

THE BODY

We are talking about taking the Road to Antioch. That is, it remains to be seen how much any of us will take the road, but we are talking about it. It is our special phrase or code word for choosing Christian community. Christians, like every other group in the world, do not develop a special language to be snooty, but to save time and enhance communication. If I have to repeat last Sunday's sermon all over again, we have no time to say anything further. So this phrase, "The Road to Antioch," is to recall all of that, and still allow us to move on.

We are talking about taking the Road to Antioch – the road to Christian community. Like any other journey, the Road to Antioch requires us to do some things – that is, to take some steps – and to keep walking toward our goal, in the direction we have chosen, with a certain consistency and patience and endurance.

When it comes to journeys, the greatest hazard of all is to lose sight of the goal, to forget the destination. Even if we die along the way, at least we were heading toward our objective. If, at the end of each day, we can look back and see that we have made progress – that we have moved in the right direction, that we are nearer to our goal in the evening than we were in the morning – then it was a wonderful day, and we are happy people.

On the other hand, if, when evening comes, we realize that we have taken a wrong turn, gone down the wrong road, traveled in the wrong direction – if we are further from our goal in the evening than we were in the morning; if we are lost; if we have lost sight of the goal; if we can no longer remember what we were heading toward; if we no longer have the will or the energy to go further – then it was a terrible day, and we are miserable and unhappy people.

There are a few members of this church who have no concept of the Road to Antioch at all. They do not see the goal or travel toward it. Somehow, none of us have reached them yet. They have heard about Jesus but they do not love Him, or His Kingdom. Therefore, the Road to Antioch, if they ever think about it, seems vague at best – a lot of trouble without very much joy or vision to justify it. Naturally, they don't come around here very often.

But only a few of us are that lost. Most of our members are more like you. I am not only talking *about* the Road to Antioch, but *to people* who are walking the Road to Antioch in some way. You have some interest in Christian community or you wouldn't be here. At least you wouldn't be here very often.

Some of you think that I am never satisfied with your performance. That is, you come here Sunday after Sunday and sometimes you hear me talking about things you haven't done yet, steps you haven't taken yet, dimensions of the faith you haven't noticed yet. Sometimes you feel scolded. You think I am never satisfied with you. Of course, that's true. And that's wonderful! It means we are not at the end of the road yet. Would you want it to end where we are now? Would you like to think that we have seen it all, and this is all there is to it?

The paradox is: I am often more pleased with you than you are. I often see the influence and impact of your faith and devotion more clearly than you do. If you are walking the Road to Antioch, you are having a greater effect on more people than you can possibly know. Just being who you are – and walking toward a goal you believe in – has a tremendous impact. You are not supposed to be aware of it all. That would take your eyes off the goal. Results are supposed to be the Holy Spirit's business. So I wanted to take a moment to remind you that, as we talk about the Road to Antioch, you may feel there are things you are not doing yet, or that you are not doing well enough yet. Of course! Because we love this road, and our Lord, we will be sorry that we are not doing better. This seems appropriate to me. It comes from caring. But we will also feel drawn by new possibilities – if we see them clearly, and believe we have a chance to attain them. So we need to stay open to change and growth. That does not mean we are bad or that we have not been doing *anything* right so far.

Now, I have a lot to cover, so I can't fool around as much as usual. That means I have to keep it clear and simple. First, I want to say a bit about the Bible and our theology. I want you to know that the Road to Antioch is grounded in our Scriptures and tradition as solidly as the Road to Jericho or Damascus. Secondly, we will take a quick look at some general suggestions for improving our journey to Antioch. We will get to some more-specific suggestions later.

I.) THE BIBLE

There is so much in the Scripture readings for today that it is actually painful for me not to say more about them. But you are not slow. And some of you will read them over and ponder them more carefully when you get home. They are about Christian community, the body of Christ, the Road to Antioch. The imagery is clear and telling: We are all participants in Jesus Christ – in what He is, in His mission, in what He came to earth to accomplish. None of us can do it alone. We truly need each other. All of us have our parts to play. Every one of us has an *important* part, no matter what we or anybody else may think about it. Only the Holy Spirit knows how important, and how it all fits together.

These familiar, but never too familiar, truths are at the very core of our faith and tradition. The concept of the church as the body of Christ is one of the pivotal, cornerstone beliefs of Christendom. In short, we are looking at the center of one of the three major roads of Christendom – the Road to Antioch. Quite simply, these Scripture readings ask: Are you part of the body of Christ? Do you know it? Are you glad about it? Do you rejoice in it? Do you live it and walk this road on purpose – as part of the Kingdom, as part of the church?

If not, you are not nearly as happy (fulfilled) as you ought to be. If not, your life is not counting for nearly as much as it was designed for. If not, you have missed, at least for the moment, one of the greatest invitations in life.

Now, that is not what I came to tell you. That is what I figure you already know. I am just reminding us, getting us on the same subject. After all, I'm not preaching to the masses. Some of you pretend, but you are no longer amateurs. You study the Bible and pray and ponder such things every day. You have been in and around the church for a lot of years, and I am not the only one who has ever spoken to you about our Faith. God has invested a great deal in you. God does not do things without a reason.

What then do I want you to see? More clearly than ever before, I want you to see and know that the Road to Antioch is, in truth, as high as the other two “high roads” of our faith:

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- The Road to Damascus: Love God.
- The Road to Jericho: Love your neighbor.
- The Road to Antioch: Be a member of Christ's body – the church.

Love and care about your fellow church members. This has always been our pattern and our truth. It has always been the framework of our faith and tradition. But our generation has lost sight of Antioch. Our generation has lost awareness of the importance of the church. We scorn organized religion, and speak scathingly of all the weaknesses of the church, as if *we* were not the church – the ones Christ calls today to be His body. Therefore, we grow sicker and sicker socially, along with our society, and our souls starve for true community.

Back to the Bible – if you want to know how things work, get the manual, read the instructions! Now I want to show you something I suspect you may not know. That is, I don't think you are conscious of it enough to explain or teach it to others, and you need to be. Your soul knows it, which is why you will recognize and understand it as soon as I point it out.

All through these last chapters of First Corinthians, Paul is giving us interesting, fascinating, important instructions and information about the church. He tells us about life in the church, what the church is, and how it operates. Again and again he turns and returns to the analogy and core imagery of the church as the body of Christ. There are other important issues, but this is the major theme. Paul also talks about how to live in a pagan society, about the gifts of the Spirit, and about the importance of love. These are all big subjects. But Paul is talking about them in the light of what they mean to the body of Christ – the faith community, the church.

We need to pay attention to all of it, but just for the moment, forget all the details. Hit the peaks, get the overview. Look at it from the top of the mountain. It is beautiful. What Christ Jesus started, we are all part of now: bringing reconciliation between God and the people of our world. Christ is still the head. The Holy Spirit still guides and controls this operation. But we are all members of the body, with our individual skills and gifts to contribute, with our individual assignments to accomplish. We can only get glimpses of the overall mission. Mostly we need to pay attention to our own appropriate task and contribution.

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I preach a sermon; you teach a class; he calls a neighbor; she visits a friend; they confront somebody at work and tell them in honest love that they are not performing. The Spirit knits it all together, and changes the world ... if we stay faithful – if we stay attached to the body. Most of the time, we only see a tiny portion of what is going on. We only see a part of what is happening in our immediate vicinity. The foot and the hand and the heart and the liver must trust the head to understand and coordinate what is going on. Christ is the head! We never are.

There are a lot of people running around today talking about the Christ within, the Christ nature, and achieving their own Christness. They think that means they are the head. But they never are. The Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ – our resurrected Lord – is the head. We get to participate in Christ, but as members of the body. Others may want to forget that. Let us never forget it. (Or you know what part of the body we will become.)

From Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which is about the church, let me pull just three verses:

“When we bless ‘the cup of blessing,’ is it not a means of sharing in the blood of Christ? When we break the bread, is it not a means of sharing the body of Christ?” (I Corinthians 10:16)

“We must test ourselves before eating our share of the bread and drinking from the cup. For he who eats and drinks eats and drinks judgment on himself if he does not discern the body.” (I Corinthians 11:28-29)

“For Christ is like a single body with its many limbs and organs, which, many as they are, together make up one body. For indeed we were all brought into one body by baptism, in the one Spirit, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free men, and that one Holy Spirit was poured out for all of us to drink.” (I Corinthians 12:12-13)

Okay. The subject is the body of Christ – the followers and believers, the faith community, the church. Try to stay on the subject. Try not to wander off to other topics, theories, or considerations. The subject is the body of Christ – the church.

“When we break the bread, is it not a means of sharing in the body of Christ?” Now, here comes the exam: When we break the bread, it is a means of sharing in what? A means of sharing in the church – the faithful community. You see? Everybody keeps trying to change the

subject. They want to get on some irrelevant argument about transubstantiation. Does the bread actually transform into the physical flesh of Jesus? That misses the whole point. That way, we don't have to do anything or be anything. That kind of theology saves us from being saved, changed, or personally affected. But Paul *did* make his subject clear. We have to try to stay on the subject.

Yes, Jesus died – sacrificed Himself, gave Himself – and rose again. And without that, none of the rest would be open or possible to us. But communion is not a sacrament to celebrate Jesus' incredible deeds. Sacraments *never* merely celebrate the past. Sacraments make *us* sacred, change us, put us into the story. Communion is also about NOW: about us becoming part of the body, members of Jesus' community, participants in His mission. It does not in any way matter what the chemical analysis of the elements is. It is not the chemical analysis that matters; it is the spiritual analysis that matters. If you eat the bread and are totally convinced that it is the flesh of Jesus but it does not make you part of the people of Jesus – the church – it will not make any difference in your life.

If you eat stale bread with mold on it but know that it binds you, heart and soul, to the community of Christ's followers – *that* will change your life, and the lives of many others through you.

“He who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment on himself if he does not discern the body.” (Are you hearing Paul yet?) Try to stay on the subject. All the same remarks apply. And further remarks apply: If you take communion for yourself alone, like some private saint – trying to find or use or keep the power, benefits, and truth of the Gospel for some personal spiritual journey or some personal evolution – then you are in grave danger. This meal is to incorporate you into the body. If you eat the bread and drink the cup, you must “discern” that the people around you are part of the body too. They are bound to you, and you to them – and all of you together in Christ. If they stumble, you fall. If you achieve, they are increased. These are your people. You cannot walk the Christian Way without them. If you take this bread and cup without discerning the body, you bring down wrath.

I always have to stop at a word like “wrath,” since so many of you are refugees from fundamentalist thinking. I don't have time to explain it. I can only tell you what Paul means, and you can argue with me later. In this context, wrath means: people will end up living in a world without community, where people are lonely, estranged, aimless, confused; where

no deep-level communication takes place; where folk seldom get the chance to experience true cooperation, love, or hope, or the joy of the Kingdom, or the satisfaction of knowing that their lives are worthwhile. What most people call “wrath” is a picnic in comparison to that.

Anyway, I wanted you to see that the Road to Antioch is bigger and more important than our present generation of Christians seems to realize. Paul links both baptism and communion – and even the coming of the Holy Spirit – directly with the Road to Antioch. I am hoping that this will be clear, and start opening doorways in your mind. I am hoping that when we take communion from now on, it will not only remind you of Christ’s great love for you, but will also remind us that we are Christ’s people together. And that, in His name, we are always being knit together in a faith fellowship where we not only serve Him, but love each other – and where we not only have our names and pictures in a church directory, but also live and work to serve and worship God together as our *primary* purpose in life.

II.) STEPS TO TAKE

Now to pragmatic and practical levels. If we want to walk the Road to Antioch, what can we do? Of course, it depends upon God. Grace is our only hope. But we can do little things to cooperate – to try to work with God, instead of against him.

A.) First of all, if you have understood these things, throw in with us. Do you know what that phrase means? Have you really done that yet? Somewhere along the line, when we are contemplating any move, we pass through a phase where we are checking it out, being cautious, and holding back.

That is appropriate. There needs to be a courtship before marriage. Oh no! I used the wrong analogy. Our generation doesn’t know *that* one anymore either. How will we recover understanding, when marriage and church membership are the best illustrations of each other, and we no longer remember the principles for either one?

Nevertheless, some people never get past the courtship phase. Even if they get married “on the books,” or join the church on the books, they never get past the first phase. They just keep wondering, year after year, if they will like it, if it will be fun for them, if it will be good for them. But they never jump in – they never go for it and get married. To be a Christian – to experience what it’s like – a person has to “throw in” with Jesus and His people. You know: “For better or for worse, for richer

or for poorer, in sickness and in health.” That’s what it means to throw in with somebody.

Have you thrown in with the Christian church? Are you married? Is it for keeps? Is it your people, come what may? Is it your family, next only to your immediate family? That’s what church is. That’s what being a member of the body is like. Throw in with Jesus and His people.

B.) No matter where you are in your commitment, consider where the church is on your priority list. Now move it up a few notches. It should not come above spouse or children. It should not come higher than your devotion to God in Christ.

But the church should come higher than recreation. It should not necessarily exclude, but it should come higher than other social organizations, don’t you think? It should even come higher than other political organizations. It should come higher than television, or watching sports, or trying to save the world on your own wisdom or power. Am I being too vague?

I am saying: Consider your part in the body of Christ, and put the church several notches higher on your personal priority list.

C.) Thirdly, if you have children, bring them with you. By that I mean, teach your children that they are part of the body too. Among other things, that means you are going to have to talk about such things openly and sincerely in your home. So far, most of you are teaching your children that the church is among the many, many things life has to offer – that they should see if they like it, and participate if it pleases them sufficiently or entertains them consistently.

That is a terrible misunderstanding. Many children today, with greater logic than we like, are applying the same approach to their loyalty toward marriage, toward family life, even toward God. Your children will have no comprehension of church until, like you, they realize that they *are* the church. If church is no fun, it’s only because its people are no fun. And if we walk away, we simply walk out of the most important dimension and possibility in life. If we are not the church, where will we experience Christian community? Will we simply keep church-shopping until we find a place where others are putting on a good show and we can watch?

Throw in with us. Raise the church on your priority list. Bring your children into the faith family with you.