Do you contribute your energy and prayer time as well as your money or do you expect other people to give your share for you? If every Christian functioned just as you do in these areas, would that be a good thing or a bad thing for the church? That's another way of checking all of this out. Go ahead again and give yourself a score.

Our fifth and final item is to love others in the church. Jesus said that love is a key mark of who is a Christian and it's especially important within the context of the church. In a sense, love is the fuel to make Christian relationships good. For without love, the church is just another human organi-

zation. But with love, it is the body of Jesus Christ.

Love is in part, an attitude. It includes acts of kindness toward others but also sometimes requires confrontation. Love is not letting other people get away with things that are out of line and inappropriate, but confronting them in a kind and a gracious way. Love is unselfish. It takes the other person's side and perspective. Love is forgiving. It's generous. It's treating others the way Jesus treats us.

No one is perfect in Christian love. Loving like Jesus takes a lifetime. But lots of you should not underrate yourselves. For many Christians, love is truly your strength and you're a lot like Jesus.

Well, how does your score add up? What do you need to do to have a right relationship with the church? When you start to work on areas that need improvement, remember this: you are not doing it for yourself, although the personal benefits are great; it's not just for the local church, although it's great when everybody does their part in the body; you're doing it for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Listen one more time to the words of the New Testament. "Now **you** are the body of Christ and each of **you** is part of it."

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