

I Corinthians 14:6-12  
Ephesians 4:11-16  
I John 3:11-18

## BUILDING UP THE BODY

Today is the culmination and climax of the series of sermons I have been preaching on “The Road to Antioch.” I will have a few more things to say about this road to Christian community next week, but today is what the series has been leading up to.

In truth, and as always, I wonder what you have been “hearing” these last few weeks. What I think I am saying and what you think you are hearing are often attached by only the thinnest of threads. And the person sitting next to you is frequently hearing something quite different from what you are hearing. Some of you are ENFPs, some of you are Virgos or Aquarians, and some of you have recently fallen in love or been promoted, while others are dealing with deep grief, or looking for work, or wondering if you can stay married. It really is an amazing mix. And we call this a church, a faith family, a community of followers of THE WAY? You bet! “Pilgrims” doesn’t mean we are all fixed up pretty, life is easy, and we have all the answers. It means we need each other – it means we enrich and support each other on THE WAY. That is exactly why the Holy Spirit calls us together, and offers to guide and strengthen and save us.

So we don’t always hear things in the same way, even from the Bible. But here are some things I think and hope the majority of us are hearing and taking to heart:

1.) The Road to Antioch is one of the big three – one of the three major “walks” or “ways” of the Christian Life. If you are a Christian, you do not *go* to church – you *are* the church!

2.) We are “the body.” Christ Jesus is still the head! We do not turn into the head because of length of service, because of status, or because we have accrued knowledge over the years, or for any other reason whatsoever – not ever! Jesus is our head: the leader and guide, the brains of the outfit. Our only hope is to keep reporting in – that is, each of us continually returning to our prayers. It is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day. Some of you who mocked this at first are now saying, “You mean every *hour*, don’t you?”

3.) The fellowship of the church (the Christian community) is a special bond between people. It is somewhat less encompassing than the bond of marriage (if that marriage is in Christ). It is somewhat *more* than all other covenant relationships on earth. It requires time to be with – time to come to know – others in the fellowship. It requires discipline. It is about love. Throw in with us.

4.) The church – the faith community – is a place to invite others into, IF you start to really care about them. Try to remember: such an invitation is just one cut below a proposal of marriage. On the other hand, this is no place for the perfect. It is a fellowship of sinners. The church is a place of healing, a place of service, a laboratory of love. It is a place to learn and grow, and to try on faith principles before taking them into the outer world. If you were a gardener, I would tell you that the church is like a greenhouse. If you were a soldier, I would tell you that the church is like boot camp. Yet these analogies are only partial. Christians always return to the fellowship to regroup and refresh. They also always go out again from the fellowship – *sent* as servants of Christ. Whatever you are doing, do it for Jesus.

5.) Today I want to talk about “building up the body.” It is a phrase and concept that Paul mentions again and again. It is inherent in Jesus’ teachings about loving one another as He has loved us. But the specific teaching about building up the body comes from Paul, as he wrestles with the task of helping pagans understand what it means to come into the church (the body of Christ).

In Israel, the concept of “kneset Israel” is established and familiar since Abraham. The Chosen People – the whole community, the kneset that makes covenant with God – is a powerful reality.

In Israel, even if, as an individual, you have sinned and God despises you and you fully deserve to be annihilated, nevertheless you are not abandoned if you are still part of the kneset (community). If you are part of the community, God would have to destroy the whole community in order to destroy you. There was a time when being “banished” – excommunicated – was considered a terrible punishment. Flogging was much preferred, even though many died from it.

We seldom think in such terms anymore. But the concept of the kneset is still the foundation of the church, whether we know it or not. We breathed it in with the Jewishness of Jesus and Peter and Paul and

the others. God deals with us as individuals, but God *also* deals with us as members of the covenant community. Even if we totally foul up on one side, the bonds of the other will hold us up until we get straightened out again.

In our day and time, most people's awareness of the riches and realities of the faith community is severely eroded. We do not trust, experience, commit to, or comprehend most of the dimensions of CHURCH (*ecclesia* – the people of God).

When the Apostle Paul began to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ into the pagan world, he was carrying a message about dramatic individual worth. Never before had *anybody* conceived of individual human beings as having anywhere near the worth or value that Paul, in Christ's name, was proclaiming.

Paul was saying that each and every child, each and every woman, each and every man – no matter what station, race, or reputation that person had, no matter if they were slave or free, criminal or governor – Paul was proclaiming that each person had an infinite, precious, personal value to almighty God.

Any person who would (could) believe it, trust it, open themselves to it, and receive it would discover God's eagerness and readiness to be friends, to be in constant contact. Of course, God was still God. He would still want things his way. God would be making a few changes: "This life under new management." And God did have plans and purposes and a methodology that were often quite surprising. Nevertheless, many people who listened to Paul thought this was incredibly exciting. Even though it might be full of surprises, or even sacrifices, what many of them had experienced in life so far had not been all that terrific. They figured: Why not take a chance? A try for something was better than staying with nothing.

But Paul said: "You think you understand, but you don't understand yet. You have been ransomed. You think that means, 'Okay, so some Creator cares something for the creation, and I'm one of the creatures, so I have more importance than I thought.' You are not listening! When the Son of God lays down His life for you, it gives your life the value of – the same worth as – the Son of God. If the Son of God loves you and refuses to leave without you, that gives you the inherent value of the Son of God. It doesn't matter that you and I know

what a worthless piece of trash you really are. If the Son of God will not go on without you, then the universe must end up dealing with you as it would deal with Him. It may not want to, but it doesn't get a choice. Christ gives it no choice. Christ just keeps saying and proving that 'If you abandon them, you abandon me, because I am with them.' Love is like that."

Sometimes we get confused and all twisted up in fancy theories and sophisticated theology and forget the simple reality: LOVE IS LIKE THAT! And we are loved by the Messiah, the Chosen One, the Son of God.

Paul was carrying this message, a message unlike anything the world had ever heard before. (If, indeed, it has heard it yet.) And Paul would try to explain what had happened to reveal this incredible truth, and why people could trust it. Then everybody would gather around, beat the hell out of him, and throw him out, chase him out, stone him, flog him, or leave him for dead. Paul would then wait until he could walk and talk again. Then he would go to the next town and do the same thing all over again.

You think I'm all broken up because a few people say some unkind things about me? I just keep reading the story. And I think, "Gee, my life is so pleasant, and so many of you are so wonderful to me, I must be doing something really wrong. Nobody has actually tried to kill me for quite a while now." Of course, the real truth is that Jesus and Paul and thousands of others have broken trail for me. They have for you too, if you will follow it.

So far, so familiar, right? At the time, Paul did not know if anything would come of his efforts. He started churches – that is, a tiny handful of people started meeting together. No cathedrals were being built; small communities were forming. If you had to bet the church's future on the tiny faith community or on the mega-cathedral, which would you choose? I mean today, in our time? There were huge cathedrals (temples) in Paul's day too, you know. They were built for Diana, Apollo, Venus, Zeus, Caesar. They were most impressive and enormously wealthy, and thousands upon thousands flocked to them.

But Paul just kept talking about a dead Jew who wouldn't stay dead. And here and there, people said, "You know, I think I met Him, only I thought it was just my mind playing games with me." "Yes," Paul would reply, "and I bet they were better games than this outer world is trying

to play with you. Why don't you go invite Him to play some more – only this time, pay attention.” So they did, and after a while nothing in this world could bribe or control them anymore. They lived, breathed, worked, and suffered for a different reality – a Kingdom not of this world. And when they looked at you, they did not see you in terms of this world anymore, but in the light of that other reality.

Nevertheless, at the time, Paul had no way of knowing if anything would come of it. In one sense, that didn't matter. He was doing what he was supposed to do, what his prayers had guided him to do, what his church had laid its hands on him to do. The results were not in his hands. Don't you wish we could all get and keep that one straight?! The results do not depend upon us! We do what the Holy Spirit guides us to do. We do not have to decide if it is worth it or if any good will come of it. That's none of our business. We are not the brains of the outfit. Christ is the head. We are the body – the hands and the feet and, when we get lucky, the heart.

In Paul's case, the time came to go back through the towns he had been thrown out of, to see if anybody there had heard the message. Had anybody remembered it? If so, could he be of any further assistance or encouragement?

It seems incredible to me that there were *always* people who had heard and remembered. They had formed into small groups of followers. Not followers of Paul, but followers of the ONE he proclaimed. And they still met, talked, and supported each other. They lived a different life because they now trusted this different truth. What Paul had told them had proved to be true for them. Once awakened to it, they knew the presence of the Holy Spirit to be with them.

In short, this message of the extreme worth of every individual invariably created a fellowship between believers. It created community. The inherent quality of Christ's love, though it did not always duplicate itself exactly, did infect the fellowship. *“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* (John 13:35) As usual with Jesus, we discover that what He said was not just “pretty words” – it was the power and principle of LIFE. The words kept (and keep) coming into being.

So Paul started this string of tiny churches. We wouldn't even call them churches. No bylaws. No buildings. We cannot imagine that

they could survive, especially when the person carrying the message was so ill-treated and unmajestic, and the world was so big and busy with other things. It seems impossible.

But then, as the churches got established, as they grew larger and larger, Paul discovered that many of these new believers had very little comprehension of community. Fights and factions developed simply because, in real life, groups must make decisions and deal with problems that arise. What do you do when people cannot all fit into the living room anymore? What do you do if Jake says it's okay to work for Claudius, who builds pagan temples, and Jack is sure Jesus wouldn't like that? What do you say to Diane, whose husband is devoted to Mithraism and beats her every time he finds out that she has gone to a Christian meeting? Should she stay married to him? What will become of her and her children, in A.D. 50, if she leaves her home and her only material security? Have any of these questions really gone away?

During his later years, people were asking Paul these kinds of questions everywhere he went. Often he answered in detail, to the best of his ability. Often he reminded people of the principles of their faith. Sometimes he even admitted that there were no good answers; we just do the best we can and try to stay faithful, and trust Jesus to save us despite ourselves and the alienated, imperfect world we live in.

Since the details are endless and the situations we find ourselves in are ever-changing, it is best to have principles rather than rules. I tried to remind you of a big one last Sunday: Remember that the hand you hold is connected to a face, a heart, a mind, and a soul. God loves and has plans for that true person. You want to help with that – be part of it – not hinder or destroy it. Remembering that is better than endless lists of specific rules.

Today I want to remind you of what Paul called “building up the body.” He gave much specific advice about it. He talked about morals, and he talked about not thinking too highly of ourselves. He warned against factions, and he encouraged us to be humble. He gave us many pictures of how we are all needed and have different abilities, and yet we fit together in a larger whole. He talked about keeping order, respecting leaders, and not letting the larger community around us think we are a threat to them, or that we live a lower life than they do.

I was planning to drag you through all of these instructions because we have all the same issues, in different garb, still today. Then it became obvious to me that these were better suited for a Bible Study class than for sermons.

And then I realized that behind all the specific advice, Paul was also telling his Christian friends that the way to think most clearly in every new situation was to remember the big principle: **What will be most likely to build up the body?**

You know very well that Paul was not talking about membership rolls, getting more money, or building nicer buildings. Not that he would have objected to such things, but he was clearly talking about the “body of Christ” as a group of people – the church – who knew themselves loved and forgiven; who returned that love; who therefore wanted to spread the love, and serve the One who gave it.

How can we build up this body? Not the outer trappings, but the inner fellowship. It seems clear that there are a thousand ways. It is equally clear that certain attitudes and approaches will always tend to tear down the body. Suddenly, most of Paul’s practical wisdom clicks into focus. This is what he was always asking himself. This is where his answers were coming from. He was always praying, and this concept was right in the middle of his prayers. **What will build up the body?**

So the questions poured in: What about divorce? What about women not wearing hats, when everybody thinks hatless women are harlots? Can we eat meat from the market of pagan temples, when we know their gods are no real threat to us? What do we do with a person who keeps coming to our meetings but keeps living the same old way? And on and on the questions kept coming. But Paul just kept asking himself and others: **What will build up the body of Christ?** What would the head of the body want? Even if all the members vote for chocolate ice cream, is that what the head would want? Is that what would be best for building up the body?

This is one of the most incredible principles we will ever try on. It is deeply satisfying. It is a different level of seeing and obeying. It is a whole new principle for pilgrims to apply as they walk the WAY. To live by this principle is a whole new layer of joy. And it is incredibly delightful to discover other people who are already using this principle all the time. You can feel it in the way they think and talk and act.

**What will build up the body?** Try it in real life for the next four weeks. Every time you decide anything, every time a new subject enters your head, every time you attend a meeting or get into an argument, every time you feel hurt or angry or unappreciated, or enthusiastic or full of energy – for the next four weeks, as many times as you can remember to do so each day, ask: **What will build up the body?**

Lock it in even tighter. I want you to have great joy and true fun. Keep asking, **What will build up the body?** Then LIVE by the answer that comes.