



All Flowing Together

Num. 11:24-30; Psalm 104; John 7:37-39; 1 Cor. 12:3b-13

We like to make distinctions among people. We look at their roles, their stations, their careers, and make estimates on aspects of their worthy by such categories. We don't mean to, necessarily, but at some level or other, we attribute different weight of importance to people based on such matters as race, language, education, wealth, gender, intelligence, doctrine, clothing, morality, vehicles, and housing. Depending on where we fit in these equations, we tweak the results to set our own worth ahead of others. The gospel sets a different standard, in which self is not as important as the community. Can we live in such a way that places the body of Christ grows beyond selfish concerns?

As missionaries, we had one major task set before us. We were to work ourselves out of a job. The task was to equip others to take over what we were doing, in order that we could move on elsewhere or to something else. In theory, pastoring should not be so different. In practice, it is simpler to retain an established structure with its artificial distinctions between clergy and laity. Sure, seminary offers specialized training. Public speaking is not for everyone. It is easier to pay someone to accomplish certain functions than for the larger congregation to fill them. At heart, however, there should be no distinction. We are all called to participate actively in the leading of God's Spirit.

This was an issue that faced Moses early on. A select number of leaders among the people in the wilderness were visited by God's spirit. They were empowered by the breath of God to be mouthpieces for *Yahweh*. Everyone was not comfortable with this. They liked having an hierarchical structure. It lent stability to their lives. It kept people in pre-determined places. It defined who was who and differing importance to individuals. Moses looked on things a little differently.

On finding out that there were two men in the camp not with Moses who were also speaking as prophets of God, Joshua wanted to have them killed. How dare they purport to speak for *Yahweh* outside the proper chain of command! Moses' response was insightful. "Are you jealous for *my* sake?" Deep down, perhaps Joshua was worried for his own position. After all, he was the heir apparent to Moses' place at the head of the people. Rather than responding to Joshua from insecurity, however, Moses said he would rather that all the nation were prophets of *Yahweh*—no exception, no distinction. Ideally, all would have access to God and extend the presence and words of *Yahweh* to others.

Psalm 104 speaks of the diversity God worked in creation. It speaks also of all creation relying on God's continued blessing and provision. God cares for all creation, valuing all with provision for their diverse needs. In turn, the complexity of life speaks to the identity of God. So also is the body of Christ. We are created in diversity. We are gifted in diverse manners, yet are part of a larger whole.

Maybe the church in Corinth was Baptist, after all. It was at least similar in many ways to some of our own Baptist traits. The Corinthian church was enmeshed in problems akin to Baptist politics. They argued over who was worthy, and who was not. They worried about one group being right and another wrong. They pitted one set of leaders against another. It was "us" and "them" all the way. In all the "I'm right, you're wrong" mentality, they missed the point of their real identity.

No matter how much we may dislike one another, Paul says we are all part of one body. No matter how much we may believe we are right and those others are wrong, we are all endowed by the

Spirit of Christ for the good of the whole body. In quibbling and fighting over one thing and another, they forgot why they were called to Christ in the first place. In looking at their distinctiveness, they overlooked how God had a purpose for each one in building something larger than their individuality.

They had come to the place they questioned how those who were different could even belong to Christ. Paul had a simple answer: “Jesus is Lord” is enough of a test. It was a sufficient test for Paul to apply to all sides in the discussion. Regardless of where one stood on issues of legalism, the question was whether one accepted the Lordship of Christ. All other issues paled. Regardless of where one stood on questions of the importance of personalities, the question was whether one accepted the Lordship of Christ. All other concerns were secondary. Regardless of one’s views on morality, sexuality, gender roles, and litigation, the question was whether one accepted the Lordship of Christ. This concern was the gospel’s foundation, and no other.

That does not mean Paul did not have opinions, preferences, and teaching to lend in all these areas of conflicting views. He was concerned, however, that the diversity of the body not be spent on promoting one factional interest over another. Diversity was meant to unify and build up the body. The ways the Spirit gifts individuals are not for individual profit, but for the larger whole. This is what the church in Corinth was missing. Their diversity was crafted to work for unity, not division. They were not created for individual pursuits, but for unified service to the Christ they called Lord.

Somehow, it is too easy to get bogged down in our differences, individuality, and distinctions. Over the ages, such issues have caused all sorts of wars, crusades, racial tension, national conflicts, denominational struggles, church splits, and broken families—often in the name of Christ. Jesus never called us to conflict, however, but to drink of his own life and love.

John records Jesus at Passover calling all to draw life from him as one would drink redemption from the Seder cup. This was a call to unity and dependence, not individuality and selfish pursuit. The whole Feast of Unleavened Bread was about dying to pride and selfishness in preparation to celebrate God’s Passover deliverance. Paul uses the Passover and Unleavened Bread theme in structuring his letter to Corinth. He says that it is the table of Christ we now celebrate, not any competing selfish concerns. We gather to become the body of Christ, individually and corporately. It is in our diversity that the manifold grace of God is ultimately revealed. It is through our diversity that the Spirit is expressed and flows for the benefit of all.

Today is Pentecost Sunday. We celebrate that God has poured out the Spirit—God’s very breath—upon all who take claim to Christ Jesus as Lord. In Christ we are nurtured into a new identity as part of the whole body of Christ. No longer are we to sit concerned for issues of our own advancement, security, or future. Rather, we join with Moses now in seeing at last the Spirit flowing into, among, and through the entire people of God. Together, we are the body of Christ. Together, the Spirit flows in us and through us for the common good, not simply the advancement of our individual concerns.

Joshua was concerned with personal issues. Corinth was worried over issues that divided and qualified believers in levels of superiority. These were not the concerns of Moses, Paul, or Jesus. Rather, they were concerned for the good of the people as a whole. Would that in all the Spirit would flow, building a nation of priests. Shall the Spirit flow for the good of the whole body, or just ourselves?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*