

Providence Church (CREC)
The Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany
January 31st, 2010 47th sermon
Sermon: Union in Baptism
Text: I Corinthians 12:12-14
Pastor Uriesou T. Brito

Text: 12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. 14 For the body does not consist of one member but of many.

Prayer: Almighty and Everlasting Father, you have sent Your only, unique Son to redeem your Bride, the Church and you have promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against it, we pray that you watch over your Body; keep it and preserve it in the unity of peace. Amen.

Sermon: People of God, diversity, not uniformity is essential to a healthy church. This is the essence of Paul's message in these chapters. After listing several gifts of the Spirit, and how each function for the common good of the body, Paul now will continue until the end of the chapter with a series of anatomy illustrations. If you want to know what Paul's central theme is in I Corinthians, look where he spends most of his time, and that is, in the idea of the unity of the body through the proper exercising of spiritual gifts.

In verses 12 and 14, Paul makes the point that the body is one, but it is also composed of many members. Just as there are different parts in the human body, so also there are many diverse gifts in the body of Christ. In fact, in the end of verse 12, Paul's analogy is quite odd. We are expecting him to say "just as the body is one with many members, so it is with the "Church." This would complete the analogy. But Paul says, "...so it is with Christ." What is Paul saying? He uses "Christ," as a synonym for the Church. Christ means "anointed one." In other words, to be united to the Church is to receive the anointing of Christ, the favor of God upon you, just as God poured His favor upon Christ, the Messiah.

But in verse 13 Paul takes a deep breath and returns to the genesis of church life. He answers the following question: How did I become a part of this one body, and what does this mean?

I remember once conversing with a well educated man in a Reformed congregation we both attended. I had casually brought up the idea that one of the main distinctive of the Reformed faith is her view of the sacrament¹ of baptism and the Lord's Supper. This gentleman believed that the only unique aspect of the Reformed faith is her doctrine of election. But he was completely unfamiliar with the overwhelming significance the Reformed tradition placed on baptism and the Lord's Supper in the 16th century. In fact, you knew a Calvinist or a Lutheran by his views of the Lord's Supper. You may think: but what's the big deal? We are only talking about water, bread, and wine. It is neither I nor our Reformed heritage that make a big deal out of the sacraments; it is St. Paul who is passionately grounded in Baptism and Eucharistic language.²

Paul is the theologian of the Holy Spirit. In Paul's mind, nothing is efficacious apart from the Spirit's work. What are gifts if the Spirit does not guide their use? What is unity, if the Spirit is not behind it? What are tongues, if the Spirit is not directing? What are the sacraments if the Spirit is not actively working through them? This latter question is the one Paul answers.

We often hear of abuses of the Holy Spirit in our own day. Indeed the Spirit is utterly abused as the Third Person of the Trinity, but He is not abused because He is talked about too much, He is

¹ In case it has not been defined, a "sacrament" is a sacred or holy obligation or oath. As question #92 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism states: "A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers."

² I must refer the reader to one of my mentors in seminary, Keith Mathison, who wrote *Given for you: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper*. Of course, the Mercersburg theologians Nevin and Schaff also must be consulted.

abused because His work is not understood. Throughout the Bible, God has been uniting His people with the Spirit.³

In chapter 10 Paul says that at the Exodus, after the people of Israel were baptized into Moses they all ate the same spiritual food and the same spiritual drink. Isaiah prophesies in 44.3-4 that Yahweh will pour out his Spirit upon the people of Israel so that they will cry out, “I am Yahweh’s; I belong to Yahweh,” and will name Israel’s name with honor. In Ezekiel 36, God says that he will bring Israel out of captivity by sprinkling clean water upon them, and will put his Spirit within them so that they once again obey him, and they will be his people and He will be their God (36.24-28). In the New Creation/Covenant the Spirit is uniting God’s people in even greater measure. Through the tearing down of the wall of partition, the Spirit unites Jew and Gentile into One. “In Acts 2, filled with the Spirit, the Apostles speak in tongues and then call on the people to repent, be baptized, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit themselves.”⁴

The Spirit is uniting God’s people, but He does not do it invisibly, He has does it through signs. St. Augustine once wrote: “Men cannot be welded together in any religion unless they are bound in some partnership of signs and visible sacraments.”⁵ In the 13th century, Aquinas quoted Augustine to show the necessity of the sacraments. In the 16th century, John Calvin quotes the same thing to make the same point, and that is, that sacraments are means by which God binds us together into one family. Calvin writes:

³ Many of these thoughts came through reading Rev. Burke Shade’s expositions on I Corinthians 12-14. Burke is a friend and fellow minister in the CREC. He pastors in Carbondale, IL.

⁴ Shade.

⁵ Quoted in Rich Lusk’s exposition of I Cor. 12:13.

The Apostle... (is) teaching that the nature of baptism is — to connect us with Christ's body. Lest anyone, however, should imagine, that this is effected by the outward symbol, he adds that it is the work of the Holy Spirit.⁶

Augustine, Aquinas, and the Reformers are following St. Paul in this passage. It is Paul who says in verse 13: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.” The Spirit unites the body and He does so through the waters of baptism. Baptism is only baptism because it is by the Spirit. Let me illustrate this by noting two perspectives on this issue. In the Roman Catholic tradition, baptism is like medicine; it has this intrinsic power to heal. For the Roman Catholic the outward symbol of baptism is effective like medicine is effective. But the Reformers have no such superstitions about baptism. For the Reformed faith, baptism is a means. It is conjoined to the work of the Spirit. What is biblical baptism? It is water plus the Spirit equals the sign of the sacrament.⁷

Baptism, according to Paul, through the agency of the Spirit engrafts us into the one church, the one visible body.⁸ “Just as God uses the marriage ceremony ‘to form a new family; the sacraments sustain God’s covenant family. Baptism does for the church what weddings do to the family.’”⁹ But some have understood this baptism in I Corinthians 12 to refer to something different than water baptism; they have understood it as a special work of conversion, which is

⁶ John Calvin, Commentary on I Corinthians 12.

⁷ Lusk’s articles on Calvin’s Eucharistic Theology is well worth examining. For Lusk, Calvin’s sacramentology embodies the best of the patristic writings without the superstitions that accompanied many of their claims. See trinity-pres.net

⁸ Concerning the Federal Vision controversy, opponents of the FV generally decry how much we emphasize the sacraments, but Calvin, Beza, Luther, and most of the Reformers have argued just as strongly. The WCF also teaches that baptism engrafts us into the body and they use I Cor. 12:13 as prooftext.

⁹ Lusk.

like a baptism. However, Paul's larger point makes the conspicuous affirmation that this is the sacrament¹⁰ of baptism. In fact, Paul does not distinguish between spiritual baptism and water baptism. For Paul, both are the same. Baptism is Spiritual,¹¹ because the Spirit works in baptism.¹²

In chapter one Paul stresses that you are united into the One whose name you were baptized. Paul says that divisions contradict your common baptisms into Christ. Why are the Corinthians lining up behind their favorite teachers? Were they not all baptized into Christ? If so, why are they dividing with one another? This is Paul's constant theme throughout I Corinthians.

The most striking parallel comes in chapter 10 where Paul uses the Israelites and their wonderings as a model for what not to do. He says that the Israelites were baptized into Moses in the cloud¹³ and sea and they drank the same spiritual drink. In our passage, Paul says the same thing of us in the New Covenant: that we were baptized into the body of Christ, just as the Israelites were baptized into Moses by the same Spirit, and we have been given to drink of the same Spirit, just as the Israelites drank spiritual drink. The parallel is clear: The baptism in the Red Sea is a real baptism; it is a baptism that formed them into a nation, so too, for us in baptism God forms us into a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people for his own possession, a people brought from darkness into light, as St. Peter says.¹⁴

¹¹ As Luks observed in e-mail correspondence, it is important to write "Spiritual" with capital "S," in order to understand it refers to the Holy Spirit.

¹² This statement comes from personal conversations with Rich Lusk. He has offered some helpful insights into the work of the Spirit in baptism.

¹³ See Psalm 77 for cloud imagery. The work of Meredith Kline on the "glory-cloud" sheds some light on this issue, though Kline's theology often contradicts his brilliant imagery-laden work. For correction of Kline, see James B. Jordan's *Through New Eyes*.

¹⁴ I Peter 2:9. All quotations from the English Standard Version.

And this is crucial: the context of this passage is about the “use of spiritual gifts in the visible church community.”¹⁵ These gifts are not given for some mystical edification, but for the common good and edification of the entire body. Paul is not referring to some invisible church, but to the visible Church of Christ on earth. Therefore, this is a visible baptism, not some secret inner experience. As one pastor has stated, “Paul calls the church the body of Christ, not the soul. And bodies are public, visible, they are tangible.”¹⁶

Baptism unites you into membership in the body of Christ. This is precisely what Paul has in mind. But notice Paul’s words in verse 13. We were baptized into one body “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” Since Paul has already referred to baptism, what then is this drinking of the Spirit? Is this possibly a reference to the Lord’s Supper? My answer is: Unquestionably. Just as an infant born into a new family desires to be nourished by that new family, so too, a new member of Christ’s church through baptism is nourished through food and drink in God’s new family. The Scriptures make this clear. “We know that immediately after baptism in Acts 2, they were eating together and breaking bread together, a reference to the Lord’s Supper.”¹⁷ And who can deny this point in light of Paul’s distinct concern that the Corinthian Church treats the Lord’s Supper as a table of unity, and not

¹⁵ Lusk proves that baptism in I Cor. 12 is unmistakably the sacrament of baptism.

¹⁶ Lusk.

¹⁷ Burke Shade offers helpful insights into the spiritual connection between baptism and eating and drinking of Christ. See also *James B. Jordan’s The Sociology of the Church*, as well as Peter Leithart’s *The Kingdom and the Power*.

division. The Bible's emphasis is first union, then communion; first birth, then nourishment. Or we can say first baptism into Christ's death and then resurrection into Christ's life.¹⁸

Who are we identified with as baptized Christians? "We are not identified by our Jew-ness or Gentile-ness or social class, slave or free, or wealthy, but by our in-Christ-ness. We are the temple of God. In baptism the Spirit took you out of Adam's family and placed you into Christ's family, took you out of Adam's body and put you into Christ's body."¹⁹

How shall we then live?

And you may ask: Does baptism do all that? Does it bring me into the body? How can mere water do this? Before I got married, I loved Melinda, but our relationship was not official. "Now on our wedding day, I woke up a single man, but sometime in the afternoon, Melinda and I made a few promises to each other in the midst of many witnesses and the pastor declared: I now pronounce you man and wife! And through that wedding ritual, God formed a new family. On the other side of that ritual, we are now one flesh, we have been covenanted together. Our wedding ceremony made our relationship official. When passing through the ritual we became husband and wife; from singleness to marriage."²⁰

We all declare how wonderful the celebration of a wedding is. It is ordained by God, but it is not a sacrament. Now, if a wedding, which is not a sacrament can do all these things by creating a new family, and giving two individuals a new identity, "why can't God create his

¹⁸ See Romans 6. At this point I will mention that understanding passages like Romans 6 and I Cor. 12 as sacramental will shape the entirety of one's theology. This is essentially the distinction between someone who has a high view of the Church and someone who does not.

¹⁹ Rich Lusk.

²⁰ Lusk's helpful illustration; See also Douglas Wilson *Reformed is not Enough* for an outworking of this marriage theme and relationship to the covenant.

covenant family through a ritual that is a sacrament? In baptism you are married to Christ, you become a part of the bride of Christ.”²¹

In baptism, you are incorporated into the Church. The Spirit takes you from the old world and brings you into the New World. You enter into a new identity. Your identity is no longer grounded in your country, your biological family, but it is grounded in the New Family that God established in this New World. You now wear God’s name. You are part of His people. So live the life your baptism declares. Brothers and Sisters, salvation is not a personal transaction. Faith is given in the context of relationships. Paul calls us to be a part of a body. Just as Paul’s emphasis is on the Corinthian Church, our emphasis is on Providence Church. If you are a member of this body, this is your church. This is your community. This is your family. Ask yourself how can you commit yourself to this body? How can you serve this body? How can you esteem others better than yourself in this community? The baptized life is the life of commitment, faithfulness to Christ. This is the unity Paul envisions for you. In the Name of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

²¹ Ibid.