

How To Live Together in Community

(And a critique of the new 'Fellowship of Presbyterians')

Romans 12:9-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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What makes the church unique and different from any other organization of which you and I are a part? This is an important question, and one that can be answered in any number of ways. Here's my answer. The church is unique in that it is called into being by God. And as followers of Jesus, we are to exhibit within our life together certain characteristics of being in true community with one another. As such, being called together by God to be the Body of Christ comes with some mighty powerful responsibilities and obligations that aren't necessarily incumbent upon other organizations.

The Apostle Paul is our best guide when it comes to understanding a theology of what it means to be **the church – a community of faith called together for the expressed purpose of modeling and furthering the ministry of Jesus, which, in a nutshell, is the exhibition of the kingdom or realm of God in our midst.**

In his letter to the Christians living in Rome, Paul reminds them, and therefore us, that it is each and every one of us together who make up the Body of Christ. At the beginning of chapter 12 Paul tells us to present ourselves to God as a living sacrifice and to not be conformed to the selfish ways of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we may discern what is the will of God – of what is good and acceptable. He goes on to explain how God has blessed each and every one of us with different gifts and skills and resources – all of which are needed for ministry and are to be used for the common good. **It is only when all of us work together with our varied talents that we can be who we are called to be as the church.**

That's the lead-up to today's reading from **Romans 12:9-21. After answering the question of why we are to live together in community Paul presents a long list of exhortations of how we are to live together in community.** You may have noticed in your pew Bible that the NRSV translation gives this list the heading, "Marks of the True Christian." In actuality, what it provides is **a window on what life in Christ looks like in community**, and therefore can be used as a kind of measuring stick to see how well we're doing.

When I have preached on this passage in the past, as I did here 3 years ago, I have applied this list to the life of the specific congregation. I commend this approach again this morning, but also want to broaden its focus. **So while keeping an eye on how we live together in community here at College Hill, I also want us to look how all this can apply to the Presbyterian Church (USA).**

Concerning College Hill, I want to mention how exceptionally proud I am of how this congregation demonstrated how it lives together in community just last weekend. One of the items in Paul's list, found in verse 15, states, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." We certainly did a lot of both of those things as we went on an emotional roller coaster ride of highs and lows.

At the memorial service last Saturday for Sam Wood, the outpouring of deep compassion and genuine empathy extended to Mike, and Donna and Deborah – as well as to each other – was profoundly moving and a true demonstration of what it means to be a family of faith. Rarely have I witnessed that level of community grief, accompanied by such care and concern for one another.

The very next day was our More Light Celebration during our service of worship last Sunday. Rarely have I witnessed that level of such community joy in following the remarkable story of this congregation's long journey through its ministry of justice, acceptance, hospitality, and inclusiveness. The historic nature of that joyous celebration was not lost on this congregation or me.

In contrast to all of that is the current situation within our denomination. **How ironic it is that as we celebrated the passage of Amendment 10-A just last Sunday, with its historic recognition that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people of faith who are called by God can indeed be allowed to serve in ordained leadership positions within the Presbyterian Church (USA), that a very large gathering of nearly 2000 Presbyterians in Minneapolis this very weekend is deciding what it might do in response to this decision that they very strongly oppose.**

This group is calling itself the **Fellowship of Presbyterians (FOP)**. It was formed in January of this year when a group of large-church pastors sent out an open letter **stating that our denomination is “deathly ill.”** Let me share with you some of the information that I have received just within the last 2 days from the Presbyterian News Service reporting on that event.

“The world does not need another denomination,” said the Rev. John Crosby, pastor of Edina Presbyterian Church near Minneapolis and a member of the FOP's seven-member steering committee, “But continuing on the same path is a dead end and we're not going to do that anymore.”

While even progressive Presbyterians believe that there are elements within our denomination that are broken, the Fellowship folks believe that it cannot be fixed, that our denomination is beyond repair, and that they must take drastic action to do something about it.

This chasm in our denomination, by the way, has been growing for quite some time, and the recent change in ordination standards is basically just the straw that broke the camel's back. Central to the malaise in the PC(USA), says the Rev. Jim Singleton, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Colorado Springs, and also a FOP steering committee member, “is the erosion of the way we understand biblical authority... We're in a box canyon and we're not sure how to move because it seems like a dead end, fracturing the church.”

So what's going to happen? No one knows yet, but here's what FOP leaders envision for their new organization, which has already legally incorporated. **They see themselves as an “umbrella” for Presbyterian congregations who wish to “differentiate” themselves from the PC(USA).** At least four possible options are being considered at the conference:

- Remaining within the PC(USA) but being more selective in participation in denominational matters;
- Creating new presbyteries within the bounds of existing presbyteries for “like-minded” congregations;

- Creating dual Committees on Ministry and Committees on Preparation for Ministry in existing presbyteries based on support for or opposition to the PC(USA)'s new ordination standards;
- Creating a new Reformed body, with some churches departing the PC(USA) and others maintaining "dual citizenship, at least in the near term".

Singleton claims, "We are not mad – our solutions will not come from our anger. We're not throwing rocks – that's not going to help us ...Louisville [the denomination's national headquarters] is not the problem – the virus is in the church. We're sicker than we know." Crosby adds, "We will not demonize the PC(USA) – anger and fear are not the trademarks of Christianity."

Forgive me for my own jaded opinion, but **in my understanding of basic psychology I read anger and fear all throughout what this group is trying to do, even as they see themselves as being faithful to their convictions.**

Singleton said the group's vision includes "redefining our theological clarity and our missional passion," creating structures that are "relational rather than regulatory," deeply connecting globally and developing leadership "in a very different way." The Fellowship's vision is rooted in congregations, Crosby said. "Our purpose is to connect like-minded churches for common ministry and mission. For many it has been a long time since many Presbyterians felt that way." **Like-minded is not the same as same-minded**, Crosby said. "We mean like-minded based on our long-held theological essentials. We have created such a big tent that there is no longer any center pole to hold the whole thing up. We want to be clear about the center rather than having to police the boundaries."

Again, I respectfully disagree and think that their understanding of "like-minded" is exactly the same as "same-minded." In other words, trading unity for uniformity.

Fuller Theological Seminary President Richard Mouw, in a wide-ranging and free-wheeling address and question-and-answer session, said, "Historically, when Catholics felt the church had gone astray, they didn't leave, they formed special orders who took special vows according to their commitments. The commitment to theological orthodoxy for many of us should take the form of a special vow, to witness to the essential tenets and the power of the Reformed faith."

While that may be true for Catholics, Mouw appears uninformed concerning our Presbyterian history. **Historically, the Presbyterian denomination has intentionally not spelled out what the essential tenets of the Reformed faith have to be – primarily because it has always known that they would be used as a litmus test for doctrinal purity (according to certain people's standards) within the denomination.**

This, it seems to me, is *the* primary focus of this new Fellowship of Presbyterians. So here's my take on what I have learned and heard so far. **Creating a sub-set of like-minded congregation within the whole of the Presbyterian Church (USA) will indeed have the practical effect of splitting the denomination.**

What's going on, in my opinion, is that what they really want is to break away entirely from the PC(USA) but can't because those congregations would lose their church property (worth millions of dollars), and their pastors would lose their pensions.

Yes, I realize that's a somewhat cynical approach, but when I hear that **there is no desire to be in relationship with others who don't see things exactly like they do, especially along the line of biblical interpretation and doctrinal orthodoxy**, then I can only interpret that (at least at this point) as trying to have your cake and eat it too.

Speaking personally, I think Paul would be appalled (pun intended) at our inability to live together in community. So instead of simply declaring ourselves "deathly ill" and seeking to divide ourselves into like-minded congregations (how boring), I would suggest a different approach. **I believe that all of us, by the grace of God, must try harder to live into those things listed by Paul as the true way to live together in community.** So at this time, please look at the cover of this morning's worship bulletin, and follow along as a read this list.

- Let love be genuine;
- Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
- Love one another with mutual affection;
- Outdo one another in showing honor.
- Do not lag in zeal,
- Be ardent in spirit,
- Serve the Lord.
- Rejoice in hope,
- Be patient in suffering,
- Persevere in prayer.
- Contribute to the needs of the saints;
- Extend hospitality to strangers.
- Bless those who persecute you; Bless and do not curse them.
- Live in harmony with one another;
- Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;
- Do not claim to be wiser than you are.
- Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.
- If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
- Never avenge yourselves...
- Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

It wasn't easy for churches in Paul's day to live together in community. It obviously isn't easy for us either. But remember, **we are called into being as the Body of Christ by God, blessed with different and necessary gifts for ministry, and our primary mission is to further the work and ministry begun and modeled by Jesus: to live into what it means to be part of the kingdom or realm of God.**

It is my hope that we can do that together, not separately, and learn how to live together in community. For ultimately, we need each other.

Amen.

Resources:
Presbyterian News Service