

Grow Up

In the name of our ascended Lord Jesus who has set free a host of captives, and gives gifts to men, dear friends in Christ: We're working on a theme here. Two weeks back, we heard the Apostle Paul describe the Christian Church as a grand construction project underway. The Lord is building a holy temple for himself to dwell in here on earth, and we, the faithful are his building material: the living stones shaped and placed by him and cemented together by our common confession of faith in Jesus and the bonds of Christian fellowship and love.

Then last week we considered the entry point of this temple. The question was "How does one become a part of it? How do you get in?" Or, to be more precise, "How can I be sure that I am on the inside and a part of it?" The answer is holy Baptism. This is the visible sign and seal of God's promise in Christ Jesus – and more than a sign, Baptism actually makes the connection. By it the Holy Spirit is granted, trust in Christ is instilled, a person is washed of sin, given a new nature, and made a child of God.

Today, building on these ideas, Paul continues with answering the question "Okay, what's next?" To do it, he shifts the metaphor from a construction project with us as the living stones, to a human body, specifically the body of Christ, with us as the various parts of his body. But understand there's some overlap in the metaphors. They share common features, like, for example unity. The concrete and timber, the widows and roof tiles, the wiring and plumbing that make up this building are all an integral part of it. They serve different functions, but are all necessary. The building would be diminished if any component were missing. So also with the body: hands and feet, skin and bones, muscles and organs, they do different things, but all are equally a part of the body and all are needed if the body is to go on functioning as it should.

So it is with the Church of Jesus Christ. There is only one of them. And in it are all true believers in Christ: those who, by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word, know him as the eternal Son of God who took on human flesh, who lived a perfect life free of sin, gave that life on the cross as the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of all people, rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven, and will come again in glory to raise the dead, to judge the earth, and to grant to the faithful eternal life in the recreated world. That's the basic Gospel message. It's God's saving truth. And if you trust in it, then you a part of Christ's one Church. You've been called out of the unbelieving world, and called into Christ's kingdom.

In view of that, Paul urges us to walk in a manner worthy of that high calling. How could it be otherwise? You've been made child of God. You've been given the Holy Spirit to direct and guide you. You've been given a new nature that delights in pleasing God and doing what's right. So live like it. What does that look like? It's not rocket science. It's keeping the commandments – not because you have to keep them to save yourself; but rather because you have been saved by Jesus and are one flesh with him and consequently with everyone else who is a member of the body of Christ.

But let's spell it out: living in a manner worthy of your calling is fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things. That's what it looks like according to the first commandment. It's using the Lord's name for the reasons he gave it: for prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. That's what it looks like according to the second commandment. It's holding God's Word sacred and gladly hearing and learning it. That's what it looks like according to the third

commandment. It's honoring and obeying your parents and other authorities placed over you by God. That's what it looks like according to the fourth commandment. It's helping and befriending your neighbor in every need. That's what it looks like according to the fifth commandment. It's keeping your body chaste sexually, upholding the sanctity and indissolubility of marriage, and loving and honoring your spouse. That's what it looks like according to the sixth commandment. It's respecting what belongs to others, and helping them to keep and increase it. That's what it looks like according to the seventh commandment. It's upholding and defending the good name and reputation of others. That's what it looks like according to the eighth commandment. It's being content with what God in his grace has given you – in all circumstances. That's what it looks like according to the ninth and tenth commandments. It's loving your neighbors as yourself and doing unto them as you would have done unto you. That's what it looks like according the greatest of the commandments that Christ gave us.

And while we're doing all that, Paul urges us also to with all humility and gentleness, with patience and while bearing with each other in love, do what is in our power to maintain the bond of peace. It would seem on the surface that the one Church of Christ has not been very successful in doing this. We look around and see thousands of divisions, the Church divided into countless denominations all proclaiming a different version of the Gospel and of God's truth. In response, some think that we ought to ignore these differences and treat them as if they don't matter, and in that way restore the *outward* unity of the Church. But that's exactly the wrong way to do it.

Listen: the unity of the Church and the bond of peace it has are creations of God, not man. And this unity and peace exist even if we don't see them. There is only one Holy Spirit who creates faith in the hearts of believers. There is only one Church, the body of Christ, with him alone as its Lord. There is only one Christian faith. There is only one Baptism. There is only one God and Father of all who has revealed himself to us through his inspired Word and his Son who is the Word made flesh. What the Church stands on is the foundation of the teaching of the prophets and apostles. What unites us is our common confession of the truths they have taught – when we say together what God has revealed to us through them. True teaching always unites the Church. What divides it are false teachings and beliefs. These don't come from God; they come from demons who want to destroy the Church. They lead people not to God and light but to darkness and death. To pretend that false teachings don't matter or can be safely ignored is to give lies equal footing with the truth. And the demons win.

No, the way to maintain the unity of the Church and the bond of peace is to submit ourselves to authority of the Word of God who by his Word makes us one in Christ. So if, for example, one denomination teaches that Baptism saves and that by it God forgives sin, and another teaches that no, Baptism doesn't save and that by it God doesn't forgive sins, we don't agree to disagree. Instead we sit down with all humility and patience and look for the answer in God's Word – whereupon we'll find that yes, sure enough, the Scripture says that Baptism does save and by it God forgives sin! The Scriptures are not obscure or difficult to understand. The Lord is actually able to communicate clearly, and he does.

This is why we have what are called the Lutheran confessions. They're called "Lutheran" but they are in fact for the whole Church. They simply state what the Bible says, and therefore what every Christian ought to believe about God, about Christ, about the atonement he made, about Baptism and the Lord's Supper, about the Church, about the role of believers in their salvation, about the work of the Holy Spirit, and a host of other important teachings that God has revealed to his Church through the prophets and apostles. These confessions were

written not to divide the Church, but in the hope of uniting it under the authority of God's Word; and they serve that function still today.

But we need to move on. I started this discussion of the Church's essential unity to illustrate a way in which the metaphors of the Church as a building project and of a human body overlap. Another feature they share is the idea of growth. When a building is being constructed, you expect to see progress from day to day. If you don't see it, there's something wrong. And typically what happens if there's no progress for a long time, some of the work that was done gets undone.

So also with the human body: it starts small and gets bigger. To be sure, the thing about babies is that they don't stay babies. They become toddlers. Then little kids, who grow into big kids, and finally into adults. And what does every little kid want? He wants to be one of the big kids. He wants to do what the big kids get to do. He looks forward to the time when he can go to kindergarten, and when he gets there, he wants to be in the grade ahead of him. He wants to grow up.

And this, according to Paul, is what we in the Body of Christ should want as well: to grow up, to become fully mature Christians, to increase our knowledge of God's truth revealed in Christ, to make progress each day toward the goal of becoming Christ-like in our thoughts, our words, and our actions.

This is why Christ ascended into the heavens: not to leave his Church but rather to be with it in a different way; specifically through the gifts he sends. What gifts? Paul tells us: he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers. Christ is present in their service to the Church: in the Word they proclaim and in the Sacraments they administer. Through them Christ causes his Church to grow: grow in knowledge, grow in Christian virtue, and yes, grow numerically because it happens that mature Christians are better able to share their faith in Christ with others. But it starts with growing in the knowledge of the truth, which is Paul's chief concern here.

It's mine too. Here's the problem: there is a part of all of us that suffers from Peter Pan Syndrome. Remember him? He's the boy who didn't want to grow up. He wanted to stay a kid forever. And that part of us (I'm not excluding myself here) is a threat to our faith as individuals and to the Church at large. How? Paul explains that the reason we want to grow is so that we won't be like children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine (he means false doctrine), by human cunning, and by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

That is to say the enemy hasn't given up. Satan still wants to lure you from the truth – which is a whole lot easier for him to do if you don't know what the truth is and how to defend it. We need to be growing constantly. Using myself as the example, by God's grace I've been able to preach and teach for over 20 years. To do that, I've got to study. And in all those years of study, what impresses me most is not how much I know, but how much I don't – how much more there is yet to learn of Christ and his truth.

And the opportunities abound. There are the Bible studies here and throughout the week. There are books and videos available online. There's that note we put in the bulletin each week about *Issues Etc.* It's great stuff, which you'd discover if you gave it a try. There's that Catechism you have stashed away some place. When's the last time you pulled that out and went through it?

I say this not to shame you (well, okay, maybe a bit) but mostly to encourage you. I'm speaking the truth in love. I want – we should all want – to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Let that then be our goal: to make progress each day, together to grow up in Christ Jesus our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!