

The church “is” Christ’s body

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Epiphany

In this season of Epiphany, we are looking at how God is light, and then he is the word which produces light and life. The 1 Corinthians text for today describes the church. Paul writes here that the church is the body of Christ. What is astonishing about this text is that it doesn’t say the church is *like* a body. It says the church *is* Christ’s body. It’s not an analogy, not a metaphor, and it’s not a sociological construct of some sort. It says the church is Christ’s body.

One way to see what’s at stake here is to look at the problem of Christian unity.

After Vatican II (1965), it was as if windows that had long been closed were opened and there was fresh air and optimism about Christian unity.

At that time Lutherans were viewed in high standing as serious, scholarly Christians. As a result, the Vatican appointed a first-class team of their scholars to engage in formal dialogue with Lutherans, both on the international and national levels.

The Lutherans stepped up to the plate and did the same. The Lutheran teams, both in the national and international dialogues, approached the question of unity in this way: “The Gospel and the Church.”

It’s significant that the international Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue titled its final report: “Gospel and Church.” The sequence is decisive. The Gospel determines what the Church is about. That’s basic to what the Reformation itself was about.

The scholars met regularly; they worked diligently and respectfully. However, by the third round of the [international] Dialogue, they reversed the title of their final report and it became: *Church and Gospel*, rather than *Gospel and Church*. This reversal seemed to signal that the Lutheran team had sold out. And it seems in fact that they did.

The main thing, the big issue, for Lutherans in scholarly dialogue, as well as in every congregation, and in all situations is: What is the gospel?

The answer to this question is the fulcrum or plumbline that governs the whole, that puts all other matters in proper relation to each other. What exactly is the gospel?

This is the issue in the Luke text for today because it says he came preaching “good news.” As you know, that’s another way of saying “gospel.” What exactly is the good news? And is there something that’s not good news?

It’s important to sort this out because there are false gospels. We need to sort out the true gospel from false gospels.

One of the false gospels that is prevalent among us is the sense that I know what I believe, and God has to be that way. He has to work it out that way. God you will have

to do it my way, because the world is confusing so you, God, must just wink and pat me on the head, give me credit for trying, and say: "Whatever works for you, little one." That, however, is not the gospel.

Along with that are those who say: The gospel has to be simple. When people say that what they're really saying is that it has to be *my way* of being simple. With that is what is called relativism. Somebody here says: "The gospel is *this*," and someone else says: "No, the gospel is *that*."

There are a variety of preachers, a variety of churches, a variety of gospels – Christ plus a certain priesthood, Christ plus good works, Christ plus a conversion experience, Christ plus inerrancy, Christ plus any number of things. Therefore, whatever works for you, that's the gospel.

We know that in the natural sciences the principle of falsification holds: "If everything is true, nothing is true." You have to be able to say "that" is not true in order to say that "this" is true.

We accept that is the case for science, but when it comes to the matter of salvation, we do the opposite and say: "Well, whatever; all religions are true," not facing the fact that the real question is: What is salvation?

Is everything salvation? That raises huge problems. Let's briefly look at six ways of going astray.

First, there is that kind of thinking that says: "Look, people believe and do all kinds of things and they manage life O.K." Because there is diversity, diversity must be truth.

Then, in the second place, there is idea that the church determines the gospel. This happens most particularly in the Roman Catholic Church.

The illustration that nails this for us is what happened in 1870 at the First Vatican Council. That Council defined the Pope as the one who has primacy and infallibility.

Just before the vote, the Pope at the time, Pius IX, was asked the question: "What is the tradition?" He answered (in Italian): "I am the tradition."

In that case "the church" or "the tradition" is what determines the gospel. The gospel is not controlling the tradition. This is what happens in churches which say that the bishops "guard" the gospel and sort out what it is and isn't. The problem is: Who guards the guardians? They can go astray and regularly do.

For the Lutheran and Protestant traditions it is the gospel that says what the church is, not the other way around.

The third major way we have of defining salvation is by miracles. I believe because there are miracles in the Bible and there are miracles other places in life. And here it all goes astray again.

Recall that in Revelation 13:14 it says that the Anti-Christ is very successful and deceives many because he does miracles. Paul in 2 Cor 12:12 says: "I can do miracles but that's not what it's about." It's about his thorn in the flesh and the message: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor 12:9). It's not about miracles.

Remember also that in Matt 16:1-4 people come to Jesus asking for miracles and signs and he says: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign (miracles), but no sign (miracles) shall be given it except the sign of Jonah." As Jonah was in the whale for three days, so there are three days from the cross to the resurrection.

Fourth, comes the whole problem of misunderstanding Paul about grace, that is, thinking grace is somehow everything and everywhere. As you know, even Hindus believe everything is grace. Thus, saying the gospel is "grace" doesn't do it.

In the fifth place there is the idea that the gospel says God is calling you. One Lutheran outdoor ministry has as its pitch: "Listen, God is calling you."

That, however, is bad news, not good news. Remember in Genesis 3 in the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve realized they were naked and God called them: "Where are you, Adam?" They fled and hid. When we face the fact that we are caught in sin and death, we flee and hid, too. We have no way to stand before the God who calls us.

In the sixth place, some say the Gospel is: God is love. It's right there in the Bible, in 1 John 4:8: "God is love." But, that's not the gospel.

What's the problem is saying God is love? Even this has been twisted into a false gospel. The way this happens is to say: "You're a victim and God has to convince you that you're not a victim. If bad things happen to you, then God is at fault. How can God do that! How can God allow that!" Then God must do good things to convince you. Then dying on the cross is just one more thing God does to prove to us that he loves us.

The basic point is that underneath all these false gospels is a certain legalism, a law which is the law of tolerance and diversity, the multicultural worldview. But that's not the gospel.

The one true gospel is God forgives you, and that's a very different message.

It means we are not victims. We are those who are caught in sin and death, and we deserve the punishment, we deserve the death. Luther puts it this way:

"God has thrown us into the world, under the power of the devil. As a result, we have no paradise here. Rather, at any time we can expect all kinds of misfortune to body, wife, child, property, and honor. And if there is one hour in which there are fewer than ten disasters, or an hour in which we can even survive, we ought to say, 'How good God is to me! He has not sent every disaster to me in this one hour!' . . . We do not know how good God is to us and we believe neither that God takes care of us nor that the devil is so evil. We want to be nothing but wicked scoundrels and yet

receive nothing but good from God" (*Whether soldiers, too, can be saved*; LW 46:117).

We are not hapless victims. We deserve judgment. We have not loved God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our might, and our neighbors as ourselves (Luke 10:27).

Nevertheless, the gospel is: God forgives us. And that makes all the difference in our state of desperation, and makes it right through the cross.

It's significant that in John 3:16 it says: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." He sent his Son, and he is the one who saves us. When we celebrate communion, we say: "The body of Christ broken for you." Not "given for you" because, even though the Greek can be interpreted either way, the context shows that "broken" is the proper translation for what is being said here.

The same is true in 1 John 4:8 "God is love," because two verses later in 4:10 it says: "He poured out his blood to save us (He sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins)." Without the very particular message of the cross we are lost, and it's that message alone which makes all the difference.

We remind ourselves often of Heinrich Heine's (nineteenth century German poet) perverse and mixed-up way of looking at this. On his death bed he said: "God will forgive me. It's his job." In other words, that's God's business, his *métier*. It's what he does.

But that's not the gospel. The gospel is God has saved us by forgiving us through the power of what he has done on the cross.

And this is power that saves. In Romans 1:16 Paul writes: "I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation."

In 1 Cor 1:18 and 1:21, it is by the proclamation of the word of the cross, by the foolishness of what we preach that we are saved.

That seems crazy because so deeply embedded in us, like a natural reflex, is the trust in works. But it's not up to "anything we are, think, say, or do" (Smalcald 3/3/36).

Rather, Christ is our righteousness, and the church *is* the body of Christ. It's about the incarnation then and the church now. In the church, through the Word who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), and in the celebrating of his bodily presence with us in word and sacrament, there is forgiveness, redemption, and life in him forever.

Amen