

above others. It is my experience that most of us who assert ourselves in this way are really are doing so out of feelings of inferiority, not superiority. When we are truly secure in ourselves, we don't need to call attention to ourselves or exert control over others or otherwise assert our egos. Usually we do such things because down deep we feel insecure or unworthy or whatever. We are trying to get a better self-image by thrusting ourselves upon the community in damaging or simply irritating ways. If we feel we have to "think highly of ourselves" it is because in truth we "think lowly of ourselves" and we are trying to get attention! This is not to say that there aren't people who are simply insensitive or arrogant or just want to control things.

Whatever the source of it, Paul is saying that to be part of this new community called together in Christ, we need to have a sober and realistic assessment of ourselves. There is no need to exert ourselves or seek from others the attention that we feel we need. Our deepest "self image," as it were, is already given us by God who created us good and loves us unconditionally. We don't need to be at odds with others, living in an adversarial way, always feeling we have to prove or assert ourselves. We can know ourselves so deeply love by God that we are content and at peace being part of the whole, a member of the community. And here is where Paul now goes.

He loves the image of the community of Christ as a body. The body is diversity AND unity. Each member, each part is essential to the whole. No one part can claim to be better or superior or more important in any way. It is the same with the *ecclesia* of Jesus, the church. Each person is here because she has been called here by God in Christ. Each person is seeking to respond by making his life an offering to God. Each person brings at least one gift to be shared for the life and work of the whole community. If we are each discerning what our gifts are and perceiving what others' gifts are, and then living out of those gifts in the spirit of God's call to serve life, then we are living as the community God has called together. It is this kind of community that truly shows by its life that it confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. It's not about words, not about doctrine. It's about life! What a blessing it is to be part of a community in which we are all discovering and working with what it means to make our lives offerings to God and to live life as an act of worship.

August 24, 2007/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

### **Life in Christ, Together**

Matthew 16:13-20[21-23]

*Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."*

Romans 12:1-8

*...so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another.*

Jesus asks the disciples what people are saying about him, who they think he is. The disciples give various reports. Then Jesus asks them who THEY think he is. Peter pipes right up: You are the Messiah [Christ, in the Greek], the Son of the living God. We call this the "good confession." It is the profession of faith common to all Christians. Jesus then says to Peter, "You are Peter [*Petros*], and upon this rock [*petra*] I will build my church [*ecclesia*]." And this is where the confusion and trouble start. Jesus is not singling out Peter as the beginning of a line of special church leaders. What Jesus says to Peter, he says to every one of us. All who make that confession of faith are part of the foundation of Jesus' community. The solidity and spiritual strength of the community is every person who is centering her or his life in Jesus.

Confessing our faith in Jesus as Messiah, or Christ, Son of the living God, goes beyond words, beyond ideas about Jesus. Elsewhere Jesus says that simply calling him "Lord" is not enough (Lk. 6:46). Calling Jesus "Lord" can be a way of avoiding doing what he calls us to do, living the way he calls us to live. Belief means not just affirming certain things about Jesus and his spiritual importance; it means giving our lives to following him. It is not about the religious ideas we hold; it is about how we live our lives.

Upon this rock I will build my "church." The word is *ecclesia*. There is no way Jesus could have meant the "church" as a vast, complicated, self-perpetuating institution. Certainly not one that constantly conform to the values of the world—bigness, materialism, dominance. The word *ecclesia* is rooted in the Greek, meaning literally "called" or "called out." Jesus was not founding a new religion. He was calling people to intensify and deepen their devotion to God and to one another in a community of love--a CALLED community manifesting in itself God's kingdom.

To confess Jesus as the Christ, or Messiah, and Son of the Living God means to respond to his call to live the life of God's kingdom in the company of others who have also responded to that call. We follow Jesus IN COMMUNITY. This is how the Church of the Covenant came into being. The vision was, and is, small groups of persons committing themselves to Jesus and one another to let the will of God become the center of their living.

This is where Paul's words in Romans 12 come in. Paul capsulizes what this *ecclesia*, this community of Jesus, is about in a few sentences.

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.* Paul uses two words that have to do with our physical life. One is *sarx*, which he uses when he talks about FLESHLY EXISTENCE and THE DESIRES OF THE FLESH. For Paul, that means letting ourselves be dominated by sensual and material desires. The other word, which he uses here, is *soma*, as in psychosomatic. Paul means our bodies, which are created by God. They are to be honored, taken care of, and celebrated as gifts from God. There is no separation of SOUL and BODY. We are an embodied life, just the way God created us. Our SOMA is everything about our living in this world—our bodies, our relationships, our work, our leisure, our creativity, and so forth. We can live in ways that cause harm to us and others, ways that do not contribute to the well-being of life around us, or we can live in ways that enrich, up-build, and otherwise honor the sacredness of life.

That is what Paul means by presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. That is our "spiritual worship." How can I live in such a way as to treat my own life as a special gift from God? How can I live my life as a gift offered to God and to life around me? Our "spiritual worship," then, is not first of all what we do here on Sunday mornings or even the time each day when we sit in prayer. All of life is our worship. The special times and places of worship are to enhance and nourish our living in the world as an act of worship, as an offering to God.

*Do not be conformed to this world [or present age], but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.* To live our lives as an offering to God, a "living sacrifice," keeps us from being taken in by the confused and damaging values and agendas of the world. By "world," Paul does not mean the good creation of God, but the "world" or "age" created by

human beings out of touch with their spiritual origin and purpose.

Conforming to this world, or age, does not just mean all those other folks and institutions that are dominated by greed or bent on violence and injustice, or just plain self-serving. It also means us, Jesus' community, when we drift into acting no different from others—hurtful, vengeful, divisive, and generally forgetting to always examining ourselves in light of the confession of faith we have made, our commitment to following Jesus. Conforming to this world means forgetting who we are as the *ecclesia*, the called community of Jesus, the community that is called by God to manifest the "new age"—the reign of God.

We are to be transformed through the renewing of our minds. When we make that commitment to Jesus, we cannot keep our old minds, our old ways of thinking. We begin to change our way of seeing ourselves, others, and the world. We cannot be on the journey of following Jesus and keep the old mind. Our old ways of thinking get in the way of seeing clearly and deeply, of perceiving God's will in the present moment and circumstances. We cling to old ideas and mental habits. We hold onto the past and fear or want to escape into the future. We look at ourselves and others through a grid of categories and judgments we have made and cling to. We impose our ideas of how people should be and what our community should be. When other people or the community do not measure up to our expectations, we become angry or disillusioned or whatever. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in LIFE TOGETHER that "God hates visionaries and dreamers." He was saying that we destroy Jesus' community when we project upon it and those in it our visions and dreams, instead of loving the real community, the real brothers and sisters God has given us to love.

Being transformed by the renewing of our minds means that we must be willing to drop our ideas, our fixed attitudes. It calls for openness and awareness of God's will in the present moment. We let go of our old minds so that God's spirit can bring about a new mind in us, the mind of Jesus Christ—a mind of love, of wisdom, of servanthood.

*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.* Paul is showing us something of this "new mind." We do not elevate ourselves