

BaptistWay: Fellow Christians

August 7, 2015

- *The BaptistWay lesson for August 23 focuses on Acts 4:32-37; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Galatians 6:9-10; Hebrews 10:24-25.*

Christians are the generous people who live the words: “What’s mine is yours.” (I owe this insight to Hulitt Gloer, professor of preaching at Truett Seminary.)

Such generosity characterized Christians from the very beginning (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-37), even before they were known as Christians. Yes, a defining characteristic of the Way (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22) was the generosity of believers toward each other. In the midst of this generosity, incredible wonders were performed, and thousands joined the fledgling movement of Christ.

Different settings

While the two descriptions of the Christian community are similar, notice the different settings. In Acts 2, the first description sums up the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In Acts 4, the second description introduces the generosity of Barnabas in contrast to the self-interest of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11).

Both descriptions offer communal generosity as a prime indicator of the origin of and spiritual condition of the community. The generous community enjoyed the power of God at work in its midst. By contrast, the self-interested received the fearsome power of God as judgment (5:5, 10-11).

Furthermore, the generosity of the Christian community was voluntary. As such, it was a free expression of trust in God to provide for one’s own

household and a free expression of love for one's fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. To withhold a portion of one's belongings from the community was to communicate the limit of one's love and trust.

From these stories, we learn in clear terms Christians are to be generous toward each other.

Generous Christians

Not only do generous Christians enjoy the power of God at work in and through them. Their very survival as a community requires their generosity.

Paul teaches the Christian community in Corinth that Christians are more than individual believers and more than social constructs in space and time. Christians are the mystical body of Christ. As such, the individual people and communities calling themselves "Christian" make up the body of Christ in the same way various organs and extremities make up a physical human body.

Just before Paul employs the metaphor of the body to describe the Christian community, Paul discusses "the gifts of the Spirit," which are given to believers in Christ "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). Believers in Christ have different spiritual gifts presumably for two practical reasons.

First, while each believer lives from and benefits others by their spiritual strengths, they simultaneously need to continue maturing their spiritual weaknesses, those gifts in which others are strong.

Depending on one another

Second and related, because spiritual strengths and weaknesses are scattered around the Christian community, the individuals in that community must depend on one another in order to be whole or full in

Christ.

On the tail of treating spiritual gifts, Paul then provided what he hoped would be a more concrete way of describing our dependence on each other by comparing Christians to a human body.

N.T. Wright writes in his *Paul for Everyone* commentary on 1 Corinthians, “The face enjoys warm sunshine, but it seems to penetrate through the entire body.” What Paul knew by experience, we now know scientifically. The human body requires vitamin D and obtains it most naturally through exposure to sunlight. As Wright notes, the skin enjoys the warmth and the eyes the light of the sun, but the whole body benefits as the various microscopic parts of the body take in and process vitamin D, an element essential to the uptake of calcium by our bones.

We entertain ourselves wondering who in the room is a foot, who is a hand, who is an eye, who is a kidney, who is a spleen, and so on. In doing so, we must not neglect the ultimate responsibility of all these body parts to something greater than themselves—the collective body. On this point, we need more thorough training beyond what this lesson is able to do.

The body metaphor

Wright also draws attention to the fact that the body metaphor already was being used in Paul’s day to describe civil society. In its secular context, proponents of the body metaphor used it to define strata of importance. More important people occupied more important positions in the body (society) and were therefore of a higher status. By contrast, Paul taught the individual parts of the body of Christ are of equal importance so that all who are part of Christ’s body are indispensable to each other and therefore equally valued.

As equally important parts of one body—Christ’ body—we are to care for one another.

At this point, we have to acknowledge this only is possible inasmuch as we are together. In a traditional sense, to be together means we are physically gathered together in the same building or location on a Sunday morning, a sense which sounds very much like the way Hebrews 10:25 reads. The problem, however, is that we seem to be “preaching” this to an ever smaller choir.

How might we continue meeting together while not in “the Lord’s house” this Sunday? Or the next?

Or the next?