

“Pneumatology and Ecclesiology (or “What Does the Spirit Have To Do With The Church?”)
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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-21, 24b-27

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Pneumatology—the first word in the sermon title—sounds like a medical condition...but rather is simply the “ology” or the logic/rationale/study of the *pneuma*, the Spirit. *Pneuma* means breath, wind, and thus spirit. Pneumatology has to do with all things regarding the Spirit, God’s Spirit.

Why this rather esoteric word is important today is because our Scripture text is often only seen as a matter of another “ology”—ecclesiology. *Ecclesia* means “church.” So “ecclesiology” is a fancy way of speaking of all things regarding our understanding of the church. And our text for today is often seen only in terms of ecclesiology. That is, the Apostle Paul puts forth one of his characteristic understanding of the church: the church is the body of Christ. Not the building...but the people: we are Christ’s body.

What may not be as evident is that the Apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth develops this ecclesiology in his addressing of matters of the *pneuma*. To put it briefly: ecclesiology or “the body of Christ” falls under Paul’s larger discussion of pneumatology, the Spirit. In other words, the church is part of Paul’s understanding of what it means to be spiritual—people who experience the *pneuma* of God.

Most of you already knew that...but perhaps did not realize that you knew it. In those traditional words of the Apostles Creed, there is a threefold structure, a Trinitarian structure. We say first “I believe in God the Father.” And we say what that means—the Almighty, the creator of all things. Then we say “I believe in Jesus Christ.” And then we say what that means—his life, death, resurrection, and rule. Third section is “I believe in the Holy Ghost” or “Holy Spirit.” And what is first thing that follows this? “The holy catholic church!” Pneumatology leads to ecclesiology. Spirituality is a “churchy” thing.

So, now listen to our Scripture today where Paul is continuing to address what it means to be “spiritual,” to “know the Spirit of God,” to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Paul turns to the subject of the church.

1 Corinthians 12:12-21, 24b-27: ¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ...But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

We are exploring what it means to have a Christian spirituality. And since New Testament times moving into the earliest church, following the Apostle Paul, there is no spirituality apart from a connection to the church. I know that may sound “exclusive” and “elitist”—that church folks somehow have the Spirit and others do not. Other eccesiologies—what it means to be God’s people—seem more open to individualism. Perhaps you can be “a follower of Christ” without hanging out with the other followers; you can “let your light shine” without having to coordinate with all the other lights. You can be “the salt of the earth” without being in the salt shaker with others. You can be a “believer” and not a “belonger.” But the Apostle Paul interweaves pneumatology and ecclesiology, spirituality and church connection.

Now this is not a hypothetical conversation for me. Two of my three adult children fall into the category of “believers but not belongers.” One is “technically” on this church roll; another is on a church roll in South Carolina, though hasn’t lived there in over six years and has not been active in that congregation or another one for more than 15 years. But if you ask them if they are “Christian,” they will say “Yes!” and without any qualification. But when it comes to their being part of the “body of Christ,” I honestly have to wonder. I am not seeing it right now. But I would not say, and I don’t think they would say of themselves, that they are “unspiritual.”

So let me remind ourselves about spirituality—it is what brings us life. *Pneuma* is breath and more—it is spirit. And no breath, no life; no spirit, no life. Now unless we are like Moses, who according to the Bible spoke to God face to face,¹ we connect to God in indirect ways. None of us has that sort of direct connection, face to face. Even prayer is sort of like leaving a voicemail with God—we are counting on God checking the messages, but we don’t get an immediate response. So spirituality is a matter of a triangle: I connect “here” in order to connect to God. And likewise, God connects in a “here” in reaching us—unless, of course, you are another Moses!

Let me illustrate this triangle: I trust the basic tenet of faith that “God is love,” not because God showed up at my door with soup when I was sick, or that God looked me in the eye and cared enough to tell me I was wrong, or that God held my hand when I was scared. No, but there were many people who did that and did much more. I connect to “God is love” because people have shown me love...many people out of deep faith. Spirituality is always a triangle: we connect to a “here” in order to connect to God. And the question becomes “What’s the ‘here’ for you?” What’s that point of connection between your spirit and the Spirit of God?

For my two adult children who are distant from “the body of Christ” right now, my hunch is that their “here” is that they have picked up a core belief in God, in Jesus, in justice, and in mercy. By standards of what is “orthodox” in Christian beliefs, they have a passing grade. Their “here” is this legacy of years of “forced” attendance of Sunday School, worship, church meetings, prayers at the table and at the bedside, and so on. And in this congregation and in the congregation in South Carolina there are church members who claim them as part of “the body of Christ,” even though they are distant. Mind you, these two adults do not disdain this interest—but it is just not a big part of their lives right now.

¹ Exodus 33:11—“Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.”

Now this sermon might begin to sound like a father's lament and ranting that they need "to go to church!" So let me turn away from them and look at us—what do American congregations look like? A congregation can do all the "best practices."

- Be welcoming and inclusive—no one on the outside wants to be part of group that "shoots the wounded" and shuts out people.
- Be thoughtful and faithful—no one on the outside wants to be part of a scatter-brained, unfocused group.
- Be active participants—there is nothing attractive about a congregation that does not practice with enthusiasm and regularity.
- Get along with each other—there is nothing attractive about bickering and battling congregations.
- Be mission-minded—we cannot compete with entertainment but mission-mindedness is a world-away from entertainment.
- Have inviting, accessible facilities—we certainly have done that.

You can do all the right things as a congregation and nothing seems to happen in attracting those on the outside, those who are distant from the body of Christ right now.

Let me tell you what is the best predictor of participation in the church in American culture today—the following three characteristics: (1) you are married, (2) with children, and (3) your income is upper middle-class.² Sociological studies—demographics research—show that these three characteristics, past and present, are correlated with those who most likely be active in the church: married, with children, and upper-middle class income. And those two adult children of mine? They don't fit any of these characteristics.

You probably know that the overall trend of church participation in America has been a steady decrease in recent decades. During that same period of decline in church participation, consider the trends in marriage—marriage is postponed, postponed, and postponed (and weddings are now often not in the church or marriage does not happen at all!). Consider the trend in the birth of the first child during that same time—postponed, postponed, and postponed. And it was the birth of the first child that had been the major tilt toward church participation. And on an economic-level—in the overall proportion of what is called our GDP, our "Gross Domestic Production"—the overall proportion of the middle-class has shrunk. GDP—the total economy has increased in leaps and bounds. GDP has increased but the proportion of middle-class income has not kept up. Think of it this way: in a year's time, if take I take 1 step forward and you take 3 steps, then you are 2 steps ahead of me. If the trend continues, in two years, I have taken 2 steps forward, but you have take 6 steps—you are now 4 steps ahead me. In another year, I have now taken 3 steps, but you are now of total of 9 steps—now 6 steps ahead of me. And the gap increases and increases. And that is what has been happening in our GDP—the proportion of middle income has shrunk.

The biggest predictors of participation in the church in American culture are these three characteristics: marriage, children, and income in the upper-middle class. And look what has

² See Dave Barnhart, "It is the Economy, Stupid" at <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/9446/methodist-house-churches-economics>? as of 1/15/19. See also the work of Princeton sociologist, Robert Wuthnow in his book, *After the Baby Boomers* (2007), particularly Ch. 3 "Going to Church—Or Not: Who Participates in Congregations."

happened in American society over the past several decades! But now look around.³ Please forgive me for those I miss right now, but say a particular “Hurray!” to the Drivers, the Eversoles, the Schullers, the Jones, the Morrows, the Killoughs, the Browns, the Rogers, Sherry Allison—they ignored our unintentional neon sign that says that the church is for those married with children. If you know Tim, Zee, Idi, Carrie, Connie, Kelley, Amy, Aaron, Molly, Andrew, Frederick, Kelly, Rebecca, Stephen—and I know I am missing someone—give them a “rah-rah.” They walked past the invisible billboard that we did not mean to put up that says “We really like you when you are married, have children, and your clothes show you can afford to dress like what we think a Presbyterian should.”

I am fast approaching in this sermon what is could be called “the paralysis of analysis.” What do we do with this understanding? There are some waves in this ocean around us that this congregation is simply riding on—we have no control over the delay in marriage or putting off marriage all together, the postponement of the birth of the first child (and smaller families), the economic opportunities before us. We have no real say-so in those trends.

Let’s return to this—something we do have a part in—spirituality involves a triangle. We move to a “here” to arrive at that which connects us to God. If you seek or want the Spirit of God in your life, then the key question to ask is this: “What’s my ‘here?’” Next Sunday, we will come back to this text about being the “body of Christ,” and reflect on how your “here” has been or might be this churchy kind of “here.” Pneumatology gives us ecclesiology...or in the ancient words of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic church.”

³ I had some real hesitancy about “naming names” here. My greatest fear was leaving someone out. My next fear was that someone would feel “invaded” by this public identification. My personal experience is that this congregation has extensive participation of those who do NOT fit the three characteristics, either past or present, of being (1) married; (2) with children; and (3) upper middle-class income. My unsubstantiated gut opinion is that we are “above the norm” in this regard (certainly feels that way in comparison to my former congregation). My hope is that our congregation will continue to be “above the norm.”