

What do we Believe about being a Connectional Church?

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At first glance a Presbyterian understanding of the “connectional church” promises to be about as exciting as a brown paper bag — like the one I put my peanut butter sandwich in this morning. Other distinctively Presbyterian beliefs — like the doctrine of total depravity — pack some sizzle. Predestination: now that’s a doctrine you can sink your teeth into. But connectionalism? Yawn.

In fact, however, the theological ideas underlying connectionalism are rich and wonderfully grounded in the Bible and in the life of the church stretching back over 20 centuries. Arguably more blood has been spilled and more hearts broken around this concept than any other in the church’s history. The words that fly when the church’s connectionalism is called into question — words like schism, heresy, orthodoxy, secession, dissenters, apostates — are among the most inflammatory in the lexicon of faith.

Far from being a yawnfest, the church’s understanding of connectionalism is a minefield. What is needed most here is light, not more heat.

A revolutionary message

The New Testament understands the church as a spiritually organic reality. The relationship between Jesus and his disciples is not just that between a charismatic leader and his followers or a gifted teacher and his students, but is (according to John’s Gospel) like that between a vine and its branches and (according to Paul) like that between a human body and its head. “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). In a manner reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus calls his disciples “salt” and “the light of the world,” Jesus tells his disciples in John’s Gospel quite simply who they are. Jesus does not say, “You ought to be branches! You ought to get connected to me!” But, “You *are* the branches.” Our life together flows from God for the sake of others.

Similarly Paul tells the Christians in Rome: “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (Romans 12: 4–5). Paul expands on this theme in his letter to the querulous Corinthians: “Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 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....” (1 Corinthians 12:14–20).

The Biblical understanding of the church as the body of Christ was as revolutionary 2000 years ago as it is today. Imagine how some of the original disciples must have rolled their eyes when Jesus introduced Simon the Zealot and Levi the tax collector into their fellowship. Zealots were Jewish resistance fighters sworn to overthrow the occupying Roman army. Tax collectors were not the same as the county officials we know today; they were collaborators with the Roman imperial occupation who sold out their own people for a cut of the tax revenues.

But notice this: the disciples did not choose to affiliate with one another; they were chosen by

Jesus. Only Christ, only the call of Christ, brought these people together as disciples. Jesus' free claim *on them* was what they had in common.

Thus Paul's message: Hands and feet don't join a body because they see the world the same way. Ribs do not affiliate with ears because they share similar beliefs. Organs of the body are formed and knitted together by the creative love of God. *What God hath joined together, let no one put asunder.*

Love in the midst of squabbles

A message from the wedding service is, incidentally, not out of place in this context. We miss the real significance of Paul's most eloquent chapter (1 Corinthians 13) when we rip it from its intended context to use it as an ornament in the celebration of romantic love. The great love chapter was intended to be read in the midst of a church squabble rather than at a wedding. Love is the life-giving force that streams from vine to branches bearing fruit, the lifeblood of the body of Christ. We need to rescue Paul's description of love from the sentimentality of the greeting card aisle in the supermarket and restore it to the deliberations of congregations, sessions, presbyteries and General Assemblies. When Paul speaks of the church as the body of Christ, he reminds us of a far more basic reality than the narrow interests of affiliation groups and our endless debates about whose values and beliefs are better or more pious. Our unity does not lie in our points of agreement, but in Jesus Christ alone. We are united, not because we have found the secret to consensus, but because Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit unites us in and through and to himself.

This union is not a theoretical abstraction, but is the most profound theological reality. We are connected as a church because we are one in God incarnate. Our unity is not on the basis of conditional contracts that hold only so long as we agree with one another, but on the basis of the covenantal grace of God sealed in Christ. Our church's polity, including this seemingly mundane notion of connectionalism, tries to give expression to this fundamental and unconditional theological reality at the heart of the church's faith: *Our unity is the act of God, not of ourselves.*

And so the author of Ephesians writes: "We must no longer be children tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Ephesians 4:14–16).

What the Bible says, then, about the connectional church is radical in the best sense of that word: it is at the root of the very meaning of the word *church*. We are connected "head, shoulders, knees and toes," as we learned in vacation Bible school.

What the Bible says about the connectional church is radical in another sense too. To proclaim today that the church is the body of Christ whose faith, hope and love, peace, unity and purity rest utterly and completely in Jesus Christ is to preach a radically counter-cultural message not only to the society that surrounds the church, but *within* the church itself.

A popular but unbiblical idea

The 16th-century Protestant Reformers recovered the Biblical message about the church as the body of Christ, but the heirs of the Reformation have had a tough time making their case virtually ever since. By the middle of the century following the Reformation an idea was growing that would have horrified Reformers like John Calvin. This new and strange idea has

grown in popularity until it is accepted by many people inside and outside the church as common sense, the idea that *the church is a voluntary religious association of like-minded individuals*.

The concept of the church as a voluntary association of like-minded individuals is enormously popular today. It is, in large measure, why Protestant groups tend to split. But this way of thinking about the church suffers from one inescapable problem: it is profoundly unbiblical.* C. S. Lewis once observed in a letter to a friend that the whole idea of a “church” gathering together around shared interests and values misses the point of the Biblical understanding of church. He explains that the church is that body “in which all members however different ... must share the common life, complementing and helping one another precisely by their differences.”

Church connectionalism is shorthand for saying that we are one body—not because we find one another agreeable or each other’s views congenial, but because God in grace and mercy has called us together. Our unity does not lie in us. Our unity is Jesus Christ.

In the Presbyterian and Reformed family of churches, we have long struggled with the forces that seek to tear us apart. In those moments when we have succeeded to reflect the Biblical witness, we have recovered this sense of ourselves, not as an institution held together by our own efforts, but as a living body whose integrity lies in our Lord.

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