

On being the church—a garden, a body, a table

A sermon for a divided church

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The church has been in trouble and turmoil for centuries, splintering and dividing, erecting walls to keep some out and knowing who is in. And today the congregations in Mennonite Church Canada and in Mennonite Church USA are in trouble. I mean, we are in deep trouble, aren't we? It's no use pretending it

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isn't so. It's no use pretending we are "without spot or wrinkle." It's no use claiming that we are one in Christ while we are acting deeply divided. Yes, we are in a heap of trouble. There are serious issues about which we are deeply divided.

What are we going to do about it? What can be done about it? Some say, let's break apart at the seams, insist on purity according to our own norms. Let's leave the church. Let's withdraw from the denominational

body. My question is, is this the way of wisdom? Is this a Christian response in a time of disagreement?

I want to suggest a response to the trouble we're in that is rooted in scripture and that can help us move beyond our present impasse.

It's Jesus's fault

The trouble we're in has deep roots. The trouble we're in can be traced back in history. In fact, the trouble in the church began right at the beginning. I want to state it bluntly: actually it was Jesus's fault.

I mean it, seriously. And I want to spread the blame a bit more. Peter is also to blame and so is Paul. But Jesus started us off on the wrong foot, and Peter and Paul didn't stop it. They continued it, went along with it.

You and I today are definitely not to blame. Let's lay the blame where it belongs—with Jesus primarily, and secondarily with Peter and Paul. We are off the hook!

You may well wonder how I can make such a claim. Let me explain. If only Jesus had given greater attention to their backgrounds, their convictions, their lifestyles, and their temperaments when he chose his twelve disciples, it might have been different. But he didn't.

Even after being in prayer about it, he called the Sons of Thunder as well as the reflective John. He picked Simon the Zealot who was totally against the Romans, willing to use the dagger when opportunity came along, and he also picked Matthew the tax collector, employed by those same Romans. Simon and Matthew—at opposite extremes, now in the same small group, called together by Jesus!

What in the world was he thinking? Had he lost his mind? Was this wise and practical? Who could imagine Simon the Zealot and Matthew the Roman civil servant working together, sharing leadership? Matthew getting a regular cut from the Romans for his work, and Simon wishing every Roman dead.

It didn't take long till differences erupted among the disciples, and disagreements and conflict quickly followed. "Who is the greatest among us?" "Can we have the two top positions in your cabinet, Lord?" The Gospel of Mark mentions arguing among the disciples and indignation at the request made by James and John.

Do you think Jesus ever had second thoughts about his choices? A bit of screening and some background checks would have helped. Did he ever wonder, what in the world have I done? How can such a diverse group form the nucleus of the church?

This is why I blame Jesus for the mess in the church.

Peter is also to blame

But I also want to give some blame to Peter. It wasn't long after Pentecost that Peter did an unheard-of thing: He stepped outside the tradition in which he had been steeped all his life. He went beyond the confession of faith. He went beyond what every Jew considered proper. You know the story in Acts 10–11. Luke really liked it and emphasized it by devoting one and a half of his twenty-eight chapters to this one mind-blowing event.

As a follower of Jesus, Peter pushed the envelope. He coloured outside the lines. At first when the notion got into his head about going to Gentiles with the gospel, he dug in his heels. He resisted. He protested. He said, “No way!” But then he did what the Spirit prompted him to do—he walked over to Caesarea, right to the door of Cornelius, a Gentile. Peter had come, knowing that it was improper for him to do so. He said as much to Cornelius’s household. And then he shared the gospel with them.

In the end Peter made an amazing confession: “Now I understand that God is no respecter of persons.” And the diversity in the church grew by leaps and bounds. Peter and his six friends couldn’t believe their eyes: a revolution was happening and they were in the middle of it!

After four days, they decided to head back to Jerusalem, to the council gathered there. We have no idea what they told their families. We are told what the church leaders charged them with and how they responded. They were asked one question: “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” Why did you dignify those Gentiles, those dogs, by sharing table fellowship with them? Just look what you’ve done! The horses are out of the barn. Jews and Gentiles are now in the church, together. Unheard of! Never before!

These Jewish Christians had inherited strong exclusionary impulses from their tradition, their theology, and their leaders, but that dominant impulse had also been challenged by inclusionary impulses—by the prophet in Isaiah 56 and also by Jesus.

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And Paul didn’t help matters

If only Jesus hadn’t started it by recruiting twelve very different disciples. If only Peter hadn’t gone to Cornelius and baptized him and his household. If only Paul hadn’t followed in Jesus’s and Peter’s footsteps, we

wouldn’t have this messy problem of diversity and conflict to deal with now.

Paul continued what Peter and Jesus had begun and harvested a bumper crop of diversity. Diversity was the trademark of every congregation he founded in his missionary work. There were no

homogeneous groups with Jewish-background folks in one house church and Gentile-background folks in another. There were no separate house churches for slaves and for free people.

In Corinth, for example, Paul shared the good news with everyone and ended up with a church divided, split into four major factions. Placards appeared: “I’m for Paul” (the founding missionary). “I’m for Apollos” (the charismatic speaker). “I’m for Cephas” (emphasizing the Jewish background and tradition). “I’m for Christ” (the real Christians).

Did those church members like the factionalism in their fellowship? Some seemed to think the right way to go was to declare their position and point out the others’ faults. Others thought the issue had to be addressed, and they informed Paul about it. Paul wrote back, telling them the disagreements were actually signs that they were of the flesh—not spiritual, but immature.

A trio of metaphors

But perhaps Paul also offers us something that can help us in living with our differences.

It seems to me that the most important thing Paul did in addressing the incredible diversity in the church was to plant

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three metaphors in their hearts and minds. He didn’t give them parables, as Jesus had done, but metaphors—seemingly harmless but incredibly potent word pictures that would take root in their hearts and continue to work like yeast in a batch of dough.

Paul, the metaphor man, must have been inspired by the Spirit when he said that the church is a garden, the church is a body, and

the church is a table. These words—garden, body and table—invite our participation, our engagement, our careful reflection. They trigger our curiosity and sense of wonder. They raise questions: what might Paul have wanted to communicate with these three simple words?

These are great metaphors for a church in disagreement, but over the centuries we have not allowed them to shape our life in church. Yet these three images show us the way beyond agree-

ment and disagreement. They are to be the default setting for the church that is in trouble as it is dealing with its inherent diversity. Instead of pointing out where we are right and others are wrong, these three images show us a more excellent way, a way forward.

These startling, often-neglected metaphors are as powerful as seeds, bursting with creative energy and potential. They may seem counterintuitive, but they are inspired by Jesus and suggested by Paul. They are deeply rooted in the gospel and were introduced into real-life situations characterized by differences, diversity, disagreement, and conflict! They were not theoretical and abstract. To me these words seem to be an inspired practical theology capturing the daring vision Jesus had for the church in the first century and for us today. Let's explore this trio of metaphors.

You are a garden

Paul introduces the garden metaphor in the longer section in which he addresses the issue of divisions and disagreement in church. "You are God's field," he tells the Corinthian Christians (1 Cor 3:9). He's referring to a city plot, in which a gardener crowds as many varieties of vegetables and flowers as possible. Every garden is filled to capacity with a variety of plants. The gardener enjoys, celebrates, and admires the abundance found in her garden's diversity. The unity of the garden is found in the soil and the moisture and the sun. Rather than lamenting diversity, Paul affirms and celebrates it. We as a congregation of diverse people are God's garden!

If only the soil wouldn't be so fertile, welcoming, and accommodating, but the gospel soil, the church, encourages all to take root, to flourish, to be part of the amazing variety growing in the same ground, dependent on the same sun, and drawing nourishment from the same water. Gospel soil and church gardens are what they are, and we need to adapt to God's reality and vision for how they are to be together.

You are one body

Paul uses the body metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12:4–27: "You [plural] are the body of Christ." Isn't it amazing that Paul says this to that deeply divided church in Corinth, in which four groups are embroiled in conflict arising from their different backgrounds and

perspectives and concerns. Isn't it amazing that Paul speaks body language to a group that includes some spiritual and some unspiritual, a quarrelsome bunch, a diverse bunch, some slave, some free, some wise, some foolish? To this deeply divided church, Paul says, "You are one body."

Is Paul serious about this, or is he kidding? Certainly the human body has huge differences and disparate functions among its members. Surely there is the danger of some parts feeling either superior or inferior.

The body metaphor insists that the parts actually need each other. One can't get along without the others; they are interdependent. The unity of the body is found within the whole range of diversity. The unity amid diversity is found in the one Spirit. Paul is telling his readers: Don't lament the diversity among you. Celebrate it, affirm it, and make the most of it!

Stay at the table—together

I think of Romans 14:1–15:7 as introducing a table metaphor, although the word *table* is not to be found in this passage. But it is implied. Listen to the concluding words of this long section: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

Jesus got into trouble because he shared table with all kinds of people ("Why do you sit with publicans and sinners?"). Peter got into trouble because of "tabling" with Gentiles (Acts 10–11). And here in Romans 14 Paul picks up the table metaphor and continues the tradition of radical table fellowship—dignifying the other by sharing a table with him.

Like the church in Corinth, the church in Rome was diverse and deeply divided. One of the issues that divided this fellowship was a table issue. Some in that church were convinced vegetarians, while others were meat eaters. For many of us today this is not a big issue, but it was a big deal for them at that time. It was a big enough issue that Paul devoted more than a chapter to it in this letter.

When it came to being a vegetarian or a meat eater, people had deep convictions and differences in practice. I say that the convictions were deep, because Paul identifies the emotion associated with this position or that. He poses two surprising and

troubling questions: Why do you despise? Why do you judge? He does not ask, Do you despise? or Do you judge? but instead asks, Why do you?

The more conservative tend to judge the more liberal, and the more liberal tend to despise the more conservative. Both the more conservative and the more liberal are motivated by the

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same thing. Both want the other to conform to their way of thinking and their way of expressing their discipleship. What does Paul expect of them?

Does he expect them to come to agreement before they come to the table? No, not at all. He tells them: Become convinced in your own mind before God, and stick to it. It's obvious that some are more conservative than you or I may be, and others are definitely more liberal than you or I may be. Some are more open-minded, while some are more narrow-minded. He urges everyone, the more conservative and the more liberal, to

stay at the table with their different understandings and different ethical practices. Do not walk away to start your own table.

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Images of a new humanity

This trio of metaphors is a picture of the new humanity created among us by Jesus's reconciling death and by his Spirit present with us. This is Paul's amazing vision for the church. These three metaphors highlight diversity, acceptance, and inclusion. They challenge our tendency to want everyone to conform to our way of seeing things and living life.

The dividing walls of hostility—Jew-Gentile, slave-free, rich-poor, educated-less educated, derision, judgment, feeling superior and right, etc.—have all been overcome by Jesus. Peace has been made—given—not by erasing differences and not by overlooking differences. Differences remain, but we are no longer strangers and

aliens but co-citizens in God's new humanity. In Christ, it all hangs together. We are being built together spiritually.

While I thought about these metaphors, I felt as though my toes were being stepped on again and again. My hunch is that what I have said here may have stepped on some toes. All of us are called to repentance in light of what Paul shows us about Christ's garden, his body, his table. All of us are welcome in the new humanity being formed among us by Jesus himself. These amazing metaphors invite us to reenvision how we are being called to be the church together.

About the author

John H. Neufeld is former president of Canadian Mennonite Bible College (now Canadian Mennonite University), Winnipeg, and a retired pastor. This sermon was preached in Morden, Manitoba, at a Bible study conference on homosexuality. A version of it was also delivered at First Mennonite Church in Winnipeg on October 18, 2015.