

GOVERNING PRINCIPLES

FOR BUILDING UP

THE BODY OF CHRIST

Tom Finley

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INTRODUCTION

Most serious Christians know that the church is not a building on the corner. The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, which means an assembly of called out ones. This assembly of God's chosen people is the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23). There are many truths relating to the body of Christ, but here I would like to examine some foundational truths that are particularly crucial to the matter of building up the body of Christ. All sincere believers want to be useful to God. If believers have spiritual insight they will recognize that all service to God has an ultimate aim - the building up of the body of Christ. This is true because it is in God's eternal purpose, planned in eternity and hidden for ages (but now revealed), to have a corporate body for Christ (Eph. 3:4-11). It is in this corporate body, composed of God's people, that Christ is to be expressed, that is, lived out.

When we speak of the building up of the body of Christ let us not think that this means "church growth," as is often promoted today. Simply to have more attendees in a meeting or on a church roll is not the edification of which we speak. Nor is this edification just the spiritual growth or discipleship of individual believers, although that is involved. In fact, the Scripture indicates that there can be a distinction between the building up of the individual Christian and the body of Christ (1 Cor. 14:4). The building up of the body involves the ministry of the members of the body to the other members of the body, although evangelism to unbelievers is also included (1 Cor. 12:7; 14:4, 5, 12, 26; Eph. 4:12, 16; 1 Pet. 4:10, 11). The result of true building up is manifested in two ways: oneness among the believers and the mature expression of the life of Christ (Eph. 4:13). **The true building up involves the ministry of Christ by all the members of the body that knits**

them together in oneness and brings them into a mature expression of Christ's person. He becomes manifest among them in a unified, corporate way. This is **the goal** of the local assembly.

If there are indeed principles of truth which govern this matter of building up the body of Christ, then it is only logical, and indeed spiritual, that our labor in the Lord must be in accord with these principles. Surely our God expects us to build "according to the pattern" He has established. He instructed Moses to be sure to build the tabernacle (a picture of the church) according to what God had shown to him on the mountain (Ex. 25:9, 40). It is very possible that as you read this booklet you will discover that Christians today, perhaps yourself, are not always "building" according to God's principles. May we humble ourselves and seek His grace to change our ways when we realize that we have been wrong. If we do not, how can we expect God to produce His goal of the oneness and maturity of Christ's body in our assembly? And, how can we expect Christ's approval at His Judgment Seat (2 Cor. 5:10)?

This booklet will discuss six principles for building up the body of Christ. These six principles are: Christ is all; Christ is the head; oneness; the body builds up itself; building up in love; building up through the cross. These truths will be seen as applying both to the universal body of Christ and to the local assembly, the place where we actually labor to serve and build up the body. Although we separate these principles for discussion, one will observe that there is overlap in the living out of these principles. No principle strictly stands on its own but is interwoven with other principles.

1

CHRIST IS ALL

In the church Christ is everything. This spiritual concept is hard for the natural mind to grasp. One may immediately react by thinking, "if Christ alone is the content of the body, then where are the believers?" The believers are all there - as members of His body. However, according to Biblical revelation, it is not the natural person of the believer that is there. It is the spiritual person, the believer who has died with Christ and now has Christ as his very life (Col. 3:2-3).

In the new man the old, natural characteristics of believers do not exist, but rather: "there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free, but *Christ is all and in all*" (Col. 3:11). This verse speaks of the spiritual reality of our union with Christ, being "in Christ." But what is true concerning the church according to spiritual reality is also to become true of her in experience.

Paul revealed the mystery of the church in the first two and one half chapters of Ephesians. Paul wrote that God gave Christ to be "head over all things to the church, which is *His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all*" (Eph. 1:22-23). Then, based upon this revelation he prayed for the Ephesian believers that they would experience the reality of this vision:

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be

strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height - to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; *that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.* (Eph. 3:14-19)

The answer to this prayer would be this result: “to Him be *glory in the church* by Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:21).

What I am saying is that it is God's intention that Christ be the building element of the church. This truth was revealed in the opening chapters of the Bible, where Eve, a type of the church, **was fashioned by God entirely from the rib of Adam**, a type of Christ. Therefore, any true assembly of God on this earth must possess a Christ that is living, a Christ that is experienced daily by its members in order that the church may be built up. **Above all the members of the assembly must learn to live in union with Christ.** It is easy to substitute religious activity for this priority.

Today in Christendom there is an attempt to increase the membership and outward “vitality” of the church through programs and activities, even often supposedly aimed at spiritual goals. Unfortunately, even Bible reading, Christian meetings, singing, teaching the Bible, preaching, helping others, or other service to the Lord can all be done apart from the living Christ. Those with discernment can sense that much of the Christian activity today stems from the natural ideas, abilities, ways and energy of men, not from the source of Christ Himself. From beginning to end the Scripture records the ideas and efforts of man to “do something” for God, and these efforts of the flesh (the natural man) always end with damage to God’s testimony. Nimrod (“a mighty hunter before Jehovah”) and others built a worship tower in Babel (Gen. 11); Abraham employed fleshly means to fulfill God’s promise through Hagar (Gen. 16); Aaron (the high priest) and the children of Israel fashioned a golden calf

and celebrated “a feast to Jehovah” (Ex. 32); Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire before the Lord (Lev. 10); the elders and people of Israel rejected God as their king and chose a man, Saul, for leadership, according to the practice of the nations (1 Sam. 8); Saul acted foolishly in offering sacrifice in disobedience to the command to wait for Samuel to offer the sacrifice (1 Sam. 13); Saul preserved the best things of the Amalekites (a type of the flesh) to sacrifice to the Lord, in disobedience to God’s command to destroy them all (1 Sam. 15); the children of Israel mixed pagan practices with the worship of Jehovah as they sacrificed on the “high places” (2 Kin. 14-17); the people mixed pagan idols and worship with temple worship, precipitating the destruction of the temple and the exile to Babylon (Ezek. 8); the Corinthians defiled God’s church with carnal and divisive preferences for leaders (1 Cor. 3); the legalists bewitched the saints into keeping the law by the effort of the flesh as the way of progress in the Christian life (Gal. 3); those influenced by Gnosticism or other beliefs brought in false human philosophies that threatened damage to the truth and true fellowship (Col. 2; 1 John).

We must take instruction from the Lord. When He called Zerubbabel and the remnant back to Jerusalem to rebuild the testimony of His house, God told them the way that it must be done: “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: “Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,” says the Lord of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). **The “might” and the “power” speak of the abilities of man, in contrast to the power of the Holy Spirit.**

The natural man, apart from Christ, has many capabilities, such as organizational abilities, leadership abilities, creative abilities, musical or artistic abilities, speaking abilities, intellectual abilities, and energetic abilities (will power) to carry out programs and plans. Yet, it is only as we agree to die to our natural capabilities and strength and wait upon the Lord for His leading, and deeply depend upon Him for His power, that we can avoid the pitfall of attempting to “build the church” by the effort of the flesh. Sadly, this willingness to die to self and wait in dependence upon God is missing in much of Christian service today. May the Lord

deepen our dependence upon Him and our knowing of Him so that we may live in the reality of our union with Him. We must have “Christ as all” the content of our living and doing in our assembly life.

2

CHRIST IS THE HEAD

“And He [Christ] is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.” (Col. 1: 18)

Honoring Christ’s headship through honoring His word

In honoring Christ as the head, we must firstly honor His word. Jesus Himself made this matter pointedly clear: “‘Why do you call me “Lord, Lord” and do not do the things which I say?’” (Lk. 6:46). In the practice of the assembly life, therefore, it is Christ's word, containing His thought and His way, that must be honored and obeyed, not man's thought and man's way. In the last chapter we saw man’s abilities to “build” the church contrasted with the power of the Spirit. **In this chapter we see the ideas and ways of the natural man for “building” contrasted with obedience to God’s word.** Our starting point must be a confession. We must agree with God's word in Isaiah. “‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts’” (Is. 55:8-9).

The Scripture and Christian history reveal a major obstacle to obedience to God’s word, and that is the religious traditions of men. If we find that our tradition transgresses the word of God, as did the practice of the Pharisees (Matt. 15:1-9; Mk. 7:2-13), are we

willing to repent that Christ may have the headship? Dare we build a church according to our way? To those who were building by the natural way of man in Corinth, the apostle Paul warned:

According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. *But let each one take heed how he builds on it.* For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and *the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.* If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, *he will suffer loss;* but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, *God will destroy him.* For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are. Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. (1 Cor. 3:10-18)

The “temple of God” mentioned here is the local church in Corinth since the “you” is plural in the phrase “you are the temple of God.” Any practice that produces division in the body of Christ is clearly against God’s word. Those who were divisively practicing the assembly life there in Corinth (1 Cor. 3:3, 4) were being warned by Paul of the coming Judgment Seat of Christ. The apostle was warning them that their natural way of building, characterized by preferring and grouping around leaders, was going to be tested by fire at the future judgment. Those doing this

were facing some “destruction” (a ruinous judgment, not loss of eternal salvation) by God.

The final part of this passage shows that this wrongful practice was something that might be considered wise according to this age, but not according to God's thought. So here we see an example of “building” the church according to the thought and way of man, not according to God’s word. In God's view this was not edification, but defilement of the church. If we tolerate any of the ways of man in the church which violate God’s word, we deny Christ His headship and violate a basic principle of the body we claim to build up.

Honoring Christ's headship by allowing the Holy Spirit to rule in the body

Besides acknowledging Christ's headship by honoring His word, we must also know His headship by letting the Holy Spirit rule in the church. The Holy Spirit’s ministry is to reveal Christ to us, so yielding to the guidance of the Holy Spirit equals being under Christ’s headship (Jn. 16:14). The Bible reveals that the function of all the members according to their respective gifts is a matter of the working of the Spirit:

There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the

interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills. (1 Cor. 12:4-11)

The operation of the Spirit as intrinsic to the assembly life is again seen in the Biblical portrait of a proper Christian meeting:

How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. (1 Cor. 14:26-33)

It is the Spirit of Christ working in each member that brings the gifts and ministries of the saints into function. This truth calls for each member of the body to be functioning under the headship of Christ (1 Cor. 12:4-6; Eph. 4:15-16; Col. 2:19). In the meeting pictured in 1 Corinthians 14 above, there is no fully prearranged program with hymns already posted on a board, or a Sunday school lesson selected by a denominational headquarters. These actions frustrate the living head of a living body. Nor is the meeting planned, organized and overseen by one member. Rather, the meeting is the spontaneous activity of a living organism, where each member gets its life and stimulus for ministry directly from the head of the body, Christ. “Ministers” are not limited to those

chosen and approved by men or by headquarters, but include all who are taught, prepared and enlivened by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

This kind of body life provides an atmosphere of liberty that encourages the function of all the members. Here, a member only needs to look to Christ the head as to when and how to function. This atmosphere, particularly in the meeting of the assembly, is in total contrast to one where everything is routine, pre-planned, controlled from headquarters or directed from the platform at the front.

“Won't confusion result?” you ask. “Won't mistakes be made or unlearned ones do damage?” This same passage declares: “For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints” (1 Cor. 14:33). Mistakes may occur, but if we dare to let God control the assembly directly He will, in His way, bring about peace and edification. Rather than fear that things may get out of control through liberty, we should instead fear man's control of the assembly. If man's authority is in tight control over the church, then Christ as the head is locked outside.

Honoring Christ's headship by not allowing it to be usurped by man

The testimony of Christian history reveals the tendency of men to want a human leader, someone to be “the head,” whom the rest follow in obedience. But, we must be on guard against this tendency in order to preserve Christ's unique headship. Christ alone is the one true authority in the church. The desire for human authority is seen in the Old Testament when the Israelites wanted a king like the nations around them. Concerning their demand for a human king, God said: “they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them” (1 Sam. 8:7). In the New Testament it was prophesied that some would “rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves” (Acts 20:30). False apostles tried to bring others into bondage under themselves (2

Cor. 11:20). But the Scripture tells us: “Likewise he who is called while free is Christ’s slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men” (1 Cor. 7:22b-23).

Each member must be exercised to hold only Christ as the unique Head (Eph. 4:15; 5:23). By such an exercise the saint should be directly under Christ’s headship, hearing His voice in order to follow His will for their lives. Over the centuries Satan has cleverly brought in corrupt teachings to usurp Christ’s headship so that persons, churches or ministries become “the head.” For example, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that the Pope is the “true vicar of Christ and Head of the whole church.”¹ The term “vicar” here means “earthly representative.” So the Pope supposedly acts as the visible head on the earth for the invisible head in heaven, being God’s “deputy authority” on the earth. Thus, strict obedience is enjoined upon Roman Catholics to follow his dictates and his teachings. This erroneous idea of such a “deputy authority” has been seen in other groups over the centuries besides the Roman Catholic Church. It always brings the saints into some bondage to a person, a church, a ministry or a movement. It hinders the individual saint’s freedom and responsibility to search and understand the Scriptures for himself or herself (Acts 17:11; 1 Thess. 5:20-21). It also hampers the saint’s ability to “hear the Lord” for their own spiritual direction because they have already been told what God’s will is for them in some points by the “deputy authority.” At its extreme, such authority teaching has even been used to control the most personal decisions of an individual’s life.

God does place human leaders in the church. The elders of the local assembly are placed there by the Holy Spirit to oversee and shepherd the flock – to watch over their welfare (Acts 20:28). Other members besides recognized elders may also provide leadership for the saints (Acts 15:22; 1 Cor. 16:15-16). Leadership in the church is not like that of the world, however, involving a hierarchy where the higher one has “authority over” the lower one

and can command him what to do. This is proven by Jesus’ word in Luke 22:25-26: “And He said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called “benefactors.” But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves.’” The New Testament calls for the elders not to “lord it over” the flock, but to be godly examples (1 Pet. 5:3). The example of the godly lives of the leaders, along with the truth they teach, gives reason for the saints to follow their pattern of faith (Heb. 13:7).

With these concepts in mind we come to understand Hebrews 13:17: “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.” The word here translated as “obey” (Strong’s # 3982) is not the word used for “obey” in the New Testament as respects obedience to God and Christ. Rather, the verb used here means “to persuade” and the particular voice of the Greek verb here would indicate cooperation with the persuasion. A possible translation would be “let yourself be persuaded by” your leaders. Also, most modern translations use the term “leaders” in this verse instead of “those who rule over you.” “Leaders” is preferable, since we are apt to think of “rule over” as something like “lord it over” (“have absolute authority over”). We must be reminded that the idea of lording it over others is against the teaching of the New Testament (Matt. 20:25-28; Lk. 22:25-26; 1 Pet.5:3). Finally, the Greek verb translated “be submissive” (Strong’s # 5226) in Heb. 13:17 is used only here in the entire New Testament. It means to yield or surrender, and it pictures surrender after battle when used of military engagement. Thus, the overall picture in the first part of this verse presents a willingness to be persuaded by the leaders, including a yielding to them after listening to them, or perhaps having a dialogue. So, a paraphrase might be: “Let yourself be persuaded by your leaders, being willing to yield to them.”

¹ First Vatican Council, 1870.

God provides leadership in the church through the example of godly lives and the ministry of God's word (Heb. 13:7). Thus, we surely should be open to be persuaded by what these leaders counsel and teach, respecting the leadership that God has given them. However, no person, church or ministry is infallible or has absolute "deputy authority" from God. We are to test things that are taught (1 Thess. 5:20, 21) and even men (1 Jn. 4:1; Rev. 2:2), realizing that some men can even be false leaders. We must preserve the headship of Christ by not allowing any absolute headship of men to be imposed upon us.

3

ONENESS

A crucial fundamental characteristic of the body of Christ is its oneness. "There is one body" (Eph. 4:4). "For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12). The unity of the body of Christ is a prominent theme in the New Testament. In its spiritual reality, in example, and in practical exhortation, the oneness of the body is emphasized again and again (Jn. 17:22-23; Acts 4:32; Rom. 12:4-5; 14:1-15:7; 16:17; 1 Cor. 1:10-13; 3:1-4; 11:17-22; 12:12-27; Gal. 3:26-28; 5:19-20; Eph. 2:11-16; 3:4-6; 4:1-6, 13-16; Phil. 2:2-3; 4:2; Col. 3:14-15; Tit. 3:10). Significantly, Christ prayed to the Father on the very night before the cross concerning this oneness:

"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me." (Jn. 17:20-23)

We see, therefore, that the oneness of the body of Christ is critical in God's view. We are all in one body universally (1 Cor. 12:13), yet experientially we must practice this oneness and grow in this oneness (Rom. 14:1-15:7; Eph. 4:1-3, 12-13). As believers who fellowship and serve in a local church, we must take care of the oneness that is so essential to the church. **The building up of the body of Christ cannot be separated from the matter of oneness. True building up results in unity:** “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying [building up] of the body of Christ, **till we all come to the unity** of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12-13).

In dealing with the issue of oneness, God's word takes a twofold approach. In a number of passages the Bible reveals the necessity of dealing with certain negative attitudes and practices that divide believers. On the other hand, Scripture also teaches us certain positive steps to take in order to promote and preserve the unity.

As we touch some of these negative and positive admonitions, I would ask you to maintain an open and prayerful spirit to God. It may be that some of these admonitions contradict your current practices. By God's grace, please remain open to His word on the matter rather than being defensive. In this way you may very well experience a change of mind in this area and become more obedient and pleasing to our Lord.

Division based on leaders

The Bible teaches that certain practices divide the body of Christ. For example, the church in Corinth was experiencing the stress cracks of division. It had not yet fully fractured into separated fellowships (there was still one identifiable fellowship in the city of Corinth), but divisive practices were evident. Paul addressed these practices with real concern in his first epistle to the Corinthians. He wrote:

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you . . . For it has been declared to me concerning you . . . that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? (1 Cor. 1: 10-13)

These divisions were the result of believers grouping their fellowship around gifted leaders and their ministries. The Corinthian believers should have realized that all the gifted ones are for the whole body and that all of these leaders belonged to them (1 Cor. 3:21-22). They should not have had a special identification with one person or his ministry, because in doing so they distinguished themselves from others and made their fellowship exclusive. In other words, by establishing special fellowships with only those believers who preferred certain ministers, they effectively excluded other believers.

Related to the unity of the body of Christ is the principle that the body is inclusive. The body of Christ includes all the members (1 Cor. 12:12). If we practice any basis of fellowship that is particular, that is not as general and as broad as the entire body, then we become exclusive - we effectively exclude certain members of the body and divide it.

Someone may well ask, “What about the statement ‘I am of Christ’ that Paul included in his condemnation?” The context of this phrase (“I am of Christ”) indicates that those who claimed to be “of Christ” were involved in quarrels and division (1 Cor. 1:10-12). Paul was condemning the divisive attitude of those making this claim. They had a divisive attitude in that they were essentially saying, “You others may be of Paul or Apollos, but we are of Christ.” They most likely felt that they were spiritually superior by not gathering around human leaders but only “honoring” Christ. Yet, they held their fellowship “around Christ” in an exclusive

way. They really did not care for all the members, but only for those who agreed to their “separated standing” to be “of Christ.” The exclusiveness of this kind of attitude, masked by a “spiritual” reason, is harder to detect within ourselves than more obvious practices, such as preferring human leaders.

Paul condemned all these special groupings as the work of fleshly men and of babes in Christ (1 Cor. 3:1-4). He concluded his criticism of the Corinthians on this point by stating: “Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come - all are yours” (1 Cor. 3:21-22). Paul's word here stressed the inclusive nature of the body by stating that the gifted ministers were possessed in common by all the members.

We must be willing to see how this teaching applies to the church today. In particular, it certainly applies to divisions caused by fellowships that identify with certain men or ministries. If Paul was here today would he not have the same thing to say to those who would state, “I am a Lutheran,” or “I am a Wesleyan” (of John Wesley), or “I am a Mennonite” (which sect was named after Menno Simons)? These names represent *denominations* (particular groups with specific names) named after men. Today's denominations are universal groupings having many local fellowships in association together.

The same principle applies to singular congregations also, such as the “Richardson Memorial Church,” which would be a church named in memory of Mr. Richardson. How can any assembly take a name other than the name of their Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ? It seems incredible to me that another name could be so honored as to name the assembly by it. Is not our Lord affronted by such an action?

The Lord Jesus spoke approvingly to the church in Philadelphia: “You have a little strength, have kept My word, and *have not denied My name*” (Rev. 3:8). There are other groups today which do not take the name of a person, but nonetheless are exclusive in the same manner. Their attitude is to care only for their unique leader and his ministry. Their basis of fellowship is

narrow and divisive; it is circumscribed in reality only by those who appreciate that leader and his ministry. A final category here would be represented by those who are “of Christ.” These would claim that their unique leader is Christ. While it is true that our sole leader should be Christ Himself, we must be careful to guard against the danger of holding a superior attitude towards others that generates exclusivity. Spiritual pride is certainly a root of division. Robert Chapman, an Englishman who lived in the 1800s and was known for his Christ-like life stated: “Humility is the secret of fellowship, and pride the secret of division.”

Doctrinal and other divisions

Before we review the teaching of the Bible concerning the positive things we must do to preserve the oneness, let us continue to look at the negative side by examining other factors that divide Christians. Any person who honestly assesses the situation in Christianity today will acknowledge that doctrinal differences often divide believers. Here again we have believers forming special fellowships (churches), not around certain persons, but in this case around non-foundational beliefs or convictions they especially hold dear. We must see that **the basis of our fellowship with other believers, even all believers, is life, the eternal life of God which we all share, not “light” on certain doctrines** (Jn. 17:2-3; 1 Jn. 1:2-3).

There is nothing wrong with having convictions concerning truth or practice. The problem comes in when Christians emphasize certain truths to the point where they become the key factors or the basis of their association together. In His wisdom, God has revealed the remedy for this problem in His word. When Paul wrote to the saints in Rome, he realized that there were probably different views among the saints there concerning certain matters. His concern was that these differing views not damage the unity among all the believers living in Rome. Here is Paul's teaching in this regard:

Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. . . . Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way. . . . Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. . . . We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. . . . Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God. (Rom. 14:1-6, 13, 19; 15:1-2, 5-7)

In this passage Paul is addressing the saints' varying views on "doubtful things" (Rom. 14:1). "Doubtful things" are those matters in Christian belief and practice which may not seem to be

so clearly defined in Scripture. Certainly there should be uniformity of belief regarding the clear teaching and commands of Scripture on moral matters. And, all believers should hold to the fundamentals of the faith concerning God and concerning Christ's person and work. However, the testimony of Christian history is that sincere believers can read the Bible and sincerely pray, yet arrive at different conclusions regarding minor doctrines, or regarding convictions concerning what God desires in terms of practical holiness in our lives.

In the passage in Romans 14 the Bible uses the example of different convictions concerning eating meat and the observance of days. However, the principle extends to any "doubtful thing." Today, for example, there are different convictions concerning what constitutes "being holy" or "not loving the world." There are also sincere differences of opinion on what the Bible teaches concerning the rapture.

The oneness of the body of Christ is a great work achieved by Christ through the cross (Eph. 2:11-16). Therefore, we should see that **the carrying out of this oneness is much more important than our pet secondary doctrines or practices**, which we can misuse to cause division in the body of Christ.

We should never expect or insist that other believers agree with us on minor points of doctrine or practice. The only doctrine that should be uniformly accepted by all true believers is "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). "The faith" consists of the basic truths concerning Christ and His redemptive work for salvation. Regarding these foundational truths the church must be unyielding. In other words, it is proper for the church to emphasize and insist upon these truths, holding them as beyond dispute. However, a more general attitude must be held on other doctrines, allowing liberty for different views. Philipp Melancthon, university professor and intimate friend of Luther, stated the kernel of this truth in this way: "In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity [love]."

There is some positive instruction in the Romans passage cited above for maintaining unity, but we also need to see the

potential divisive factors noted there. It is a sad fact of history that believers tend to separate from other believers by emphasizing minor doctrines or practices. Such an emphasis, or an expectation of conformity among the members of the congregation, inevitably leads to special fellowships (churches) based upon these emphases. What is of gravest significance here, however, is that the oneness that should be evidenced among Christians locally (Rom. 15:5-7), is destroyed by such “churches.” Through their practice of distinctions, the one local body of Christ in each city (1 Cor. 12:27; Rev. 1:11) is divided in a visible way.

Persons outside the church have no difficulty in seeing the divisions in Christianity: Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, etc. All of these divisions are based upon distinctions. The Baptist movement had its impetus from a strong conviction about believer's baptism (as opposed to infant baptism). Methodists had their beginnings with Charles Wesley, who, along with his brother John, were members of a club at Oxford University that practiced certain spiritual disciplines. Due to their disciplined lifestyle, others termed them “Methodists.” Although today their method is probably not emphasized universally in Methodist churches, the Methodist label remains as a distinction that separates (divides) them from other Christians.

The Episcopal Church's distinction comes from its emphasis on the bishop system of church government. The Presbyterian Church emphasizes another church government arrangement, namely that of presbyteries, or ruling bodies of elders. *Denominations* are defined as sects (factions, divisions) that carry a certain name. Sometimes the distinctive beliefs or practices are obvious from the name and sometimes they are not.

In recapitulation, let us put this matter in full Biblical perspective. It is appropriate and necessary for teachers to teach minor doctrines, as they understand them, in their assemblies (1 Tim. 4:13, 16; 5:17; 2 Tim. 4:2-4). Yet, uniformity of belief within the assembly on minor doctrines should not be expected. On the contrary, each member is responsible to grant other members the liberty to believe as each one is convinced in his own mind,

without despising the other members (Rom. 14:1-19). While allowing for such diversity, these members collectively *are to practice unity* by receiving all other members, thus glorifying God (Rom. 15:5-7). It is not permissible to misuse this liberty to form special groups or parties within the local body, because this would damage the oneness (1 Cor. 1:10-13; 11:17-19).

It is here that we can see the error of ecumenism. This movement attempts to solve the problem of division by bringing into “unity” (actually only loose association) various sects or denominations. No labels are dropped and particular fellowships (individual assemblies) based upon distinctions are maintained under an umbrella of vague “oneness.” Biblical unity consists of *individual members*, not sectarian groups or bodies, forming one body locally in each city (1 Cor. 1:2; 12:27). Biblical oneness permits diverse doctrinal views, but forbids division to arise out of these diverse views through labels (1 Cor. 1:10-13), or grouping into sects (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 11:18-19; Gal. 5:20). The Bible declares that divisions are just as much a work of the flesh as are immorality and drunkenness (Gal. 5:19-21).

Since the matter of division has now been covered in detail, I will only mention a few other factors of division. Some groups create special fellowships by having an emphasis on certain experiences (such as the Pentecostal or “second blessing” experience). Some gather together on the basis of race or nationality (such as a “black church” or a “Korean church”). Such grounds of meeting are contrary to the principle that all such distinctions are dissolved in Christ (Col. 3:10-11). Some churches may create division by focusing upon ministry only to a certain segment of society. A real life example would be a congregation in a certain city that says its mission is only to serve the professional and academic members of their community. However, we should have the same care for all the members of the body or we will create division (1 Cor. 12:25).

Practicing the oneness

We have seen some dividing factors. On the positive side, however, how are we to practice the unity of the body? To practice this oneness **we need to pay attention to both outward practices and inward attitudes. Outwardly**, we should not divide the body of Christ by taking labels or making special (exclusive) fellowships based upon grounds narrower than the whole body (1 Cor. 1:10-13) and “the faith” (Jude 1:3).

Concerning the need for **inward practice**, there are several key passages, among others, that we should consider. Carefully review the following three passages which focus upon our inner attitudes:

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph. 4:1-3)

Fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. (Phil. 2:2-4)

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.

And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. (Col. 3:12-15)

In addition, we are to receive all the other members of the body of Christ without despising them for their views on minor practices and doctrines (Rom. 14:1-15:7). We must also not make distinctions among members of the body (Jas. 2:4), but instead we need to exercise the same degree of love and care toward each member of the body (1 Cor. 12:25; Phil. 2:2).

Note the special place given to humility and lowliness of mind in the verses quoted above. Spiritual pride can easily come in because we “know more” or feel we follow Christ more closely than others. This pride, if not dealt with, will cause us to inwardly pull away from other believers and desire to be just with those who “see” or practice what we see. Like those who were claiming to be “of Christ” (1 Cor. 1:12), spiritual pride can be especially subtle when our convictions seem particularly “spiritual” and right before God. Our need for humility in order to practice unity with all believers is paramount. Perhaps this is why the beatitudes begins with the blessing upon the “poor in spirit,” our sense of utter poverty before God (in our resources) to be or do anything that pleases Him (Matt. 5:3).

By all of the practices noted above, we can see that to properly practice the oneness that belongs to the body of Christ is extremely challenging. It is against our natural tendencies and is impossible in our own energy. To practice this oneness is probably the greatest test of one's spirituality and maturity in the Lord. However, in Eph. 4:1-3 we are enjoined to walk worthily of our calling by diligently practicing this oneness with all believers. The context of this injunction points especially to our calling into the one body of Christ.

In the midst of the divided situation in the church at Corinth, there were some saints who practiced maintaining unity. Paul's comments on these saints are rarely noticed by those who read the Bible, but they are truly significant: “For first of all, when

you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, *that those who are approved* may be recognized among you” (1 Cor. 11:18-19). Since, according to the context, the *disapproved* ones were those practicing division, the *approved* ones would have to be those who would have a proper attitude and care towards all the saints (1 Cor. 11:17-22). In application today this attitude and care **must be shown toward all believers, not just those meeting with us.** It is much easier to love and appreciate those with whom we meet, or those who are like-minded with us in minor matters. Yet God earnestly desires (it is His will) that believers will broaden their hearts to have the same love toward all of His children.

Today in Christianity, in your city, a divided situation also exists - only more so (all the saints no longer come together as they did in Corinth). Such a divided situation provides an opportunity for some to be approved, in God's sight, by practicing the oneness of the body of Christ. Such a practice truly builds up the body of Christ.

4

THE BODY BUILDS UP ITSELF

The body of Christ builds up itself through the function of every member. “From whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which *every part does its share*, causes growth of the body for *the edifying of itself* in love” (Eph. 4:16). This truth applies to the local assembly, where the building up work actually occurs, as much as to the universal church.

What is one key reason for the spiritual immaturity of a local assembly and its lack of being a substantial, unified testimony of the living Christ? Here is the answer: all the members are not functioning; therefore, the body is not built up. So we need to ask another question: Why are all the members not functioning? If we discover the reasons for this problem, then perhaps we can find solutions.

I believe that there are two aspects of the problem. One aspect can be termed a “system problem” and the other aspect termed the “individual saint problem.” These two aspects are not fully divorced from one another - each aspect influences the other. Let us first examine the “system problem.”

System Problem

In speaking of a system in Christianity, let me make it clear that I am addressing the situation in American Christianity. This system may not exist in the same fashion elsewhere. The

functioning of the saints here in America is severely hampered by a highly developed clergy/laity system. The “clergy” means the collective class of persons who are ordained for religious ministry. A “clergyman” is defined as a member of this clergy. As for the “laity,” they are defined as all those who are not included in the clergy.

Thus we see that, according to this existing system, there are two classes of believers: those who are officially authorized to be “ministers” and those who are not. This distinction exists, no matter how much some “pastors” would want to deny it or minimize it. This concept is firmly fixed in the mind of the average “lay person” - some are especially equipped to minister and some are not. Therefore, most “lay people” do not attempt to fully carry out their God-given gift of ministry. Those who really want to serve the Lord attempt to do so, but often in a timid way, requiring reassurance and direction from the pastor, since deep within they do not feel fully qualified. The exception is the bold saint who, enlivened and directed by the Holy Spirit, carries out his ministry in the body of Christ.

The New Testament knows nothing of a class distinction between “clergy” and “laity.” All believers are priests (1 Pet. 2:5), and as such they should serve God and help others live unto God. All the saints are to participate in “the work of *ministry*, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12).

This great class distinction has been aggravated by a number of factors that make the clergy special. Firstly, special, formal training is required in most congregations. Only years of special schooling thus prepares and qualifies one to minister the word and lead a congregation. One preacher I talked to told me that he already had one seminary degree, but he then had to return to get schooled at another seminary in order to get “his ticket” (his term) for the pastorate within another circle of churches.

There is no doubt that those who preach the word should know the word, but where in the Bible do we see the formal academic training of those who teach the flock? The teachers and elders of the early church learned the word from other gifted

persons (2 Tim. 2:2; Tit. 1:9), and by their own diligence as proper workmen (2 Tim. 2:15). Therefore, seminary or Bible school training should not be *expected or required* of elders or teachers. (I am not saying any such training should be *prohibited*.)

It should also be noted that as respects the overseers the Biblical emphasis on preparation is upon mature Christian character, although the ability to teach is required (1 Tim. 3:2-7; Tit. 1:5-9). This is in accordance with their primary role as leaders - to be examples for the flock to follow (1 Pet.5:3).

In line with special training is the matter of special livelihood. Most clergy today are expected to make their living from church service. Another specialty of today's clergy is special titles. Usually they are acknowledged by specific titles such as Reverend, Father, Pastor, Bishop, etc. These titles set them apart from the “common brethren,” who are not identified in any special manner. Was not our Lord warning of the problem of special elevation of some saints by the use of titles when He berated the Pharisees in Matthew 23?

“They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi.’ But you, **do not be called ‘Rabbi’**; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and *you are all brethren*. **Do not call anyone on earth your father**; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. **And do not be called teachers**; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matt. 23:6-12)

We should all just be brothers. Special titles only help create a distinctive, elevated class. Another distinction among some of today's clergy is special dress, either in or out of the

pulpit. This practice is just an improper carry-over from the Old Testament priesthood, which in that era belonged to only one tribe and family (Num. 18:1-3; Heb. 7:5).

All of these factors of specialty make today's clergy a distinctive class with a special standing. In fact, what has developed today in American Christianity is **a class of church professionals**. The ministerial leader has become a professional, which by modern definition means that he has been highly trained academically, thus prepared to work at this calling as a profession (a way of making a living). Then, of course, is the matter of ordination, conferring official status to the “minister.”

The professional minister of today is, therefore, comparable to any other professional in society. After training and certification, one works in a church as a pastor, while another works as a CPA in an accounting firm. Both are distinguished and set apart from the common man. Of course, there are some congregations which do not have such professional leadership, and, for the most part, the church at large in America feels these leaders are “lesser folk” than the true professionals. They too, however, usually maintain a clerical standing, and usually have been officially “ordained.”

The early church, however, did not have such a class of church professionals. Here are the comments of historian Robert A. Baker: “In the New Testament period the church consisted of the people in a local body; the leaders were on the same level with the people but served because they had been given special gifts by the Spirit.”² “The earliest bishops or presbyters [elders] engaged in secular labor to make their living and performed the duties of their church office when not at work.”³ “These leaders usually worked with their hands for their material needs. There was no artificial distinction between clergy and laity.”⁴

² Robert A. Baker, *A Summary of Christian History* (Nashville, Tn.: Broadman Press, 1959), p. 43. Used by permission.)

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 43,44.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

The development of the clergyman took place gradually and was integral to the development of church hierarchy. Originally, a group of elders, not one man, exercised the oversight in each church (Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; Jas. 5:14). They shared this oversight equally as a group.⁵ This initial Biblical pattern changed shortly after the close of the apostolic era, as detailed in *A Summary of Christian History* by Baker:

For one thing, the original equality among the several pastors, bishops, or presbyters serving in a church began to disappear. In the New Testament church there was no difference in office between a bishop and a presbyter, the two names simply describing functions of the one office (Acts 20:17-35). But quite early in the second century it became common for one of the ministers to assume leadership, sometimes because of unusual scholarship, strong personality, or maturity. . . . one man, the best qualified, was asked to resign his secular labor, and give full time to the religious task. It became his business to “oversee” (the word which means “bishop”) the work of the Christian community. He received the title of bishop in a special sense and finally claimed the name as a special dignity. The other ministers were now called “presbyters” in distinguishing them from the overseeing minister, the bishop. Early in the second

⁵ “The basic unit was the city congregation, worshipping initially under the collegial leadership of a group of presbyter-*episkopoi* [elder-overseers], but from the second century onward under the presidency of a single bishop.” [Jones, Lindsay (Editor). *Encyclopedia of Religion, 15 Volume Set*, 2E © 2005 Gale, a part of Cengage Learning, Inc. Reproduced by permission. www.cengage.com/permissions. Quote from First Editon, Vol. 4, p. 561.] An excellent source for study of the plural co-equal eldership pattern is *Biblical Eldership* by Alexander Strauch. It is available as a full length book or as a quite adequate abridged version in booklet form. The publisher is Lewis and Roth (www.lewisandroth.com).

century the churches at Antioch and Asia had developed such a leader over all other presbyters, although this had not yet manifested itself in Rome, Philippi or Corinth.⁶

Church hierarchy and the clergy class had their beginnings at the time of the departure from the eldership system. Philip Schaff, the great church historian, also tells us of the evolution of some of the things we have been discussing:

In the external organization of the church, several important changes appear in the period [100-311 A. D.] before us. The distinction of the clergy and laity, and the sacerdotal view of the ministry becomes prominent and fixed; subordinate church offices are multiplied; the episcopate arises; the beginnings of the Roman primacy appear . . . During the third century it became customary to apply the term “priest” directly and exclusively to the Christian ministers, especially to the bishops. In the same manner the whole ministry, and it alone, was called “clergy,” with a double reference to its presidency and its peculiar relation to God. It was distinguished by this name from the Christian people or “laity.”⁷

From the above history, we see the aberrant development of church leadership into a clerical class and a hierarchy that eventually led to the Roman system. The reformation did not completely undo this development.

Some readers may now be wondering: “Do you mean no person teaching the Scriptures or doing missionary work should be supported or given monetary gifts? What about Paul's teaching in 1

⁶ Baker, pp. 43, 44.

⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), Vol. II, pp. 121, 126, 127.

Corinthians 9 concerning ‘not muzzling the ox?’ What about his instruction to Timothy: ‘Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine’ (1 Tim. 5:17)? What about Galatians 6:6?”

I would reply in this way. The same Paul who wrote those verses also wrote the following ones. In Acts 20, Paul called to himself the elders of the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17). His final words of instruction to these leaders were these:

“I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” (Acts 20:33-35)

Paul had a fruitful, sacrificial ministry in Ephesus for over two years (Acts 19:9-10), yet he made tents there for his living (as he did in Corinth: Acts 18:1-3). Not only did Paul support himself through his tent making, but he also supported others with him (Acts 20:34). It is important to note that in doing this he was providing an example to the elders at Ephesus. His lesson for them was that they, as leaders among the flock, should work hard at earning a living in order to help (materially) those less fortunate (Acts 20:35).

Also, in spite of the fact that Paul, as God's apostle, had a right to make his living from proclaiming the gospel, he did not insist upon this right (1 Cor. 9:6-15). Time and again he gave up this right for the benefit of those he ministered to, especially so that they might follow his example (Acts 20:35; 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8, 9). And, as we have already seen, Acts and church history show us that during the apostolic age it was not the practice of the local overseers to give up their secular work and make their

livelihood from church service. Thus it should be clear that **it was never God's intention to set up a system with a special class of paid professionals**. The leaders of the assemblies are to be examples of sacrificial ministry.

Does this mean that we are not to give gifts to local elders or teachers? No, otherwise we would set up another system and deny the teaching of Galatians 6:6 and 1 Timothy 5:17-18. Although the early church did not have paid, full time elders, those leaders, and other teachers of God's word, probably did receive some gifts in accordance with these Scriptures. Also, those called by God to go out for His name and the gospel deserve our prayerful consideration of support (1 Cor. 9:2-14; Titus 3:13; 3 Jn. 1:5-8).

What God wants us to do is to follow His Spirit in these matters. Yet, we should be very aware that a system exists today that is contrary to the overall testimony of the Bible and early church history. In our decision making in this matter, therefore, we should take care not to be influenced by any man-made system.

Because there now exists a special clergy class, the laity tends to view the clergy as the truly capable ones, the ones who can really serve God. The laity views real service as belonging in the hands of the trained professional. Thus, the laity does not make much effort to serve. The laity's part is often viewed primarily as attending the service and giving money to support the church and the pastor.

Another element of this problem is that the pastor is so dominant in the meetings of today's churches that it would be very difficult for any "common" member to spontaneously function in the meeting as described in 1 Corinthians 14:26-33. The liberty does not exist in today's meetings for such functioning, partly due to a dominant clergy, which itself is the result of the clergy/laity system. Although many pastors today understand they are just to have an "equipping ministry" which prepares the saints for service (Eph. 4:12), this will never happen to any degree until there is no class distinction between the equipping ones and the other saints.

The damage done by the clergy/laity system should now be evident. Some Bible teachers feel that God specifically condemned this system in the Bible through the references in Revelation to the

"Nicolaitans" (Rev. 2:6, 15)⁸. Church history cannot confirm with certainty that any group actually bearing this name ever existed. On the other hand, the Lord no doubt condemned real persons.

The name "Nicolaitans" is probably symbolic, as are some other terms in the book of Revelation. This meaningful name is a compound word composed of two words. The first word is from a verb which means to conquer or be victorious over. The second word means laity, or common people. Thus, the word "Nicolaitan" literally means one who conquers the common people, or is above them. Since the book of Revelation was written late in the first century, these Nicolaitans could well have been those who were promoting a special ruling class over the laity. It was early in the second century that history records that a single bishop began to take a position over the other elders as the unique, elevated overseer of the assembly. Concerning the doctrine and the deeds of the Nicolaitans, Christ says that he hates them (Rev. 2:6, 15).

The Bible clearly teaches that we are to acknowledge leading ones among us who watch over our souls, being willing to be persuaded by their counsel (Heb. 13:17). We are to recognize their role in the body and esteem them highly in love because of their labor (1 Thess. 5:12-13). However, there should be no class distinction (Jas. 2:3-4), or special elevation of one class of members that would create a division (1 Cor. 12:24-25). We are all brothers (Matt. 23:8); we are all priests (1 Pet. 2:5); we are all needed (1 Cor. 12:21, 22; Eph. 4:16); and we all must serve (Lk. 19:13).

Individual saint problem

Now let's look at the "individual saint" aspect of this problem of all the members not fully functioning. The problem here often has to do with a saint's estimation of his gift and his

⁸ See, for example, the original *Scofield Reference Bible* and the *Pilgrim Study Bible*. Especially see *The Numerical Bible* and *Nicolaitanism – The Rise and Growth of the Clergy* by F. W. Grant (Believers Bookshelf, Box 261, Sunbury, PA, 17801), as well as *The Orthodoxy of the Church* by Watchman Nee.

value to the body. In such a saint's mind, he is a small, unimportant member and his function does not add that much to the building up of the body. After all, he cannot give an inspiring talk like the pastor or the evangelist. He feels his portion is really not needed. Paul addresses this problem in 1 Corinthians 12:

For in fact the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. (1 Cor. 12:14-25)

These members need to realize how important their function is. They must understand that God has sovereignly placed every member in the body according to His wisdom and plan (1 Cor. 12:18, 24). In God's mind these members are vital.

My heart is heavy as I write this because I truly grieve over the wrong perspective of many saints. I long to be able to explain to them how utterly helpful and encouraging their seemingly insignificant gift is. What is more healing to the body than those who show mercy on the unlovable or undeserving? What is more uplifting than to see some impoverished family, which has been crying out to God for help, become overjoyed in testimony to answered prayer because some unnoticed, or unknown, saint felt the Holy Spirit move within him as a liberal giver? What is more moving than to see some faithful brother or sister (like Tabitha) sacrifice his or her time and energy again and again to serve others through practical help? Oh, how wonderful are these members! I love them so much! And God needs them so much!

Another element of this problem is seen in the Lord's parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30. Here, one servant fails to function. He is only given one "talent" [a weight measure] of silver. This one talent represents his spiritual gift, along with other "spiritual capital" of the Lord (such as the gospel, the Bible, prayer, opportunities, etc.), given according to his natural ability (v. 15). His responsibility is to employ this capital (the talent) in order to gain some profit for the Lord (v. 27).

This servant made excuses (v. 24), and did not employ his gift for his master. His master's appraisal of the servant was: "You wicked and lazy servant. . ." (v. 26). It is wickedness (sin) not to employ the gift given to us by the Lord, but it is slothfulness that is often a root cause. The Christian life cannot be passive. Every saint is required to produce a profit for God through the diligent employment of the Lord's gift by faith. All the saints must be warned of slothfulness, not just the ones who are given one talent (see Lk. 19:12-26, where size of the gift is not an issue).

This parable teaches that the master (Christ) of that servant will eventually exercise a severe judgment upon the "unprofitable servant": "Therefore take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable

servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 25:28-30).

This judgment is not upon a false servant, but upon a real servant entrusted with the master's (Christ's) gift. Here, the parable pictures the judgment of Christ upon the believer who does not use his gift to build up the body. This judgment does not involve the loss of eternal salvation, but has to do with the loss of joy and responsibility in the 1,000 year kingdom age that follows the Judgment Seat of Christ.

The antidote to the problem of a saint's laziness is this very kind of motivating teaching concerning the coming Judgment Seat. The reason the Lord gave this parable was to portray the future positive reward for the faithful saint and the future negative recompense to the slothful, unprofitable saint. Such teaching provides real motivation to those who would want to “bury their talent in the ground.”

Every member must be in full function for the body to grow to maturity (Eph. 4:16). Therefore, we must eliminate the clergy/laity distinction and system. We must value every saint, regardless of the size of the gift they have received from the Lord, encouraging them to appreciate their gift and its value to the body of Christ. Finally, we must stimulate every saint into service through proper teaching concerning the coming Judgment Seat of Christ.

5

BUILDING UP IN LOVE

“From whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body **for the edifying of itself in love.**” (Eph. 4:16)

We can certainly see some overlap in this governing principle with other principles, especially the principle of oneness. However, the importance of love in the building up of the body cannot be overly stressed. As we attempt to actually build up the local body of Christ together with other believers, we will learn that love is indispensable. Let us look at some verses that will give us insight on this principle. As we do this, let us be reminded what constitutes the real “building up” of the body. The “building up” involves the ministry of Christ to one another in the body that unites us and brings the body as a whole into a mature state.

One might think that the ministry of Christ to others for the building up would be just a matter of exercising spiritual gifts in faith. But, according to the following passage, this is not so.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed

the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1-3)

If we are to practice the “body life” we very much need love, God’s love. By the “body life” I mean a fellowship of believers who are related to one another in a mutually dependent way, as are the members of our physical body. These believers will practice caring for one another spiritually and practically, being involved in each others lives. Gifts alone are not sufficient because all the members of the body are genuine people. People need love. Also, because none of us are yet perfected in this life we can easily be tempted to interact with others according to our old dispositions. We can become impatient with the ways of others. We can be offended by others when they mistreat us (according to our perspective). Those who hold onto offenses will tend to separate from those who caused offense. Our pride can keep us from admitting our faults when relationships become strained. Pride can also keep us from associating with our “lowly” brothers and sisters in Christ (Rom. 12:16). An attitude of self-pleasing can keep us from caring for the weaker or less attractive members of His body (1 Cor. 12:22-25). We may be self-seeking instead of willing to sacrifice our interests for the benefit of others or the body as a whole (Phil. 2:3, 4). Such self-seeking can even be seen in the tendency to group together with those that are like us. That is, we may desire to gather only with others who think like us doctrinally, or with whom we have race or culture or social position in common. All of these attitudes will tend to drive us apart instead of uniting us with all of our brothers and sisters in Christ. But unity, a vital part of the building up, is what God wants us to actually experience in the local body life. Love is a key to unity.

“But above all these things **put on love, which is the bond of perfection**” (Col. 3:14). The Greek word for “bond” here means that which binds together, and is used of the ligaments in the body in Col. 2:19. The Amplified version reads: “And above

all these [put on] love and enfold yourselves with the bond of perfectness – which binds everything together completely in ideal harmony” (Col. 3:14, AMP). So, it is God’s love within us that unites us together. **God’s love overwhelmingly conquers every divisive tendency within the body of Christ**. We can see this in the great love passage in 1 Cor. 13:

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely; does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

Not only is love vitally linked to the unity of the body, but it is also linked to the growth of the body. “But speaking the truth in love, [we] may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ” (Eph. 4:15). This must be so because there is no real growth in Christ without the experiential knowledge of His love. “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him” (1 Jn. 4:16b).

So we see that love is integral to the building up of the body in its two critical characteristics: unity and maturity (Eph. 4:12-13). It is for this reason we can understand Paul’s prayer in Ephesians chapter three. That prayer for the Ephesian believers was based upon the foregoing revelation of the body of Christ. In that prayer, there was a focus upon those believers actually experiencing the love of Christ so that God could realize His goal for the church there to manifest Christ. Part of this marvelous prayer is as follows:

That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being **rooted and grounded in love**, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – **to know**

the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:17-19)

We must have a heart to love all the members of His body equally in order to build up the body of Christ. “That there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another” (1 Cor. 12:25). “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (Jn. 13:34). The Bible uses a special Greek word for God’s love, as distinguished from normal human love. That word is *agape*. *Agape* love is not a love based upon emotion, but upon the will. Nor is *agape* love one which expects at least some response in return from the one loved, as does human love. Rather, *agape* love, which describes the love of God Himself, is a sacrificial love, which seeks the benefit of the other person, regardless of the other person’s response. May God grant us to see the critical importance of love in the body life, and may He grant us to experience His love towards all of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

6

BUILDING UP THROUGH THE CROSS

This final principle is of the utmost importance and may be the most difficult principle for believers to comprehend and practice consistently. Yet, this principle is interwoven with all of the other principles noted and is foundational to their practice. We must be those, therefore, who know how to build up the body of Christ by means of our subjective experience of the cross of Christ.

Jesus Himself laid down the principle of building up by means of the cross: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain" (Jn. 12:24). In this verse Jesus was prophesying how His death on the cross would produce life in countless believers. All true building up of the body of Christ will be in line with this principle. It is only as we experience the death of Christ in us that the ministry of His life will flow out to others. It is in this way that our prayers, our service, our love and our care towards others will have the essence of Christ Himself in them. Let us look at a passage to see this clearly.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed – always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also

may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, but life in you. (2 Cor. 4:7-12)

In these verses Paul indicated that he, and those with him, had many difficult outward experiences. Yet, they experienced an inner power that was of God, not of themselves. They also carried within them the “dying of the Lord Jesus”, or literally, “the putting to death of the Lord Jesus.” This means that Paul experienced the cross of Christ in his service. We should see that the difficult outward experiences that Paul and his co-workers experienced cannot be separated from their inward experience. They first had to die to self, to what would have naturally been pleasing to them, in order to endure such hardships. This inner self-denial matches the self-denial of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane when He prayed, “Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done” (Lk. 22:42b). After Jesus agreed to die to His will in prayer, then He was able to rise up and carry out the outward suffering of the cross. As Paul yielded to the will of God, agreeing to die to his will, his way and even his power, then God's power was manifested in him. As Paul continually agreed to die to self in the experience of the cross, then the life of Jesus was manifested in him. By this resurrection life he was strengthened to endure suffering and to minister the life of Christ into the Corinthian believers (2 Cor. 3:2, 3; 4:12).

Paul's great desire was to know Christ, to actually experience Christ, in his life. The true experience of Christ cannot be separated from the experience of His death on the cross. Note Paul's great aspiration in Philippians: “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Phil. 3:10). Paul's desire was to know the fellowship - the spiritual participation with Christ - of His sufferings, with the result of being conformed to Christ's death. Conformity to His death here could not mean simply

outward death, a literal crucifixion. But, conformity to His death could only mean a total death to the self-life in order to carry out God's will. Paul indicated Christ patterned such a life for us in the great passage of Philippians chapter two, where Christ made Himself of no reputation, taking the form a bondservant and humbling Himself to be obedient to death, even the death of a cross.

To experience the cross is to allow the cross of Christ to put all that we are in our natural life to death, so that Christ may live in us (Gal. 2:20). When Christ lives in us, He lives to God and His will, which surely is focused upon the building up of the body of Christ, His supreme work in this age. We can see this living in Paul as he suffered to build up the body of Christ: “I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church” (Col. 1:24). The afflictions of Christ here are the sufferings of the cross applied to the self-life in the experience of believers for the building up of the body of Christ, not the unique sufferings of Christ on the cross for redemption.

Let us now briefly look at how this principle works in a foundational way with the other principles. Concerning “Christ is All”, Christ can only be the building element of the church when we agree to the cross in our lives. This means that we believe and agree with the truth expressed in Col. 3:3-4: “For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life . . .” We must agree to die to our abilities, our initiative and our strength to “do things for God” in order to let Him live in us with His power and His ability. This may sound very strange to those who have been taught that they are to “use their abilities and talents for the Lord.” The revelation of Scripture, however, shows that when we serve the Lord with our natural abilities and energy we actually do damage to God's work. Review again all the cases cited in Scripture regarding this point in Chapter One. God does give spiritual gifts “to each according to his own ability,” but the exercise of our gifts must be according to the power and leading of the Spirit (Matt. 25:15). We must live by faith in the truth of our

co-crucifixion with Christ and our co-resurrection with Him in order to “walk in newness of life” and “serve in the newness of the Spirit” (Rom. 6:4; 7:6). This exercise of faith needs to be in full inward dependence upon Him, placing “no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3).

As respects the principle “Christ is the Head,” the lesson of the cross is again needed. Men have many ideas of how to “live for Christ” and “serve the Lord,” but all too often the word of God is negated by these ideas. If we are to be under the headship of Christ, then we must agree to the cross putting to death our natural ideas and traditions of how to serve the Lord. We must be willing to abandon all tradition that conflicts with God’s word, even at a personal cost. Otherwise, we are not letting Christ be the Head. We also must not serve by routine, especially in our gatherings. It is too easy for the self-life to carry out a routine on “auto pilot” in our gatherings or other service. This is especially true if we have some measure of experience and knowledge. Instead, we must practice looking to the Lord in a prayerful spirit at all times, agreeing for the self-life to be put to death and seeking for the fresh leading of the Lord.

The experience of the cross is also critical in the matter of maintaining unity within the body of Christ (the principle of “Oneness”). The natural tendency to pull back from others due to their minor doctrines, their Christian practices or their culture or background is very strong in our lives. We like to be around others who are just like us in every way. To embrace diversity (within fundamental orthodoxy) calls for a deep dependence upon the Lord. To do this, we must be impressed by God of the priority of keeping the unity with others in the body of Christ (Eph. 4:1-3). That priority should lead us to a humble willingness to let the cross put to death the self-life that is so divisive due to its own preferences.

Further, if we see the truth that “The Body Builds Up Itself,” we will be on guard against any thoughts and tendencies towards a special class of believers. We will also allow the cross to deal with any pride we may have that we are a special member of the body. Romans chapter twelve is a chapter on the body life.

Verse three shows the particular danger of pride that downplays the function of the other members of the body: “For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith” (Rom. 12:3). If we truly see that every member is needed to build up the body of Christ, then we will seek to practice our Christian life in such a way as to encourage the function of every member. This practice will include dealing with our natural dispositions. For example, some believers have a natural disposition that causes them to “take charge” and be very active and dominant, particularly in a group setting. These believers very much need to agree to the cross in their lives so that they will not operate in this manner, but rather wait upon the Spirit’s leading to function. This way of “holding back” by the cross will leave room for others to function. There is also the timid disposition that fails to rise up to function in the Lord. Believers with a natural timidity or a reserved disposition need to apply the death of the cross to their natural life and respond in faith to the urging of the Spirit to function. Those saints who have a seemingly smaller gift need to be particularly aware of the tendency to bury their gift from the Lord and apply the cross to this tendency (Matt. 25:25).

“Building Up in Love” can only happen through the cross, where our natural life with all of its self-interests is put away. *Agape* love does not seek its own interests, but seeks the benefit of others. Love bears all things and endures all things, so it is only as we die to the self-life that we can be patient with others. True humility and willingness to be wronged, all aspects of God’s love in us, can only be realized when we agree to die to the self-life through the acceptance of the cross of Christ. God’s *agape* love is the full expression of selflessness.

CONCLUSION

We have looked at these six basic governing principles for building up the body of Christ. These principles are full of challenges, aren't they? They measure us. They may expose how much we have been off the mark or how foolishly complacent we have been in our church experience.

The church is integral to God's eternal purpose (Eph. 3:4-11). We cannot afford to treat it lightly. Christ will not treat it lightly at the Judgment Seat (1 Cor. 3:9-17). What shall we do? Shall we do what is right in our own eyes? Shall we do what is comfortable, what is expedient, what is traditional, what is accepted? Or, shall we take the way of the cross – the way that gives up pleasing the self and chooses to please God?

Some may say that to have a church which practices these principles is really impractical and impossible today. Yet, I would answer that we should never seek to do anything less than God's will. As we humbly seek to do His will, we should expect Him to empower us to carry out that will. I leave you with this encouraging word from the Scriptures: "Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, *to Him be glory in the church*" (Eph. 3:20, 21a).