

GOVERNING PRINCIPLES
FOR BUILDING UP
THE BODY OF CHRIST

By Tom Finley

GOVERNING PRINCIPLES
FOR BUILDING UP
THE BODY OF CHRIST

By Tom Finley

© 1996

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated,
are taken from the New King James Version.
Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.
Used by permission. All rights reserved.

In some Scripture quotations words
are italicized or in bold print for emphasis.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
1 – CHRIST IS ALL	4
2 – CHRIST IS THE HEAD	5
3 – ONENESS	8
4 – THE BODY BUILDS UP ITSELF	14
5 – CONCLUSION	21

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 Christ has an ultimate aim - the building up of the body of Christ. It is important, therefore, that our labor in the Lord be in accord with the cardinal principles that Scripture shows govern the body of Christ and its growth.

Can we expect Christ to sanction efforts to build up His body that contradict the fundamental principles God has revealed concerning the body? I do not believe so. However, it is possible, either knowingly or unknowingly, to be a person who “does whatsoever is right in his own eyes” (Deut. 12:8), as opposed to “that which is right in His (God's) sight.” (Ex. 15:26). My prayer for myself, and for you the reader, is that we will sincerely humble ourselves before God in order that we may evaluate our doings in the light of His word.

This booklet will discuss four principles concerning the body of Christ. These four principles are: Christ Is All; Christ Is The Head; Oneness; and The Body Builds Up Itself. 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.

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).

The one new man in Christ is not the old, natural man where natural characteristics exist, but rather it is one “where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free, but *Christ is all and in all.*” (Col. 3:1 1). Yes, this verse points to “positional truth”, what is true by virtue of our being put “in Christ” by God (1 Cor. 1:30). But what is true concerning the church positionally is to become true of her in experience.

Paul revealed the great mystery of the church in the first two and one half chapters of Ephesians. Paul wrote that Christ is “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. 3:2 1).

What I am saying is this. 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 to be the genuine expression of the church. Above all, the members of the assembly must learn to *live in union* with Christ. “Abiding in Christ”, being “in spirit”, or experiencing the “inner life” are other ways of saying the same thing. It is easy to substitute religious activity for this priority. Even Bible reading, singing, helping others, or other service to the Lord can all be done apart from the living Christ. May the Lord deepen our dependence upon Him and our knowing of Him in order to live in the reality of our union with Him.

2 - CHRIST IS THE HEAD

Christ must have the headship and the preeminence in the church (Col. 1: 1 8). In honoring Christ as the head, we must firstly honor His word. In the practice of the assembly life, therefore, it is Christ's word, Christ's thought, and Christ's way that must be honored and obeyed, not man's thought and man's way. 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).

If we find that our tradition transgresses the word of God, as did the practice of the Pharisees (Matt. 15:3,6), are we willing to repent that Christ may have the headship and

the preeminence? Dare we build a church according to our way? To those who were building by their carnal way 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 was the local church in Corinth since the “you” is plural in “you are the temple of God.” 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 a “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. 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, we deny Christ His headship and violate a basic principle of the body we claim to build up.

Besides acknowledging Christ's headship by honoring His word, we must also know His headship by letting His Spirit rule in the church. 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 hearings 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. 11:3; 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. Such a meeting atmosphere 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 say. "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.

3 - ONENESS

The next 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 oneness of the body of Christ is a prominent theme in the New Testament. In positional truth, in example, and in practical exhortation, the oneness of the body is emphasized again and again (i. e., 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. 3:10-15; Tit. 3:10; Jas. 2:1-9). 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 can not be separated from the matter of oneness (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 oneness.

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 and heart 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. They should not have had a special identification with one person or his ministry, because in doing this they distinguished themselves from others and made their fellowship exclusive. In other words, they were establishing special fellowship around persons (or ministries) according to their liking rather than keeping their fellow- *ship inclusive* of all the members.

Related to the oneness of the body is the principle that the body is *inclusive*. The body of Christ includes all the members (1 Cor. 12:12). If we adopt any ground of fellowship that is particular, that is not as general and as broad as the entire body, then we become exclusive (we 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?" Here Paul was condemning the attitude of those making this claim. They had a divisive attitude in that they were saying, "You others may be of Paul or Apollos, but we are of Christ." In other words, 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 condemn the others for not being "of Christ."

The same exclusive attitude existed among those "of Paul." They were really only happy to have special fellowship with their like-minded "Paulites." They probably did not care that much for fellowship with those that did not have their special bias. 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 really 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), here named after men. These 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 (and also thus take an exclusive standing). 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). But there are other groups today which do not take the name of a leader, but nonetheless are exclusive in the same manner. Their attitude is often to care only for those who follow 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.

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-fundamental doctrines they especially hold dear.

There is nothing wrong with having convictions concerning Scriptural truths. The problem comes in when brothers 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 the saints in Rome, he realized that there were different views among the saints there concerning certain doctrines and practices. His concern was that these differing views not damage the testimony of oneness that should have existed 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).

I have quoted the most pertinent verses here, but it would be good to read the entire passage in Romans 14:1-15:7. The apostle Paul's ultimate aim in this instruction is that God may be glorified (expressed) by virtue of the oneness demonstrated among these Roman believers.

How could there be “one mind” and “one mouth” in this situation where there were divergent views? It is important to note that this unity was *not* to be achieved by uniformity of doctrines and practices. Rather, it was to be achieved by all the members receiving one other, not despising or judging one another, pursuing the things which make for peace, bearing with one another, building up one another by not pleasing themselves, and by giving liberty to each other to be “fully convinced in his mind” concerning minor issues. This kind of unity, which allows for diversity of opinion on minor issues, *while maintaining a real oneness* among all the believers in a locality, truly glorifies God.

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. 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 3) “*The faith*” consists of the basic truths concerning Christ and His redemptive work of 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.”

There is some positive instruction in the Romans passage cited above for the keeping of the oneness,, but we also need to see the potential divisive factors noted there. It is a fact of

history that believers tend to separate from other believers by emphasizing minor doctrines or practices. Such an emphasis inevitably leads to special fellowships (churches) based upon these emphases. These groups are often not that accepting of others who disagree with their emphasized doctrine or practice. What is of gravest significance here, however, is that the testimony of oneness that should be evidenced among Christians locally (Rom. 15:5-7), is destroyed by such “churches”. Through their divisive distinction, the one local body of Christ in each city (1 Cor. 12:27; Rev. 1: 11) is divided.

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, their other traditions, along with the Methodist label, remain 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 nothing more than 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 can not be demanded. 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 hold to a testimony of oneness* among themselves by receiving one another, thus glorifying God (Rom. 15: 5-7). This oneness is *not* a oneness based on universal agreement on minor doctrines. It is a oneness based upon the members all belonging to the same Lord (Rom. 14:3, 8; 15:6, 7).

The only teaching that the assembly must insist upon as its common theological base is “the faith”, the foundational truths pertaining to Christ and His redemption. The liberty for diverse views is given to *individual members, who* collectively hold to a testimony of oneness in the one local body of Christ in each city (the New Testament reveals only one church, one common fellowship, in each city - 1 Cor. 1:2; 12:27; Rev. 1:11). It is not permissible to misuse this liberty to form special groups or parties within the local body, because this would damage the testimony of oneness (i. e., 1 Cor. 1: 10- 13; 1 1: 1 7-19).

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 fellowship (individual assemblies) based upon distinctions are maintained under an umbrella of vague “oneness”. Biblical oneness brings *individual members*, not groups or bodies, into one body locally in each city (1 Cor. 1:2; 12:27). Biblical oneness permits diverse 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).

Since the basic 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 (i. e., the Pentecostal or “second blessing” experience). Some gather together on the ground of race or nationality (i. e., 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” are obviously designed to appeal only to members of a certain social stratum, and this too is condemned in the Bible (Col. 3:11; Jas. 2:1-4).

Practicing the oneness

We have seen some major dividing factors. On the positive side, however, how are we to practice the oneness of the body? From the verses we reviewed in Romans 14 and 15, it should be clear that we are to receive all the other members of the body of Christ locally (in our city) without despising them for their views on minor practices and doctrines. Also, we should be willing to give up certain practices in order not to stumble other believers (review Rom. 14:13-21).

From Ephesians 4:1-3, we learn that in all humility and gentleness we must endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, bearing with one another in love. 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). We should not divide the body of Christ by taking labels or making special (exclusive) fellowships based upon grounds narrower than the whole body (i. e., 1 Cor. 1: 10-13) and “the faith” (Jude 3).

By all of the practices noted above, we can see that to properly keep the oneness of the body is extremely challenging. It is against our natural tendencies and is impossible in our own energy. To properly maintain a testimony of oneness is probably the greatest test of one's spirituality and maturity in the Lord. However, it is a goal toward which we must press.

In the midst of the divided situation in the church at Corinth, there were some saints who maintained the proper oneness. 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 properly care for all the saints and the oneness of the body (1 Cor. 11: 17-22).

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. *Webster's* defines clergy as “persons ordained for religious service, as ministers, priests, rabbis, etc., collectively.”¹ A “clergyman” is defined as a

¹ *Webster's New World Dictionary, Second College Edition* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1986), p. 265.

“member of the clergy.”² As for the laity, *Webster's* defines them as “all the people not included among the clergy.”³

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 just that - they lay down. 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.

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 to find 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 or head up 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 the elders 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 in study (2 Tim. 2:15). Therefore, seminary or Bible school training should not be *expected or required* of elders. (I am not saying any such training should be *prohibited*).

It should also be noted that as respects those leading the flock (the elders), the Biblical emphasis on preparation is not solely, or even primarily, on doctrinal training, but upon mature Christian character (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).

Following the 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. Most of the time 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

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 789.

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 being certified for his calling, and consequently prepared to work at this calling as a profession (a way of making a living).

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 feels these leaders are “lesser folk” than the true professionals. They too, however, usually maintain a clerical standing.)

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.”⁴ “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.”⁵ “These leaders usually worked with their hands for their material needs. There was no artificial distinction between clergy and laity.”⁶

⁴ Robert A. Baker, *A Summary of Christian History* (Nashville, Tn.: Broadman Press, 1959), p. 43. Used by permission.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 43,44.

⁶ *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 the authority of leadership equally as a group.⁷ 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 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 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.⁸

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.”⁹

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.

⁷ “The basic unit was the city congregation, worshipping initially under the collegial leadership of a group of presbyter-*episkopoi*, but from the second century onward under the presidency of a single bishop.” [*The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1987), Vol. 4, p. 561.]

⁸ Baker, pp. 43, 44.

⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), Vol. II, pp. 121, 126, 127.

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 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 foremost 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, church history shows that during the apostolic age it was not the practice of the church leaders (the elders) to give up their secular work and make their livelihood from church service.

Thus, from church history and the example of Paul we see 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 never to support full time laborers or give gifts to leaders or teachers? No, otherwise we would also set up another system and deny the teaching of 1 Corinthians 9:7-14; Galatians 6:6, and 1 Timothy 5:17-18. Although the early church did not have paid, full time elders, those leaders probably did receive some gifts in accordance with these Scriptures.

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 spiritual 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 to attend service and give money to support the church and the pastor, the professional.

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 just does not exist in today's meetings for such functioning, partly due to a dominant clergy. 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 commentators feel that God specifically condemned this system in the Bible through the references in Revelation to the "Nicolaitans" (Rev. 2:6, 15)¹⁰. 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", however, is probably symbolic, as many references in the book of Revelation are.

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 the authority of the leading ones and respond to it (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

¹⁰ 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 can not 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 (vs. 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 many saints have. 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 Dorcas) 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, given according to his natural ability (v. 15). His responsibility is to use that gift in order to gain some profit for the Lord (v. 27).

This saint 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 our gift, 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 exercise of his gift by faith. All the saints must be warned of slothfulness, not just the “one talented” ones (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 responsibility and joy 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 encourage and value every saint as respects his or her gift; and we must stimulate every saint into service through proper teaching concerning the coming Judgment Seat of Christ.

CONCLUSION

We have looked at these four basic governing principles for building up the body. I am sure other principles can be added, but I have felt these are foundational. These principles are full of challenges, aren't they? They measure us. They expose how much we have been off the mark or how foolishly complacent we have been in our church experience.

God's eternal purpose is centered in the church (Eph. 3:4-1 1). We can not 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 of God's will, the way of self-denial, the narrow and constricted way?

The cross means to die to self in order to follow Christ, to carry out His will. The principle of the cross is deeply imbedded in each of these principles. However, some may say that

such a church life is not practical. Some may say that to fully follow these principles today is impossible. 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. 3:20-21).