

BUILT TO LAST



Jesus Christ as Ground and Goal

"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ." 1 Cor. 3:11

A five session study and prayer guide, inspired by 1 Corinthians 3:11.

by Tom Yoder Neufeld

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Hymnal: A Worship Book (HWB) (www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/502),
Sing the Journey (STJ) (www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/70), **and**
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Built to Last:

Jesus Christ as Ground and Goal

A Season of Prayer

A five session study and prayer guide, inspired by 1 Corinthians 3:11.

by Tom Yoder Neufeld



Ways of using Season of Prayer material.

These annual resources are used in a wide variety of ways. They have grown out of the observance of a week of prayer to start the calendar year and some congregations of Russian Mennonite heritage continue to use them in this way. Other congregations use them as a resource for a deeper life week at different times, with Passion Week being quite common. They are also used for early morning prayer breakfasts, for Sunday morning or midweek study and/or worship series. Whatever way you choose to use them, we hope and pray that Tom Yoder Neufeld's sharing of his gifts in this booklet will be a blessing to your congregation and will help your congregation be a blessing to others.

The focus of Session 4 on ingesting the body and blood of Christ lends itself well to a celebration of Communion. You will want to decide whether you will use it in conjunction with a regular communion service, or plan an additional communion service in conjunction with this study.

This study and prayer guide is available for free download at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/481.



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Foreword

Foundations are very important. A foundation defines the shape, establishes the stability, and defines the size and nature of what can be built upon it. We see this clearly in the construction of buildings, but it is also true for other kinds of foundations, such as:

- Foundations can be charitable organizations that support particular activities (like Mennonite Foundation of Canada).
- The basic ideas on which theological understandings or philosophies are built are called “foundations.”
- There are foundation garments and foundation make-up.
- When I used to keep honey bees I controlled their building of honeycomb by providing them with sheet of “foundation wax” that kept the sheets of honeycomb uniform.

In all of these “foundations” there is a close relationship between the foundation and what is built upon it. If a foundation is inadequate, whatever is built upon it will collapse (Matthew 7:24-27) or at least tilt precariously (like the Leaning Tower of Pisa). Even when a foundation is perfectly built, it remains useless if nothing further is built on it. Foundations exist to be built upon. That is also true of the church’s foundation. Our foundation expects that we build on him as well.

The Christian church is built upon a foundation that is not an idea, not a doctrine, not an ethical standard, but a person – Jesus Christ. The metaphor of Christ as the foundation of our faith has been a favourite in our church and in others. Though much has been written about it, we never fully comprehend its meaning and implications. This guide for study and prayer will deepen your experience of this wonderful image and will help you build on that foundation.

I’m delighted that Tom Yoder Neufeld has written this guide. Tom is an excellent teacher who brings together passions for the church, for Christian faith, and for careful reading of biblical texts. As he writes below, “If Jesus, Paul, and other writers of the New Testament could be nimble in their use of metaphors, so should we as we contemplate them, meditate on them, let them seep into our imaginations, and prayerfully let them shape our lives.” Tom has shown us how to be nimble in our reading of the metaphors. I pray that we will have the courage to follow his example.

Paul warns those who build on the foundation that their work will be tested to determine its quality (1 Corinthians 3:10b – 15). Test this study guide: you will discover that it is comprised of “gold, silver and precious stones” (1 Corinthians 3:12). As you ponder and pray through the following chapters you will be inspired to grow in your understanding, your imagination, your commitment, and your love for Jesus Christ, the foundation of our faith.

Dan Nighswander
Pietermaritzburg, South Africa
7 September, 2007

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Visual Display Suggestions to Support Holistic Reflection and Worship

This Season of Prayer continues the Apostle Paul's approach of mixing many metaphors to communicate the good news of the church. For instance, Paul refers to himself as a gardener, with the church being both field and building in 1 Cor. 3 "The church is the new community of disciples sent into the world to proclaim God's reign and to provide a foretaste of the church's glorious hope" (Confession of Faith, Article 9). By juxtaposing the organic images related to the different uses of flax with ancient symbols that have survived the millennia we have attempted to give visual expression to the church's glorious hope and calling.

A coarse linen table cloth and a projection surface or poster stand will provide the backdrop for each session's visuals. The photos used in these sessions can be downloaded for projection or printing at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/481. The setting in which you gather for these sessions will help you decide whether you want to print a small poster or project a larger image. Larger gatherings will require larger visuals.

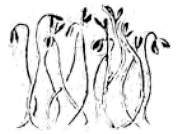
Session 1

Place a mortar and pestle containing ground flax seeds on your worship table. When flax is ground by rock and mixed with hot water, it gets very sticky and can be used to bind baked goods. Similarly, God's love is described in this session as a mortar that binds the church together and will not crack or let go. The picture of the Temple of Apollo behind this organic image will help to focus your thoughts on foundations that are built to last.



Session 2

Place a dish with mixed sprouts (including flax) onto the worship table to represent the many different 'seeds' that are growing, and growing together, in Christ. The picture of the stone arch, which is used to represent Christ as our cornerstone, will tie this organic image into the ideas about the firm foundation Jesus Christ provides for the church, God's earthly home.



Session 3

An additional linen cloth or scarf (linen is made of flax fibres) can serve as this session's visual focus on the worship table. The picture backdrop of the baptismal font from Turkey will add to the impact of the linen clothing and support the message of putting on Christ in our baptisms.



Session 4

Place a loaf of grainy, chewy bread (containing flax, of course) onto the worship table. If you are celebrating communion as part of this service, add a goblet, and use these items for communion. The painting of Communion in the Early Church from the stone walls of the Catacombs can serve to extend your awareness of being in communion with the church through the ages, in many places, and in diverse settings.



Session 5

“A Body to Die For” echoes the familiar verse, “Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” (John 12:24) Therefore, the recommendation for a worship table visual is one of seeds being planted in a pot. Additional pots of plants, at different stages of growth, could be added. The picture of “Jesus, the Good Shepherd” for this session is a photo of the earliest surviving visual representation of Jesus, who is both ground and goal for the church, and who died so that the body of Christ would live on in him.



–Elsie Rempel and Katharina Nuss



Introduction

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 3:11

I was recently privileged to visit sites of Paul's mission in what is now Turkey and Greece, including Corinth. In many places, little, other than foundations, is left of the cities of Paul's day. Scattered about them, when they haven't been plundered for other buildings or roads, are reminders of what once were homes, temples, schools, and baths. These ancient sites impressed on me again and again the solidity and durability of foundations, reminding me that they serve a purpose, namely to furnish a solid basis for what is built on them.

Not surprisingly, Paul found the metaphor of a foundation well suited to express how essential and necessary, yes, how foundational, Jesus Christ is for our lives as daughters and sons of God, individually and collectively. Perhaps he also knew that Jesus had earlier used this metaphor in a somewhat different way when he spoke of those who foolishly build their home on sand, and those who wisely build it on rock, on a sure foundation that can support the house through the storms that will surely come (Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49).

Foundations are typically immovable, solid, we might even say static. But Paul's use of metaphor is anything but immovable and static. He is quite capable of mixing metaphors, something we're taught, in school, never to do. I, for one, love a creative mixing of metaphors. Even within 1 Corinthians 3, where we find the image of Christ as our sole foundation, Paul presents himself as a mom feeding the Corinthians with milk, when he wished they could already have graduated to solid food (v. 2). In the very next verses he's a farm hand, working God's garden plot (vv. 5-9), which turns out to be not just a field but a building, the foundation of which is Jesus Christ, a foundation on which he, his co-workers, and indeed all believers build together (vv. 9-15). If we move to other parts of the New Testament, we discover that "foundation" can also refer to apostles and prophets, with Christ as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20; cf. Romans 15:20). We are reminded of Jesus' calling Peter the "rock" on which he would build the church (Matthew 16:18). And then, in clear dependency on Psalm 118:22, Jesus is referred to as a stone that was rejected, but who has become the precious head or corner stone, a stone of stumbling and judgment for some and a stone of healing and salvation for others (1 Peter 2:4-7; cf. Isaiah 28:16). To push the metaphorical envelope even further, this stone is called a "living stone" (1 Peter 2:4), on which the many "living stones" of the people of God are built together into a "spiritual house"—God's own home—in which they also serve as priests.

It's enough to make the head spin! The point is not the metaphor itself, least of all metaphorical consistency, of course, but that to which it points. And **the point of all of these metaphors is to place us quite deliberately in immediate and intimate relation to Jesus who is the one who gives us**

the basis, the ground, and the orientation upon which, out of which, and according to which we grow and build.

If Jesus, Paul, and other writers of the New Testament could be nimble in their use of metaphors, so should we as we contemplate them, meditate on them, let them seep into our imaginations, and prayerfully let them shape our lives. I'm grateful that the incomprehensible richness of the manifold wisdom of God (Ephesians 3:10) does not restrict itself to one metaphor. In the reflections that follow, **I invite you to reflect prayerfully, but with relish, on the suggestive and evocative jumble of architectural and organic imagery of foundations, rocks, gardens, food, and clothing—all various ways of helping us come to “see with the eyes of our heart” (Ephesians 1:18) that our lives are based on Christ, are nurtured by Christ, and are shaped and formed by Jesus Christ into the building of a temple fit to be God’s home, into a body as living limbs and organs fit to do the work of Christ.** As Paul has said so well, for us “to live is Christ” (Philippians 1:21).

The following reflections are intended to help focus our collective and individual prayers, first in gratitude for the foundational gift of Christ, then in requesting a fuller and deeper insight into what that means for us as believers and as communities of faith, and finally, in intercession for the church in its efforts to be faithful to the one who is our ground and our goal.



Session 1: Christ is our Sure Foundation

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 3:11

Introducing the theme

Visible to every visitor to the ancient archaeological site of Corinth is the impressive foundation of a 6th century BCE temple of Apollo. Remarkably, some of the giant one-piece pillars of this temple are still standing and testifying to the solidity of its foundation, a foundation that has supported the pillars through wars and earthquakes to this day. It was built to last. Of Paul's community of believers in Jesus there is no physical trace, other than a paving stone that may reflect a donation of Erastus, the city treasurer who was a part of the community (Romans 16:23). And yet, something infinitely more foundational for the world was being established through the lives of a small circle of persons who were devoted to following Jesus.

When Paul penned the immortal words: “no other foundation than Jesus Christ” he could not know that we would treat the letter he and Sosthenes wrote to their sisters and brothers like a foundation, or that we would receive his assertion about Christ as a rock of orientation, and as a visionary call to faithfulness and gratitude. Paul would not have understood his letter as foundational; for the sole foundation was and remains the crucified and risen Messiah Jesus. He insisted on that in a time when the Romans crucified those who questioned or threatened the solidity of the empire. The Roman Empire was secured through armed force, and advertised its solidity and power through architectural accomplishments that still impress visitors to these ancient sites. So, for Paul to present Christ as the only solid foundation was a sharp reminder to Corinthian believers to resist being seduced by the apparent solidity and strength of a world Paul knew was “passing away” (1 Corinthians 7:31).

That was not the immediate reason for his use of this metaphor, however. He and his companions had learned via a delegation sent to Paul in Ephesus by Chloe, one of the leaders in Corinth, that cracks had developed within the household of faith (1 Corinthians 1:11). Some were identifying themselves as followers of specific leaders of the Jesus movement (Apollos, Peter, Paul). Others were claiming superiority over the rest by identifying themselves as followers of Christ alone. Spiritual competitiveness, elitism, ethical judgmentalism, and license, had become deeply corrosive features of Corinthian church life.



6th century BCE Temple of Apollo in Corinth.

Whose letter are we reading anyway?

How did the “church in Corinth” develop these cracks and fissures? After all, it was not a church with a building; it did not have an organizational and authority structure, denominational accountability, or a long tradition about “how we do things.” The church in Corinth did not have a New Testament to which they could resort to help them sort things out. Instead, they were a breathtaking mix of people: Jews drawn to the community by the good news that the Messiah had arrived, and non-Jews, some of whom had no doubt spent time at the synagogue and were familiar with the ways and teachings of the Jews, and others whose background was marked by the worship of a diversity of gods, often in ways that deeply offended the Jewish members of the circles of believers. There were likely a few well-to-do persons, like Chloe, Erastus, or Stephanas (1 Corinthians 16:15), who would have had homes large enough for group meetings, but many more who were “low and despised” (1 Corinthians 1:28), including slaves who had little say over their own lives (1 Corinthians 7:21-24). This church in Corinth was maturing within the context of a class- and status-conscious society, in which people interacted and ate with their own kind. What an amazing contrast to their society their church must have been!

This diverse collection of persons shared a sense that they were participating in something dramatically new and revolutionary. They had responded to the shocking good news that God’s agent of liberation and transformation, the Christ, the messiah, had come. Yes, he had been tortured and executed by crucifixion by the Romans, but God had raised him up again, and with that, signaled the beginning of the transformation of everything. Moreover, through the spirit of Christ, which “blew” through their midst in great gusts, they were communing with the living Christ himself.

We might expect that this would meld this diverse collection of persons into one faithful community, worshipping and witnessing together. On the one hand it did indeed, as it has over and over again in the history of the church. It brought together Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, men and women in one organic community (Galatians 3:28).

While these diverse people were becoming one community, the novelty of it all, the intensity of spiritual experience, and the unprecedented diversity produced a roiling stew of competitiveness, elitism, callousness, and marginalization, tearing at the fabric of the community. The challenge Paul faced was more than having people get along. That’s hard enough. But much more was at stake: Paul saw the emergence of a new humanity in these house-groups. Paul saw even more: this community was nothing less than the ongoing active presence of the living Christ, a community with a messianic identity and calling. Because this is what they were, the divisions among them were endangering God’s great redemptive project for the world.

That is the immediate context of Paul’s assertion that there is “no other foundation.” Nothing and no one else is big, solid, or long-lasting enough to support this fragile and vulnerable community of grace, this colony of the new humanity, this home of God “not made with hands,” but made of hands, sometimes lifted up in prayer, sometimes embracing, and still too often with pointed finger or balled up fist.

Addressing our Context: Who is reading this letter today?

We can empathize with Paul's emphasis on the Corinthian church's foundation. Our own time is increasingly foundation-less. We speak of it as "post-Modernism," a time in which diverse values and versions of reality are met with a reflex of tolerance or even a nonchalant "whatever." Even when our own congregations appear homogeneous, their members are often bewilderingly diverse in their beliefs and ethics, and often deeply divided. Some of us say "whatever," and adopt a "live and let live" attitude. This was not an option for Paul, nor must it be for us. **Our lives, as daughters and sons of God, are premised upon the foundation of what God has done in Christ; they grow out of the shared soil of God's grace, reconciliation, and new creation.** So what?

Faced with what seem like insurmountable differences of belief and behaviour, we can be tempted to see a basis for "one" uniform confession, belief, and practice in the "one" foundation. Many Mennonite church splits began with such a view of unity and, in one sense, that focus on being unified is exactly right, as Ephesians 4:4-6 forcefully reminds us. But our foundation is not our *convictions* about Jesus, our *beliefs* about him, or even our *understanding* about how to follow him in life. Our foundation is *Christ himself*. To be unified in Christ himself, we must be in relationship with Christ and Christ's body. To do this we must be a people of prayer. In our prayers we can rejoice in and praise who Christ is.

Hymn to Christ

*Christ, you who came as an ordinary stranger,
drawing those on the margins to yourself,
reaching out with healing and power to free from affliction,
we praise you.*

*Christ, you came as a poor man in order to free others from poverty,
you came and offered yourself for our liberation,
for this we give our heartfelt thanks.*

*Christ, who took on yourself humanity's hostility,
until God raised you up and gave you the name above every name,
we adore you.*

*While we were weak, sinful, and hostile to God's advances,
you brought us God's love and offer of peace,
so that, in and through you,
we might find our new life
by building on the one sure foundation.*

For all this we offer you our humble sacrifice of praise.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Comparing Foundations

We need only compare the impressive Roman and Greek temples, and the foundations on which they were built, to know how "foolish" (1 Corinthians 1:18-31) a foundation such as a crucified poor man, raised from the dead, the one Paul points to, would have seemed to his contemporaries. It must have seemed utter folly to present a defeated "terrorist," as the Romans

surely viewed Jesus, as saviour and liberator. Can that “rejected stone” be the rock on which they were to build? Can it be the rock, the foundation, on which we are to build? Crazy, but true!

As Paul reminded the Corinthians and now reminds us, God has chosen weakness to show his power (2 Corinthians 12:9), the cross as a means to save, and the weak, or humble, with which to shame the (apparently) powerful and wise (1 Corinthians 1:18-31). This is how God builds. The mortar or cement of both foundation and building that God works with refuses to come unstuck. What might it be? Nothing other than God’s strangely pliable love that takes endless abuse, and bears anything (1 Corinthians 13).

That is our foundation. Not the list, but the saviour. Not the idea or the “myth,” but the actual ministry, death, resurrection, and ongoing lordship of Jesus Christ. Because this foundation is the living person of Christ, this foundation is secure. But secure does not mean immovable for this foundation. Christ as foundation is dynamic, responsive, life-giving for it is a “living stone.” So, when Paul proclaims into the Corinthian mess that there is one foundation, Paul does not wish to still the creative energetic winds of the Spirit, or to dampen the enthusiasm of worship, but he challenges them to base their creativity and enthusiasm on Jesus Christ, in and through whom the new creation is coming about.

To say that this foundation is made of “living stone,” does not make creativity and spirituality themselves the foundation. That was Paul’s concern with the Corinthians, who took their own spiritual experience and their own levels of enthusiasm (some of us could only wish that were our problem!) as the measure of their fidelity to Christ. If creativity is the foundation, the “building” will fly apart, as it threatened to do in Corinth. If spirituality is the foundation, it will soon lose its necessary connection, as happens all too often in our day, to the Spirit of the one who taught and modeled how to live in light of the reign of God, who died and was raised for the redemption of the world. Rather, remaining based on Christ, the foundation ensures that spiritual energies are given strong grounding, strong enough to allow the wind of God to blow through the building we are constructing on the foundation without knocking it over. The foundation is large and strong. It can sustain all of our energies, all of our architectural creativity and passion.

On the site of ancient Corinth, visitors, like me, try to imagine the former buildings as we view the remaining impressive, but crumbling, foundations. How different from reflecting on the foundation that is Christ. With Christ, we may have trouble imagining the foundation rather than the buildings. The Church has been built much on this foundation for over 2000 years. Much has been renovated, much has fallen down and been rebuilt, and access to the foundation is sometimes difficult. In other words, Jesus Christ is present to each of us, and is as close to us as he was to the Corinthians; but he is also mediated to us via the rich building processes that make up the history of the church, successful and failed, that have become a part of the foundation on which we build. We are heirs not only of the Anabaptists, but of the mothers and fathers of the faith in the millennium and a half before them, and the centuries since. As pointed out in the *Introduction*, Ephesians 2:20

reminds us that “foundation” can also refer to the “apostles and prophets,” with Christ as the “head cornerstone.” **The foundation sustaining and orienting us is Christ, but always Christ-in-his-body, the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, servants and leaders of the past, and of the endlessly rich variety of church communities today.** They have often held to views and practices we are convinced do not conform to the foundation. Even so, the mortar of Christ-like love challenges us, binds us, to engage each other within our denomination (our particular part of the building project called the temple of God), and to engage those from other traditions alongside of whom we are building, with an eye to learning, and a willingness to take and offer constructive advice. We are blessed by knowing that the mortar is good, and the foundation is strong, sure, and expansive enough for us all to work toward faithfulness as we “build each other up.” We should never lament the countless layers of building, even if they sometimes make access to the foundation a difficult chore. After all, that is what a foundation is for—to be built on. Thanks be to God.

Reflection Questions:

1. Symbols of solidity still seduce us. If we were in a pastoral situation similar to the one in which Paul was when he wrote these words, what images of power and solidity would we use as metaphors for Christ’s role in the life of our current church?
2. Consider your congregation in terms of a building. What kind of a building is it? What role do you play in this building? What is causing the cracks in your household of faith?
3. Spiritual competitiveness, elitism, judgmentalism, or license can still weaken and deface the household of faith. How can you work against that threat to the unity of the church in your congregation?
4. When we base our lives as sons and daughters of God on what God has done in Christ, they grow in the shared soil of God’s grace, reconciliation, and new creation. Reflect on situations in the life of your congregation where grace and reconciliation helped your congregation remain unified as you processed different views. Share these with each other.

Prayer

As mentioned in the introduction, this reflection has been offered to focus our collective and individual prayers in (1) gratitude for the foundational gift of Christ, in (2) requesting a fuller and deeper insight into what that means for us as believers and communities of faith, and in (3) intercession for the church in its efforts to be faithful to the one who is our ground and goal.



Entering Into Prayer

There are many ways of praying, including praying with Scripture, praying written heritage or contemporary prayers, praying spontaneous formulations that are free flowing or that follow a pattern, and the prayer of silent listening, or waiting on God, to name just a few. Whatever form you choose to use, be intentional about connecting with that place inside each of us where we experience the nearness and love of God. It is when we are still that it is easier to know that God is God and Christ is our sure foundation. Dimming the regular lights and lighting a Christ candle is one way of signaling this shift of focus from learning about to entering an encounter with our Lord. Singing a song of devotion, such as STJ 6 *Jesu tawa pano (Jesus, we are here)* and/or some ritualized movement from one location to another, are other ways. Whatever option you choose, allow God to fill you with an attitude of reverence as you lead the congregation in this holy, preparatory activity. These study and prayer sessions are structured on the movement from gratitude and praise, to confession and personal petition, to intercession for the church and the world.

1. Prayers of gratitude for Christ

Allow the “eyes of your heart” to imagine the foundation that is Jesus Christ. Think of all of the ways Jesus is foundational for you, the church, and indeed the world. Take the time to make the inventory, and keep a record. Use your list to pray a prayer of gratitude, similar to the Hymn to Christ on page 13, thanking God for the gift of this foundation.

2. Prayers of confession and petition for insight

Reflect on the difficulties we, personally and as a community of faith, have in basing our life—our decisions, our practices, our relationships, our hopes, our expectations, our faith—on this foundation of Jesus Christ. Use this list of difficulties, whether mental or written, the basis for a prayer of confession, and then for a prayer of petition for yourself and your church. Or, if you prefer, use Psalm 51, select an appropriate prayer from the Psalms, or from the Prayers of Praise in the back of our hymnals, HWB 680-689, STJ 125-127.

3. Prayers of Intercession

Widen the circle of gratitude and intercession from the previous prayers, by moving on to pray for the circle of your family or intimate circle of friends, your congregation, our denomination, in Canada and globally, the church in all of its diversity, and finally, the world in which we live. The size and strength of this foundation invites us to this wide horizon. Pray that we all might together be more firmly established on our foundation, and because of that, experience new freedom and creativity in building on that foundation.

Prayer for the Church

Ephesians 3:14-21

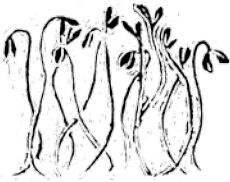
¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Hymns

HWB 43	<i>Christ is our cornerstone</i>
HWB 311	<i>The church's one foundation</i>
HWB 343	<i>My hope is built on nothing less</i>
HWB 567	<i>How firm a foundation</i>
STJ 6	<i>Jesu, tawa pano (Jesus, we are here)</i>
STJ 28	<i>We worship God the Rock</i>





Session 2: God's Home under Construction: a Tour

So with yourselves; since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church. 1 Corinthians 14:12

When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. 1 Corinthians 14:26b

Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing. 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Introducing the Theme

My family home is undergoing some necessary renovation. A wobbly chimney needs to be made safe, crumbling plaster needs to be replaced with drywall; rotting windows and crumbling sills and headers need to be replaced. Those who have the “privilege” of owning an aging home know what I’m talking about. It seems there is no end to such maintenance. It takes a great deal of planning, and discerning, and patience with each other, even when we all agree it’s got to be done! In the midst of the disruptions and exhaustion it’s sometimes hard to remember how good it is when it’s done.

All this preoccupation with building and renovating coincides rather remarkably with the focus of the following reflections. One of Paul’s most cherished ways of capturing both the relationships we enjoy with each other in the church and our task vis-à-vis each other and together is “building each other up.” We touched on this last time. Today I invite you to reflect prayerfully and imaginatively on what that might mean.

Paul's Thoughts on Constructing God's Home: A Tour Orientation Session

Whether Paul is addressing the relationships between the weak and the strong in Rome (Romans 15:2), superior spiritual insight (1 Corinthians 8:1), the right to insist on one’s freedom in matters of behaviour (1 Corinthians 10:23), the use of the gifts of the Spirit in worship (1 Corinthians 14:4-5, 11-12, 26), or the exercise of pastoral and apostolic authority (2 Corinthians 10:8; 12:19; 13:10; Ephesians 4:12, 16), the most fundamental task, and the highest service we can offer each other in the body of Christ, is to “build each other up” (cf. also Ephesians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:11). We used to use the word “edifying” a lot, and some of us perhaps still do. That is just another way of saying “building up” (constructing an edifice). But to some of our ears “edifying” has somewhat unwelcome moralistic or pious overtones, and we suspect it of being used to squelch criticism or the telling of inconvenient truth. However fair that may be, “edifying” or “building up” has for Paul little if anything to do with cleaning up our act or our language (as important as that no doubt also is; cf. Ephesians 5:3-5). Rather, we should

bring “building up” into close relationship with the assertion that Jesus Christ is our sure foundation.

Foundations exist to be built upon in ways that are similar to the way Paul wants Christians to build on Christ. Implicit in Paul’s metaphor of Christ as our sole foundation is the clear summons to build on that foundation. True, as we have seen, Paul also presents Jesus as the head cornerstone of the building that is God’s home (Ephesians 2:20), but even that architectural image reminds us that Jesus is the chief cornerstone, the orientation-determining rock by which we orient our own building efforts, and which gives structural integrity to all our efforts (Ephesians 2:21; 4:15, 16). In short, “building each other up” speaks not only to the care, deference, concern—love—we have for each other, but also to the project of building up the body of Christ, in which we engage when we care for each other. **To build one another up is to participate in the greatest endeavor any of God’s creatures have ever engaged in. It means engaging in the construction of God’s peaceable home, a home in which God lives with befriended and reconciled enemies, with lost children who have been welcomed home, with returned exiles and refugees.** To build each other up is to participate in the core mission of God vis-à-vis his creation.

Approaching the Temple Construction Site

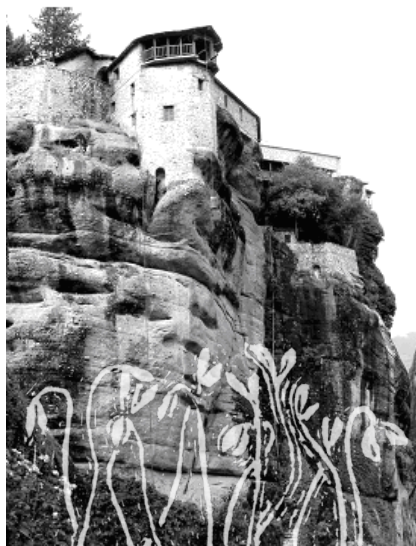
It goes without saying that God’s home remains a construction site. The building is never finished. Nor dare it be! The home of God will be under construction as long as rejected stones have not all been collected, as long as rejected materials are yet to be recycled, as long as there is still room on the foundation for more construction. The temple is perfect precisely in its still unfinished state, because, as 2 Peter 3:9 reminds us, the chief inhabitant of the home does not wish any—whether building materials or artisans—to be lost. No matter how many rooms there already are (John 14:2), more can always be added. “Building each other up” participates precisely in that immeasurably grand construction project.

“One another,” or “each other” (as in “therefore encourage one another and build each other up” in 1

Thessalonians 5:11) quickly brings to mind those we are already close to. That’s not always a comfortable thought, for it is often those closest to us in our circles of family, work, and church who chafe us the most, who test our capacity for “anothering” most severely. That said, the “breadth, length, height, and depth” of the foundation that is Christ invites us to contemplate how endlessly expansive the building project is that is going on around the globe. **We may do our building on one small**



Christ the Alpha and the Omega—The headstone of one of the arches at the Martyrium of Philip at Hierapolis, Turkey.



One of the monasteries at Meteora, Greece, perched atop rock pillars.

part of the construction site, but Paul's words about Christ being our foundation invite us to see our contribution to the building as our small part of an immeasurably larger building project. As I reflected on this, my imagination took flight, and I found myself being drawn into an imaginary tour of the building site that is God's temple. I would like to invite you along, to see with the "eyes of your heart," and to share in the wonder and gratitude.

On a recent trip to the sites of Paul's mission to Asia Minor (Turkey) and Greece I had the opportunity to see great and solid foundations, arches kept in place by headstones, churches with lofty domes that had been sitting on their cruciform foundations for a millennium and a half, and

monasteries that had been and still were perched impossibly upon the steepest of rock outcroppings. But nothing compares to what I imagined as I contemplated the temple of God built of and by us on the foundation of Christ. It is like a giant pyramid or ziggurat, those marvelous ancient human-made mountains of adoration, except that this one dwarfs the biggest of them. God's home on earth reaches high into the heavens, and beyond the horizon, as a wondrous pile of interconnected, living buildings—soaring cathedral towers, mud huts with roofs made of thatch or corrugated tin, gymnasiums and multipurpose halls, ordinary houses with large enough court yards or living rooms for people to meet, caves and catacombs, small wooden church buildings, store front churches, tiny black steeples topped with red neon crosses on top, grand monasteries and convents and baked mud cells in which monks spend their days and nights in prayer. Sometimes one can discern patterns in the building styles, depending on age and location, but the more one moves up the holy mountain, the greater, the more bewildering, but also the more exciting the diversity of building efforts, many still clearly in the early stages of construction. Maybe we should think of this more as the "City of God" than as a temple. It hardly matters. The point is that this temple or this city (Revelation 21:2-4) is where God is at home.

Perhaps your imagination hears better than it sees. I once walked through the ancient Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on an early Sunday morning with my son David. It was first built by the Emperor Constantine's mother in the 4th century, a marvel of architecture at the time. Earthquakes did their damage and now for many years the dome is held up by supporting walls that have in effect divided up the once open space in such a way that various traditions of the church claim their part of the church. While this

might be seen as a living metaphor of the divisions in the church (and there is some strife among the claimants to the space inside that ancient church), it became for me a wonderful image of the global community of faith in its unity and diversity. As we walked quietly through the cavernous church, we moved from one kind of music, language, and liturgy to another. As one culture of worship faded from view and hearing, another appeared. For me it was a remarkable example of what would happen if we could move through God's vast global home at worship time. We would move from slow and ponderous chants to animated harmonic singing accompanied by bands and dancing, from informal guitar and fiddle to grand baroque organs, from highly structured liturgies performed midst clouds of incense to respectful and expectant silence, from informal exhortations to laboriously researched and honed sermons, from recited prayers to speaking in tongues, and all this in countless languages—all equally cherished by the God who is at home in this place. That grand diversity is what the foundation that is Jesus Christ makes possible and sustains.

Reflecting on the Tour

As I stated earlier, this is a home under constant construction and renovation. I dare say that the sounds most pleasing to God's ears, if we may speak in human terms, are the sounds of building, to stay with the metaphor, of hammers, saws, drills, of shouts of direction and encouragement, and, yes, urgent correction. Building each other up and thereby building the temple is music to God's ears. I find Ephesians 5:18 enormously instructive in this light. Notice that one of the manifestations of being filled with the Spirit, or to stay with our metaphor of building, having connected to God's power grid, is to speak to each other, in effect to build each other up, with "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." We do not address our hymnody only to God. Here our first audience is each other, those we live and work alongside, those with whom we are engaged in the global construction project that is God's dwelling. That is what hymns are for. Might this invite us to rethink what we are doing when we sing, preach, and pray? **Does our music build up? Does it equip us with the means with which to speak, to adore, to praise, to lament, to challenge—to build?**

As we let the "eyes and ears of our heart" wander over the scenes and listen to the sounds we have imagined, we'll be awestruck by some vistas, some building efforts, some sounds, some styles of music, and thoroughly turned off by others. Most, if not all of us, have fairly strong likes and dislikes. These are often rooted in taste, in culture, in class, and sometimes in theology. I know I'm one of the most opinionated among the opinionated—as my friends and family can readily attest. This tour through God's ramshackle and wondrous home forces me to acknowledge that no one does ugly intentionally, and to acknowledge the exceeding generosity of our God who delights in our offerings when they are the first fruits of our best efforts. What God does not delight in is show-off attitudes ("I thank you Lord that our part of the building is more beautiful than theirs; we thank you, Lord, that our music is so much better than theirs. You must be embarrassed with them; we are!").

On our tour we could also imagine the effects of time and conflict: crumbling buildings, burned out ruins, girders sticking out of abandoned unfinished efforts. Sometimes these would be the result of opposition to the reign of Christ, or the divine home owner's alterations to the building. And sometimes they could be the consequences of conflict among the builders. Lack of shared vision, lack of love or knowing how to love, lack of seeing that the best way to build on God's home is to build each other up, and sometimes a simple inability to talk over the chasms of language, culture, and race often result in catastrophe and failure in our attempts to build the church. Diversity is valued in our day, but this often leads to an "anything goes" attitude that is ill-suited to the building of God's home. Paul already needed to deal with that with the Corinthians who relished their freedom and diversity. He adds his own important corrective when he quotes them in 1 Corinthians 10:23:

"All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "Everything is permitted," but not everything builds up.

Each of us can point to many times in church history, even in our own histories as tradition, denomination, or congregations, where we have experienced bad building practices, or outright sabotage on the work site. On such days it might have been tempting to call in sick or to set up a picket line.

But then, in the hands of the master builder, as I experienced in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, these divisions born out of catastrophe can come to reflect the wonderful creativity of the Creator and those he has created. The divisions in the body of Christ and the makeshift efforts to shore up the dome of the church following the earthquakes have ironically produced a startlingly diverse yet ultimately harmonious offering of praise and adoration. It reminded me of that other towering attempt to build into the sky, the tower of Babel (Genesis 11). In that story, however, the multiplicity of languages served as God's means of undoing the cooperation of those who wished to storm heaven with their tower. When the healing of Babel occurred at Pentecost, it occurred without returning to one language. The great outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost resulted in everyone hearing in their own tongue (Acts 2:8-11). God evidently loves multilingualism. It is surely a miracle of grace that the inhabitant of this great home assists us in ways we can hardly imagine, transforming even our failures into features of his home that we come to cherish.

Reflections and Responses to the Tour

1. Consider the stories of the Tower of Babel, the many tongues of Pentecost and the diverse styles of simultaneous worship in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Which of these is closest to your experience of diversity? How can we move toward attitudes that embrace diversity and communication in the spirit of the Pentecost?
2. Listen to Bryan Moyer Suderman's instrumental piece, *God's Family*, track 16 on the CD *God's Love is for Everybody*, or listen to the MP3 recording of it at the following link: www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/284 Reflect on your response to this blending of many musical dialects. What dialect would your congregation add to this music? What rhythm, melody or

instrument could you add to this emerging song of God's people? Join in with the music of God's Family, or take a few minutes to write or talk about feelings and thoughts you had as you experienced this music.

3. Sing HWB 567 *How firm a foundation*, stanzas 1-4. Listen for assurances of how God builds us up when we struggle with dismay, fear powerlessness, and experience a deep sense of failure. What phrases of this song reveal God's gracious responses to our troubles and distress?
4. Paul's attitude, as expressed in 2 Corinthians 12: 7-10, is well reflected in the song, *How firm a foundation*. Read these verses and reflect on them. Perhaps there are other Scriptures that help you accept weakness, trouble, and distress in your personal and in congregational lives. Share these Scriptures with each other, and build each other up.

Entering Into Prayer

In this session, the themes of the wonderful diversity of God's church and humanity's dismay, struggles, and failures in responding to this diversity emerged. The prayer time therefore provides opportunities to praise God for the riches of diversity, and to lament, presenting our petitions and intercessions to God for help with our struggles and failures. Praying this way can help us build each other up with "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:19). Perhaps our prayers will provide the opportunity to experience the words of *How firm a foundation*, "For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless, and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress." Bless our troubles? We often pray that God will bless us by relieving us of our troubles. We will surely pray for that, and be grateful for eased burdens! But we can also claim that God will actually *bless* our troubles; that God will make holy our deepest distresses. We also have the enormous privilege of building a home for God on the sure foundation, which is Christ. This leaves us with the need to present our petitions. We build God's home together with countless sisters and brothers, near and far, familiar and strange, likeable and unlikeable, humble and arrogant, weak and strong. This leaves us with the need to intercede on their behalf. May the foundation, that is Christ, sustain us all (including the countless others we are called to recruit to the construction site) as we get to live on the construction site together with them.

Prayer

1. Prayers of Gratitude for God's Earthly Temple, the Church.

Our tour of God's home has provided many indications of how often our gracious God has blessed our troubles and made holy our distress. It is deeply humbling and hope-bringing to know that God can transform even our troubles as congregations and as church into means of grace, for us and for our world. This imaginative tour of God's home leaves us with a sense of wonder and awe and the need to praise.

We are at home with God! God is at home with us!
For this we say: Thanks be to God!
God's home among us is astonishing in its diversity.

For this we say: Thanks be to God!

God invites us all to participate and add our unique voice and flavour to this home.

For this we say: Thanks be to God!

Sing STS 120 *Somebody prayed for me*

Prayers of Confession and Petition

Pray for a deeper sense of what it is we do when we relate to each other in the church, that we are equipping each other to be better builders, to be better at building together. Pray especially for a sense of wonder and awe at the rough and frayed grandeur that is this temple of God. The prayer in *STJ 143* may help you bring your petition to build each other up to God.

Prayers of Intercession

The disunity in the church, that God calls home, calls us to pray for unity in our diversity. The following prayer has been written and is prayed regularly by members of **Bridgefolk** (www.bridgefolk.net), an informal group of Mennonites and Catholics who are growing together in Christ. Perhaps this can also serve as our prayer of intercession for the church:

O Lord our God, eternally living and giving, a Trinity of persons, may all your Christian people come to share in truth the table of your Son Jesus Christ, unified and peaceable, joining in the communion of saints, martyrs, apostles, and bishops who have beaten their swords into plowshares.

Empowered by that very grace of your Holy Spirit who unites the Trinity in mutual love, they have been a bridge to your coming Kingdom, already present in our broken world.

By that same grace and love, empower us then we pray – empower us here today – to be a bridge to that future of unity and peace which you ever yearn to give to your Church, yet ever give in earnest through your Church, as you set a table before us making present the life and death, body and blood, faith, hope, and love of your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.



Hymns

HWB 567	<i>How firm a foundation</i>
HWB 4	<i>Unto thy temple, Lord, we come</i>
HWB 6	<i>Here in this place</i>
HWB 7	<i>Here, O Lord, your servants gather</i>
STJ 16	<i>Praise with joy the world's Creator</i>
STJ 32	<i>If you believe and I believe</i>
STJ 37	<i>Miren qué bueno (Behold, how pleasant)</i>
STJ 39	<i>Ubi Caritas (Where true love)</i>
STS 120	<i>Somebody prayed for me</i>





Session 3:

Wearing Christ: “Putting on” the Foundation

*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.
Galatians 3:27 (NKJV and ESV)*

Introducing the Theme

Up until now we have explored with the “eyes of our heart” the foundation and the building it supports. We’ve centered our prayerful reflections on Jesus Christ as the one who makes our life possible, who upholds us as our foundation, who sustains us in our lives with each other and with God. We have reflected on the expansiveness of the foundation he provides, on the way he “gathers up all things,” in the words of Ephesians 1:10, and on how he makes possible our participation with countless others, often so very different from us, in fashioning a home for God, and in the process a home for God and us. Christ not only sustains this massive building enterprise, but, as head—or cornerstone, gives it direction, orientation, and structural integrity. In the following reflection I want to focus on one of the central rituals we practice—baptism, most especially as practiced in Paul’s churches. In particular, I invite you to reflect on one of Paul’s metaphors that appears to have grown out of the way they practiced baptism, namely, “putting on Christ” much like a garment.

In the ruins of ancient Ephesus there are two ancient baptistries, one in the great church of St. John the Evangelist, beautifully reconstructed, the other hidden away at the back of the ruin of the basilica of the Virgin Mary, far off the well-worn paths of the tourists. In both cases the baptismal pools were in the form of a cross, with stairs leading down one side and up the other. It appears that those baptized would enter the baptismal font and be immersed—a witness in stone to Paul’s understanding of baptism as a rite of being buried with Christ into his own death, and rising with him into new life. That is the way I remember my own baptism. I was baptized by immersion together with a number of others, young and old. I remember it and other such baptisms as rather messy and clumsy, and of course wet. You are dunked under, and come out of the water immensely glad for air and a firm footing—exactly as it should be with birth into a new humanity. Over the years I have come to cherish the messiness of it all as



Baptistry at St. John the Evangelist, Ephesus

appropriate to the elemental drama of dying with Christ and being raised together with him to newness of life.

As best we can figure out from the way Paul writes in his letter, those being baptized would take off their old clothes, representing the “old human,” be baptized, and then put on new clothes, representing the “new human.” A profound drama of unclothing and reclothing, where the clothing is Christ himself, the “new Adam,” as Paul likes to call him (1 Corinthians 15:21-22).

Not too many years ago I was asked to preach at a baptism at our home congregation in Kitchener. While at that time we did not baptize by immersion, as we sometimes do now, I wanted to give the congregation a sense of what the drama of baptism would have been like in the time of Paul and his churches. I began the sermon wearing old grease-stained, tattered and torn overalls, borrowed from a mechanic in our congregation. While we, like many churches, are used to people “dressing down” for church, I dare say no one had ever seen quite such a severe instance of it, least of all from the preacher! Then at one point in the sermon I took off those overalls (I was properly attired underneath those overalls, to everyone’s relief) and put on a white “galabeya,” a cotton cloak or tunic worn by many men in the Middle East. One of the little boys sitting close to the front blurted out for all to hear: “You look just like Jesus!” Exactly. Right there and then the sermon was fully preached.

Given the focus on Jesus Christ as our foundation you will forgive me if the phrase “foundation garment” came to mind as I reflected on this topic. Since I don’t usually use such terminology, I was somewhat dismayed to discover that it has to do with undergarments, corsets, and the like, and worried that some of my readers might find that a bit disrespectful and non-conducive to prayerful reflection. But then it struck me that we can’t get much more basic than the clothes we wear closest to our skin. So maybe it’s not so inappropriate after all. **We don’t “put on Christ” for appearance sake, after all, to “look good” and “proper.” We “put on Christ” in order to be properly attired for the urgent task of being the body of Christ in the world.** We “gird our loins,” to use the ancient biblical term, for the messianic task of being Christ in the world. To “put on Christ” is to put on the most essential, life-defining, identity-shaping, attire in existence. The garment of Christ is the new humanity in the making, and thus the most foundational imaginable.

Examining the Christian foundations we wear

What is it that we put on when we put on Christ (Romans 13:14; Galatians 3:27)? What does it mean to “wear Christ?” Here we need to give our imaginations some leash, because this is clearly intended to be highly suggestive language. First, and most importantly, it suggests to us that in our baptism, and in all subsequent moments in which we recall and make real all over again that entry into the new humanity, we have entered into a new kind of reality, into the “new creation,” in which Christ becomes in some profoundly mysterious way our identity. We become a part of Christ, and Christ becomes a part of us.

This stress on identification, on partnership, on “becoming one with”—*koinonia*—is not at all unique to Paul’s writing. We will recall Jesus’ fervent prayer as recalled in the Gospel of John:

“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.... The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” John 17:11, 22, 23.

We remember that Paul likes to mix metaphors, and so, in addition to “putting on Christ,” he reminds us that our identification with Christ goes so deep that Christ can be said to be formed in us, to be born in us (Galatians 4:19), to dwell within us (Ephesians 3:16, 17). As Paul says in Galatians 2:20: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” We put on the one who lives within us. Go figure.

Baptism means much to us in the Anabaptist tradition. Our sixteenth century forebears recovered the sense of baptism as a moment of identification with Christ and his body that finds its integrity in a life of identification with the way of Jesus. Hence they believed it was a rite only fittingly experienced by persons old enough to give such a pledge, mature enough to participate in the give and take of encouragement and correction within the body of believers, able to read the fine print on what being the body of the messiah out in the world might cost. Given the violence of opposition of the early years it was not difficult for them to identify with what it means to die with Christ in the hope of resurrection. Many would experience that not only symbolically and ritually, but physically.

In our day, baptism remains the central ritual of becoming members of the church. To be sure, our communities of faith include the children we nurture in the faith, the youth, young adults, older loved ones we carry with hope and anticipation of mature faith and commitment, and those whose own baptism has become a distant memory and whose commitment has virtually lapsed. Even so, baptism continues to mean formally becoming an accountable member of the visible community of believers. We have also retained something of the ethical stress on baptism as a promise to follow Jesus in life, even if we struggle to live up to that promise. I wonder, though, how deeply we have a sense of identification with Christ, of becoming not only members of the church, but persons who, together with our sisters and brothers, “wear Christ” as the one who “is our life” (Colossians 3:4)? Baptism is nothing less than the drama of our becoming one with Christ. We put on the very Christ who lives within us. It cannot get more foundational.

Paul does not let this identification slip into a mystical union unrelated to the here and now of life in the church, or to the church’s mission in the world. It is just not possible to become one with the Messiah, to “put on Christ,” without being drawn into what the Messiah did and does as God’s agent to reconcile the world to himself.

Not surprisingly, we see reminders in the New Testament that baptism calls believers to a certain kind of life, in imitation of the one who gave himself to the point of death for them. We readily remember Paul's words in Philippians 2, where he asks his readers to "have the same mind" as Christ, to think and behave like the one who emptied himself of all privilege for the sake of those he loved. Colossians 3 makes this point equally eloquently, reminding the readers of their own baptism. It's appropriate to quote it here at some length:

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with [literally "put on"] the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with [literally "put on"] compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with [literally "put on"] love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossian 3:9-17(c. f., Ephesians 4:22-5:2, 18-21)

There is a German story by Gottfried Keller entitled "Kleider machen Leute" ("clothes make people"). "You are what you wear," we might say in English. To "wear Christ" is to become Christ in the way we live our lives, in the way we treat each other, in what we do with our lives, individually and together with others. **We are not compassionate, humble, and loving because those are good values we should try to live up to; we are that way because we are wearing the one who inhabits us, the one who is our very life, and that is what he is like.**

Reflecting on what we've "Put On"

So, when we contemplate baptism, or when we recall our baptism, we should be mindful that nothing less than life itself is at stake; we get to "put on" the new clothes of the new human being created in the image of the Creator. But the moment we open ourselves to that new life, we are invited into the most amazing project of creation. When it says that there are no longer Jews and non-Jews, barbarians and cultured folk, slave and free, male and female (to add to the list from Galatians 3:28), it means we get to be born anew into the new humanity with all of those folk: just use your imagination to add to all of "those" you're not used to seeing yourself a part of; they're there in the process of being remade, reborn, and refashioned into the endless patterns the Creator has for the members of Christ's body. To "put on Christ" is, if it isn't stretching our imaginations a bit too much, also to put on all of them as well. Some clothing!

More, together with all of our many sisters and brothers, we are to “put on” the means of participating in the struggle against all those forces, spiritual, political, social, cultural—the darkness that opposes God’s efforts to make peace with humanity. In Romans 13:14 Paul speaks of “putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.” But that is intended to parallel the phrase earlier in verse 12: “put on the weapons of light” since the day of salvation or liberation is now much closer than it has ever been. In other words, get ready to participate in God’s invasion. Get ready to be the well-dressed and equipped body of Christ. In 1 Thessalonians 5:8 and Ephesians 6:10-20 the “weapons of light” are elaborated as breastplate, helmet, belt, shoes, shield, and sword. We are to put on that whole armour. Wielding what? Faith, hope, love, truth, peace, justice, and the word of God.

We don’t put on Christ without getting dragged right into the world, there to participate in the messianic mission of Jesus. We might even say more strongly, that participating in the mission of Jesus is why we put on Christ. Just as Jesus came not for himself, but to live and give his life for others, so we do not ultimately wear Christ for our own sake, but to imitate him, to take up our cross (Mark 8:34-38 par.), to go outside of the city with him to bear the abuse he endured (Hebrews 13:13).

In our tradition, clothes have often mattered a great deal, and still do. The most obvious are those within the Anabaptist tradition such as the Amish, the Hutterites, or the more conservative and traditional Mennonites. They have made clothing a matter of nonconformity to the world, much as a uniform sets people off from others. Sometimes we have thought of the church as a bride whose clothes should be without spot or wrinkle (Ephesians 5:27), unstained by the world. To “wear Christ” is to wear white, surely.

The Wardrobe Challenge: Wearing New Clothes in an Old Dirty World

But here’s the twist. We are to wear the new clothes—Christ—into an old, messy, and dirty world. That is where the messiah was sent; that is where he sends us. Our new clothing is our uniform; but it is the uniform we have been given for the task of getting down and dirty in the world, engaging in the messy work of building the home for God and his reconciled enemies. Will our new clothing get soiled? Hopefully! We can’t be part of the construction crew building God’s home and stay clean. We won’t be able to get the stones from the refuse pile without getting some of the dust on us. We won’t be able to work without wear and tear, without grease and sweat stains, maybe even some smeared blood from picking up the broken and injured, or from “getting in the way,” as Christian Peacemaker Teams like to say.

Our garments will get wrinkled and stained, if we’re doing our job. The question is whether the soil on our new clothes is a result of following Jesus into the world, or because we’ve dishonoured the uniform, soiling it with our own selfishness, our own arrogance, or even, rather ironically, our desire to keep our clothes clean by not getting into the brokenness of the world. Nothing’s dirtier than that kind of clean. Clothes we try to keep clean by staying home and out of a dirty world only look clean to ourselves: in God’s eyes they have been contaminated by lack of love for the world, by a selfish interest in our own salvation. This side of the great day of the Lord, our

uniforms should never be clean, but should look exactly like the clothes worn by the one who is our foundation: dusty from the roads traveled to get word of the reign of God out, touched by the diseases of those he came to heal; bloodied by the cross we too are to bear; sweat stained from the energy expended not only to proclaim but to make peace. That makes this set of clothing no less the clothes of the new creation, of the new human. Indeed, that's what the clothes of the new human in an old world look like.

I have already mentioned the Amish and their “different” clothes. People mostly see their rather quaint and easily sentimentalized outer garments. Last year, however, they showed us what they really wear, right next to the skin, as it were, where it really matters. When their children were murdered in their school in Nickel Mines, PA, they stunned the world, not by their quaint ways or their different clothing, but by the way they “wore Christ,” by courageously, if quietly, offering forgiveness and resolutely foregoing bitterness. They were wearing the “weapons of light;” theirs was nothing less than a fully “armed” assault on the forces of bitterness and revenge. Clothing matters! You are what you wear!

Come to think of it, maybe I preached that baptismal sermon wrong. Maybe I should have taken off the clean white galabeya and put on the torn, grease-stained overalls. No, actually we need that ritual of renewal, that drama of new creation. Let the clothes be white on that occasion. But when we “wear Christ” faithfully, the clothing of the new creation will look pretty tattered, torn, and tarnished—and beautiful in the Creator’s eyes.

Reflection Questions:

1. This session challenges us to recognize that “putting on Christ” in our baptism includes thinking and behaving like the one who emptied himself of all privilege for the sake of those he loved. When we choose what clothes to wear, the image that the clothing projects is part of the decision. What kind of clothing could project the image of Christ?
2. How does your baptism help you “wear” Christ in your thoughts and actions as individuals? Similarly, what would your church’s neighbours say about the way your congregation “wears” Christ? Are you serving as a sign of the “new creation”? The Amish example in this session can help you reflect on this challenging topic.
3. Think about the person sitting next to you, and share the ways that Christ-like behaviour and thinking are evident in them.
4. Your baptism linked you into the body of Christ at a local, regional, national, and global level. How did you think about being part of these levels of church at your baptism? Which ones felt like “us” and which ones felt like “them”?
5. Being born anew into God’s new humanity includes accepting all of “those” children of God that you’re not used to seeing yourself a part of. Which parts of God’s family are challenging for you to identify with? How is God nudging you forward in this process?

Entering into Prayer

Shift from discussing and sharing with others to a time of communing more directly with Christ. You may be helped in this process by singing a song of devotion such as *Be still and know that I am God* or STS 31, *Jesus, be the center* and changing one of the phrases in the song to “Jesus, be my jacket or poncho” or “Jesus, be my garment”.

Slowly, read the selection of Jesus’ unity prayer from John 17:11, 22 and 23 aloud. Spend several minutes imagining how Christ is within each of you. Read the passage again.

Prayers of Gratitude

Become aware of the clothing that is covering you and keeping you warm. Look at it and feel it next to your skin. Think of it as “wearing Christ.” Keep a thankful silence for several minutes. Conclude by reading Psalm 117 and/or singing STJ 29 *You are all we have* or HWB 365 *Christ, from whom all blessings* and HWB 105 *Christ, we do all adore thee*.

Prayers of Petition

Offer your own, spontaneous prayers of petition and confession about the shortcomings and the privilege of “wearing Christ” and being the body of Christ, and/or use the prayers below. STJ 132 provides a suitable responsive prayer of confession about being the body of Christ.

Prayer of Petition for Wearing Christ

Christ, our Saviour, our garment of righteousness,
forgive us for not living up to,
perhaps even dishonouring,
the garment we were offered at our baptism.

Forgive us for not developing our skills
with the weapons of light you offer;
breastplates of righteousness and swords of the Spirit
for not using the helmets of salvation, belts of truth and shields of faith
for not tying on shoes that are ready to proclaim the Gospel of peace.

But, Christ, we also pray for the courage to live up to our high calling,
to wear you as our foundation garment
with “humble pride” and “meek courage”
in this world that needs your reconciling Gospel.

Clothe us, equip us and send us, Lord.
Help us to put on and reflect the “new creation”
wearing faith, hope, love, truth, peace, justice and the word of God.
Help us participate in your reconciling invasion of this world’s needs,
an invasion that leads to your will being done
on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Reflect on others in your community, region, and in the broader world who are making sacrifices to participate in God's reconciling invasion and pray for them.

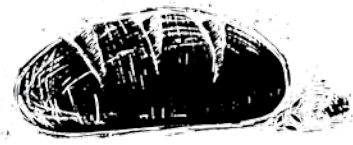
Reflect on and pray for the areas in your community, region and the broader world where an invasion of God's reconciling Gospel is needed, and pray for discernment to hear which of those situations your congregation is being called to respond to.

STJ 182 provides a good ending intercessory prayer.

Hymns

STJ 29	<i>You are all we have</i>
STJ 38	<i>Beloved, God's chosen</i>
HWB 365	<i>Christ, from whom all blessings</i>
HWB 105	<i>Christ, we do all adore thee</i>
HWB 392	<i>Heart and mind</i>
HWB 526	<i>In the rifted Rock I'm resting (Consider using the new English words in STJ 93 <i>Wehrlos und verlassen sehnt sich.</i>)</i>
HWB 518	<i>Eternal Light, shine in my heart</i>
HWB 653	<i>Abide with me</i>
STJ 118	<i>Thy holy wings</i>





Session 4: The Basic Elements of Life: the Body and Blood of Christ

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. 1 Corinthians 10:16, 17

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh...Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. John 6:51-56

Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. John 4:14

Eating with the Corinthians

The Corinthian believers gathered often to eat together. Shared meals were evidently a central feature of communities devoted to Jesus in the early years, as Acts 2:46 indicates. After all, eating was a central feature of Jesus' life and ministry. For Jesus, sharing meals was a way of enacting the generosity of God toward everyone, especially those hungry ones living on the margins, who were seldom, if ever, invited to special occasions. It was also a way of anticipating in a celebrative way the full coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus' friends and followers evidently carried on the tradition of making food and drink a central feature of their shared life.

But the Corinthians did not do well at this, as we can see from 1 Corinthians 10 and 11. They did not fully appreciate what it was they were doing when they met at the Lord's table. Some saw no tension between communing with Christ on one occasion and participating in ritual meals devoted to other gods on another ("demons," Paul calls them, 10:21). What particularly miffed Paul was the way in which the Corinthian believers treated each other at their common meals. Folks, especially the wealthier ones, evidently ate with their own kind, respecting and reinforcing the social hierarchies prevalent in Corinth. We should not be surprised if it was especially slaves who were thus ignored. Smug about their own status, the wealthy were oblivious that they were marginalizing all over again those whom Jesus had welcomed. Paul accuses them of not "waiting for each other" (11:33). Perhaps Jewish believers had difficulty eating with "them," those Gentiles unschooled in the ways acceptable to God. Whatever the specifics, the believers in

Corinth failed to appreciate fully the degree to which their eating together represented communion with the living Christ, and that their communion with Christ was inseparable from their communion with each other as members of the body of that Christ. As Paul puts it, they did not “discern the body” (11:29).

With few but striking words, Paul reminds them in his first letter to them of what (whom?) it is they eat and what it is they are and do when they meet together to eat. Like Israel of old, Paul tells them that they are taking in “spiritual food” and “spiritual drink.” They are eating from one loaf, and they are drinking from the same rock as Israel once did, Christ himself, then and now. And each time they do so, they remember Christ’s self-offering for them in anticipation of the full appearing of God’s reign. They are thus “remembering” with Christ and each other. This is worth pondering more deeply.

The term Paul uses to indicate the intimate connection we have with Christ and each other is *koinonia*. Whereas that word is sometimes translated as “sharing” or “participation,” the word we most commonly translate it with, especially as it relates to eating together, is “communion.” It’s a strong word, even if a little shop-worn. It speaks to the foundational nature of the bond between us and Christ, and lends itself perfectly to **food and drink** as a metaphor that is most foundational for life itself.

Food and Drink: the Elements of Life

We cannot live without food and water. Solid and liquid sustenance is essential, basic to our very life. We are by now quite sophisticated in knowing about basic food groups, about which foods are good for us and which are not, about what a balanced meal should look like. In fact, I suspect that few things preoccupy our culture as much as food and diet. It has likely always been that way, either because of an overabundance of it, as for most of us in Canada, or because of scarcity. Either way, we should not be surprised that for Jesus, Paul, and the writers of the gospels, food and drink are metaphors for the very essentials of life itself. **When Jesus speaks of himself as the “bread of life,” he’s making a connection between himself and the manna in the desert without which the people of God in the desert would have starved.**

When Paul reminds his readers that the desert wanderers drank water from the rock, he makes an explicit connection between that rock and Christ. Whether manna or water from a rock, both metaphors speak to the foundational nature of Christ as our “spiritual food” and



Communion in the early church: 3rd century painting in the Catacombs of Rome.

“spiritual drink.” Jesus is foundational for our very existence. That is what we “say” in our celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

In some Christian traditions, eating the bread and drinking the wine become almost literally ingesting Christ. Metaphor becomes less a pointer than a description. Fully acknowledging that even in such traditions much mystery surrounds such communion with the divine, our Anabaptist tradition has been quite suspicious of such an understanding of the Lord’s Supper. Instead we have stressed the symbolic nature of the meal as an “ordinance,” as well as its occasion as a solemn time of recommitment to following Christ and to his church as his body. The Lord’s Supper has been a time to test our conscience, a memorial meal with overtones of willingness to take up our own cross.

More recently, an air of celebration has entered our observance of the Lord’s Supper, drawing on the gospel accounts of Jesus’ feasting with disciples and outsiders in anticipation of the Kingdom. In some congregations this emphasis on celebration and the inclusiveness of Jesus’ table fellowship has been in some tension with the exclusiveness of communion as a solemn meal for those who have pledged themselves to follow Jesus in baptism. More generally, we wonder increasingly whether our minimalism and our suspicion of a kind of sacramental “materialism” hasn’t come at a cost.

Have we stressed remembering Jesus and following him more than communing with him, becoming one with him, and he with us?

More than “just” a Metaphor

Metaphors participate in that to which they point. The metaphor of food and drink, of bread and wine, of body and blood, invite us to ponder what it truly means to have “communion”—*koinonia*—with Christ, and through him with each other. Both the gospel accounts and Paul suggest that we do more than memorialize. This is not a funeral. Rather, as we commune with our living Lord and his body, the church, at his table, we take in the basic, foundational “elements” that give us life, energy, and the means with which to participate in the reign of God. In communion we are receptive to, we take in and make Christ, who gave himself, no less in life than in death, for the sake of the world, part of our very makeup. Christ becomes a part of our makeup and we become a part of the nature and character of his body. Even if we retain a strong sense of the metaphorical nature of “eating the flesh of the Son of Man” (John 6:51-56), or of communing with the “blood of Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:16), we can allow this ritualized meal of the church to give us a deeper sense of what participation—*koinonia*—in Christ means. **We can let the Lord’s Supper open us up to the one who is foundational for our life the way food and drink are foundational to the life of our bodies. And for this we need to give thanks.**

Giving Thanks as we Commune in and with Christ

Let me suggest a number of ways of giving thanks. First, when we eat and drink we are doing the most elementary thing we can do as creatures of God. When we chew and swallow the bread and sip the wine, let’s do so with a prayer of gratitude for the gift of life itself, and for the way in which Jesus

Christ is himself the most elemental foundation of our life. In many traditions of the church the name given to what we frequently call “communion” is “thanksgiving”—*eucharist*.

Second, when we break the bread in memory of Christ’s own broken body, and drink the wine in memory of his shed blood, let us give thanks for the way he gave himself in life and death for our salvation, thus giving us new life. There is a necessary and proper solemnity to this moment, but also a note of exhilarating victory over death. Here too, as we prayerfully contemplate the gift of Jesus’ life, his death, and his resurrection, we are to translate this into true *eucharist*, true thanksgiving.

Third, the metaphor of food and drink reminds us that we become what we eat. That means that when we “take in” Christ, his life becomes our life. To paraphrase Paul only slightly, “it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives within us.” So, **to give thanks for his gift of life, to give thanks for the cost of that gift, to give thanks that we can commune with Christ’s living presence, includes responding to the summons to live like and as Christ in the world.**

Becoming One with Christ

To commune with Christ is to participate with Christ in his generous, peaceable, confronting, and costly mission. This insight became all too real to me during a student conference I participated in as I was heading for graduate studies. After a time in the spiritual desert, God encountered me with the most basic and simple offer of grace. This intense awareness came out of the blue, and I was overwhelmed with gratitude. And then, at the end of the retreat we celebrated communion together. One of the retreat leaders came up to me and asked whether I would thank for the cup. Boundless joy was suddenly tempered with a keen awareness that the gift of grace comes with the call to participate in the offer of grace by taking up the way of Jesus. “Thank for the cup!? Do you know what you’re asking?” I’m not sure I actually shouted those words to the person asking me, but they were deafeningly loud inside my own head. Was I up to thanking God for a cup from which I had drawn life, and which I was now being asked to drink as well? I am reminded of Jesus’ terse comments to the sons of Zebedee, James and John, who wished for high positions in the kingdom:

“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.” (Mark 10:38, 39 paraphrased.)

That question is being asked us every time we eat the bread and drink the wine. There can be no greater thanks, no greater communion, no greater “becoming one with,” than to participate in the life and death of Christ. This includes the hard stuff. No wonder John 6 tells us that, after Jesus had made that clear to his disciples, many of them no longer “went about with him” (John 6:66).

We can not possibly answer Jesus' hard question about whether we are "able" with a realistic "We are able!" were it not for the fact that Jesus offers us the very means with which to eat the broken bread and drink the cup of suffering. We come to this question as we are being fed by the one who *is* living water, who *is* the bread from heaven. **When we celebrate communion, our oneness with Christ, we also celebrate that he gives us, individually and corporately, the food we need, the drink we need, to live a life of service and self-offering, and to do so with thanksgiving.** We are not asked to "go about with" Christ on an empty stomach. The hard stuff of suffering with and for Christ is to be lived by those who are infused with living water and bread from heaven. Therefore, we can and must make thanksgiving a central feature of our observance, indeed, of our lives, both individually and corporately.

Good and Bad Eating Habits

Finally, there is no place for picky eating at the Lord's table, taking only what strikes us as tasty, and leaving the strange stuff that takes some chewing on the side. Too often, we'd like our Jesus meal pre-packaged, cheap, preferably without having to get out of the car. Cheap grace, we might call it. And we'd like it super sized. **But, there is no wolfing down a fast-food Jesus.** For bread to represent the body of Christ, it should not come to us as cube sized Wonderbread, but as a crusty loaf, laden with whole kernels, nuts, raisins, and all kinds of other wonderfully strange things. You have to chew on this bread, sometimes long and hard, and even then it's not always easy to digest. After all, the Christ who is "eaten" in this bread came into the world as a healer and sage, confronting a hostile world with the good news of the kingdom, finally offering up his own life for the sake of his enemies.

The wine that represents his shed blood should not be sweet dessert wine, but neither should it be vinegar. The life giving blood of Christ is wine that bursts old wine skins; it is blood-red, hearty, and bracing. It makes our head spin; it lightens our spirits, even as we taste the cost of our salvation in it.

A final note of caution: even the best food, eaten with the greatest of care and appreciation, can become poison for us if we get no exercise, if we do not use the body to which the food and drink give life. For us to "taste the kindness of the Lord" and not to make his kind of life our own, is to eat and drink to our own condemnation (1 Corinthians 11:29).

Reflection Questions:

1. Reflect on the difference between a memorial meal in which we recall Christ's sacrifice and a meal in which we re-member Christ, in which we focus on reconnecting with the gathered believers as members of Christ's body. How aware of the church as the gathered body of Christ is your congregation in its celebration of communion? How can you increase this level of being "in Christ" as you approach the Lord's Table?
2. This session describes communion as a ritual (a symbolic action), an ordinance (following the instructions, or orders, Jesus gave), a celebration, a thanksgiving, and a process of becoming one with Christ, in

which we become what we eat and drink. Which of these describes your congregation's present communion services most accurately? How many of these descriptors is the Holy Spirit inviting you to add to the way you plan your communion services?

3. Reflect on the relationship between being thankful and responding obediently to discipleship that can be costly. Zacchaeus' willingness to repay fourfold those whom he had defrauded is one such example. Share stories with each other where thankfulness has shown itself in a costly response.
4. Christ invited those who lived on the margins of society to his table. How does/could your church invite those who are on the margins of society into table fellowship?
5. Symbols, metaphors, and actual presence are ways the church has thought of the bread and wine at the Lord's Table. How do you respond to this session's suggestion that the bread should be crusty, grainy, fruity, and full of wonderful and strange ingredients and that the wine should be blood-red, hearty, and bracing? What type of bread and wine would reflect your understandings of the body and blood of Christ?

Entering into Prayer

Shift from discussing this stimulating material on the Lord's Supper as a foundational, basic element of our life in Christ, to a time of communing more directly with Christ. It may be challenging to commune with Christ without moving toward an actual celebration of communion in this session. If you decide to hold a communion service, consider using a grainy, fruity, chewy bread and some of the songs and prayers listed below in your service. Using the recipe for Whole Wheat Flax Bread, found in *Simply in Season* (www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/501), on p 288 (© 2005 by Herald Press, Scottsdale and Waterloo) would lead to the bread described in this session if a cup of dried cranberries, currants, or raisins were added to it toward the end of the kneading process.

Prayers of Gratitude

Recognize and thank Jesus for being the host of our communion meals, a host who offers us manna from heaven, and wells that never run dry. Spend a few minutes reflecting silently on Jesus as the "true food" and the "true drink" of your lives.

Sing HWB 466 *Jesus, sun and shield art thou*, STJ 88 *Hallelujah! We sing your praises* or STS 34 *You are holy* to offer your thanks. The prayer found in STS 166 may also help you express your thanks to Christ as the end of all our longings.

In eating and drinking we become, together with Christ Jesus, one loaf and "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Visualize your congregation as a spring of living water in your community and beyond and thank God for this privilege and challenge. The prayers in STS 173, HWB 785, or HWB 789 may help you express your thanks for the church as the body of Christ.

Prayers of Petition

Offer your own, spontaneous prayers of petition for help in recognizing how foundational Christ is to our lives. Confess your shortcomings and ask for God's mercy to help your congregation in its mission to be the body of Christ in the world, and/or use the prayers found in STS 186, HWB 717, HWB 743 and HWB 761.

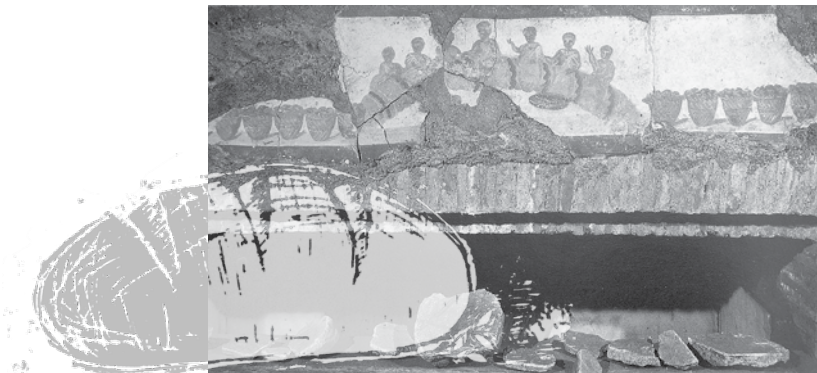
Prayers of Intercession

Inform your prayers for the broader church by checking these links for stories about the Brethren in Christ Church in Zimbabwe www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/497 or the Mennonite Church in Colombia www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/498.

Reflect on and pray for others in your community, region, and in the broader world who are suffering for participating in the body of Christ in their context. Pray for their ability to rely on Christ's living water and to identify with Christ's self sacrificing nature.

Hymns

STS 34	<i>You are holy</i>
STJ 84	<i>Jesus, offered up as bread</i>
STJ 86	<i>Taste and see</i>
STJ 88	<i>Haleluya! Pelo tsa rona (Hallelujah! We sing your praises!)</i>
HWB 459	<i>I come with joy to meet my Lord</i>
HWB 466	<i>Jesus, sun and shield art thou</i>
HWB 471	<i>Eat this bread</i>
HWB 474	<i>I hunger and I thirst</i>
HWB 478	<i>Sent forth by God's blessing</i>





Session 5: A Body to Die For!

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us...that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. Ephesians 2:14-16

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ...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. 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. 1 Corinthians 12:27, 12-13

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 knit 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 4:15-16

Few metaphors are as plain and as profound, as over-used and as under-valued, as Paul's metaphor of the body. It captures perfectly the way Christ furnishes us with our identity, how he provides us with the essentials of life, and, as importantly, what our task is as members of his body. "Body" is both a metaphor for the church and, as the phrase "body of Christ" reminds us, for Christ himself. The body is Christ incarnate—enfleshed. I invite you to free your imaginations for prayerful exploration of this familiar metaphor for how and why Christ matters so "foundationally" for us.

The ONE and the Many

Most familiar to us is the use of the body metaphor in congregational life. Sometimes, it is used to combat the problems of competitiveness and individualism in congregations that are striving to become communities of nurture, support, discipline, and accountability. The Corinthians were already infected with strains of these viruses, to use an appropriately organic image, with their social and spiritual rivalries and divisions. Indeed, much of 1 Corinthians is devoted to Paul's pastoral and apostolic attempt to root out that infection. Rivalries and divisions do not come about only because of a falling away, a loss of zeal. They typically befall communities committed to renewal and nonconformity as well, as our



The Good Shepherd. 3rd century painting in the Catacombs of Rome.

own experience as Mennonites illustrates. Often, it is precisely when people try hard to get it right that they become susceptible to seeing themselves, or their sub-group, as superior to others.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses the metaphor of the “body” to take head-on the problem of diversity and its effects on community. He insists diversity is not for measuring levels of importance or status in the community. Diversity, rather, reflects the variety of gifts God’s Spirit bestows on the community, just as a body requires a huge variety of members—of organs, limbs, muscles, and tissue. While some body parts are more visible, others discreetly covered up, still others never seen at all, they are all essential, each in their own way, to the functioning of the whole body. The stress in Paul’s use of “body” and “members” falls on two points at once: each part of the body is distinct and unique, and all parts derive their value in relation to the whole body. Competition and rivalry, unless it is a matter of “outdoing each other in showing honour” (Romans 12:10), seriously wound and damage the community.

I have witnessed a living parable of this. More than a decade ago, my sister-in-law, Bonnie Neufeld, experienced a horrific electrical injury, leaving her with severe Parkinson’s-like symptoms. Her physicians explained to her that the muscles, in and of themselves strong and healthy, were receiving signals that had them doing the right thing in a wrong way, that is, out of sequence. In effect the muscles were working against each other, making most motor functions virtually impossible. Dramatic healing began through painstakingly teaching the muscles to work together for the sake of the whole body, as Paul would say. Our imaginations don’t need much prodding to “get” the metaphor of the body, and how it reflects the dynamics experienced in the church. Our own bodies are our best teacher.

The Body Born: Conceived in Peace

But the body is more than a handy metaphor for negotiating group dynamics, as profitable and essential as that is for most any congregation or denomination. It is much more a way of becoming conscious of the life-giving, generative bond we have with the One who is our foundation.

The body of Christ was conceived in peace. Nowhere does this come to more forceful and beautiful expression than in Ephesians 2:11-22. The one “who is our peace” (v. 14) reconciles enemies to each other and to their common Creator (v. 16). Both the decisiveness and the costliness of this are expressed quite ironically with the vocabulary of violence: Christ is said to have “murdered” hostility through his own death (v. 16).

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
such a way as gives us breath;
such a truth as ends all strife;
such a life as killeth death.

—George Herbert, 1633 (*HWB* 587)

There is much more in this passage than the wondrous victory over enmity, violence, hatred, and estrangement. If we pay close attention, we see there this astonishing wonder: the birth of the new humanity, the emergence of the body of the one who is himself Peace. Truly a body to die for! The offspring of God's costly and risky peace, conceived within the womb of God's peace, the church as the body of Christ is nothing less than humanity being created anew. "If anyone is in Christ, there is new creation," Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17. I can't help but see this as the church's own Christmas story of divine conception and incarnation!

All other uses of the metaphor of the "body," whether to help us in our relationships with each other, or to give us a framework within which to make sense of the variety of gifts the Spirit has given the church, finally derive their depth and meaning only from the fact that this body is nothing less than God's creation in and through the Messiah. In the end the church is not an organization (however much it needs to organize), or a club of the like minded (however much members ought to share the "mind of Christ"). The church is evidence, individually and communally, that God is graciously at work at making peace, and re-creating humanity. Congregations are cells of the Kingdom, colonies of God's future, glimpses in the flesh of humanity's future, in which enemies have become sisters and brothers of each other, and together a home for God.

A Body like No Other

The metaphor of the body is by its very nature entirely familiar. We all have them; we all are them. We also know what a beautiful body looks like, even if we don't always agree on what that is, and even if too few of us think our bodies fit that category. The phrase "without spot or wrinkle" easily comes to mind in connection with beautiful bodies. As in the case of God's home, built on the foundation of Christ, and as in the case of Christ, the garment we put on at baptism, this body does not match common notions of beauty. After all, who, but God, would give birth to or fashion a body made up of those who have never gotten along, who have even defined themselves over against each other? That is what it meant to have the body of Christ made up of Jews and Gentiles in Paul's day. And who, but God, would "grow" this body by adding "members" to it from society's pile of misfits and rejects? This body design has no attempt at symmetry, proportions, or complexion. But this body is beautiful beyond words in the eyes of the Creator:

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are. 1 Corinthians 1:27-28

It is precisely in the miracle of retrieval, reconciliation, and re-creation that this body's perfection and beauty come to stunning expression. Because every bit of it, from its nose to its toes, tells of its origin in the costly making of peace; every bit of it, from its rough and tumble appearance to its garments stained from getting into the thick of rescue and restoration work, tells of its calling. The aesthetic of the divine artist is shaped most

fundamentally by peace—a peace that creates something breathtakingly new out of what has been diseased and discarded.

Out of step with our prevailing notions of a healthy body as lean and trim, the body of Christ is huge, and wants to keep growing. Its embrace already reaches beyond the horizon. Not only are you and I members of this body, but so are our congregations; so is Mennonite Church Canada; so is Mennonite World Conference; so is the world wide communion of the church. We might go so far as to say that even the church is only a part of what the body of the reconciling Christ will ultimately encompass. Ephesians 1:10 reminds us that God is gathering up “all things, in heaven and on earth” in and through Christ—“*all things*.” Who can possibly grasp “what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge”? (Ephesians 3:18). This truly is a body to die for.

Doing What the Messiah’s Body Does

Language works on the imagination in strange ways. When I hear the phrase “body of Christ” I immediately think of the church, about the identity of the church, about how members relate to each other. But when I hear “messianic body,” or even just “body of the Messiah,” I immediately think about what such a body *does*. “Messiah” and “Christ” actually both mean “anointed one,” and refer to God’s chosen instrument or agent. Messiahs *act*; so do bodies. We “use” our arms, our hands, our legs, and our feet. When we speak of the body of Christ, we are speaking of the means by which the risen Messiah carries out his messianic mission of reconciling enemies to each other and to God, healing the sick, confronting the powers, and, finally and climactically, giving his life for the salvation of the world. There is no way we can “put on” this Christ, no way we can eat and drink the “true food” and the “true drink” that is Christ, no way we can *be* the body of Christ without *doing* the work of the Messiah. In the unforgettable words of St. Teresa of Avila, a contemporary of the early Anabaptists:

*Christ has no body here on earth but yours,
no hands but yours, no feet but yours.*

*Yours are the eyes which express
Christ’s compassion to the world.*

*Yours are the feet with which
Christ is to go about doing good.*

*And yours are the hands with which
Christ is to bless us now.*

It is not only Paul who has this conviction. The Gospel writers wish to make much the same point in the way they narrate the life of Jesus. Every word he speaks, every move he makes—announcing the gracious reign of God, eating with outcasts and sinners, healing the sick and afflicted, even giving his life for his friends and his enemies—is to be imitated by his followers. During the height of his own ministry Jesus sent out his followers on a mission that looked remarkably like his own (Matthew 10; Luke 10). The four Evangelists

agree: what is true of Jesus is to be true of his followers. That is also exactly what Paul means when he informs his congregations: “you are the body of Christ!” To repeat, there is no way to *be* the body of the Messiah without *doing* what the Messiah does.

When the Body is Ill

We know, of course, that there is a way of being the body without doing what Christ does. We see it all the time, in our own churches. We see it in ourselves! We know that even when bodies are lazy or ill; they’re still our bodies. Similarly, **there are times when the body of Christ looks like it’s spent too much time watching the world rather than engaging it—the church as couch potato.** At times the church shows few signs of life, and we wonder if the body is on a respirator, unable to breathe, on its own, the bracing oxygen of the Spirit. And when it has been active, all too often its doing has been terribly destructive, and has left Christ to suffer for and in his own body.

Paul’s use of the body metaphor is meant to remind the Corinthians of who and what they are, but just as surely what that *should* mean given that identity. Yes, Paul is realistic. His Corinthian correspondence shows amply that Paul has his eyes open to what is going on. But realism does not mean becoming cynical about the church, or losing hope and patience. Realism in light of God’s love, grace, and peace, means insisting on the reality of the identity of the church as the body of the Messiah, and at the same time to look the failing of the body squarely in the face. The new humanity is still always being born, even as it is already the new human “in Christ.” And it is always the new human in what is still very much an old world—a world that vies with the new creation within each of the members of the body of the Messiah.

The Breath of Life

Ezekiel once stood in the killing fields of Iraq, called Babylon at the time, shaken to the very core of his being by the vision of desolation. He saw before him the bones of God’s chosen people. And God asked him: “Mortal, can these bones live?” Looking at the devastation with humble honesty, he answered: “O Lord God, you know” (Ezekiel 37:3). God then ordered this dubious prophet to tell those bleached skeletons that God would put sinews and muscles and skin on their bones, and put breath into their lungs, and that they would live, and that they would know that God is the Lord. Suddenly, in anticipation of the great Easter to come, these bones came together, bone on bone, muscle on muscle. And then God completed the miracle of new creation by putting the breath of life itself into these bodies, “and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude” (37:10).

In his use of the metaphor of the body of Christ, Paul is announcing to us who are often dispirited, God is creating us anew, bringing together “members” of the body, and giving us the breath of life. The term translated as “breath” in Ezekiel is none other than our word for “Spirit.” As we are reminded in 1 Corinthians 12, **God does not simply put us together as muscles, sinews, limbs, and organs, but gives us the breath of life, the**

Holy Spirit, filling the lungs of the body of Christ, the new humanity in the making, with the oxygen it needs to stand on our feet, indeed to do the work of Christ. In Ephesians 4:16 it is Christ the “head” who gives the body, right down to the sinews and ligaments, exactly what it needs to grow and “build itself up” (compare also Colossians 2:19).

Paul’s metaphor of the body is his prophetic word to us reminding us of the new life we have in Christ. In baptism we have been raised with Christ to newness of life (Romans 6:4), we have eaten of the bread of life (John 6:35), we have drunk the living water (John 4:10), and now, we have been given life together as Christ’s body, woven together into a body that builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:16), breathing together the life-giving breath of God, working together at the messianic task of befriending the world with its creator. Let us let the prophet from Tarsus send us off with a fitting exhortation:

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:12-17

Reflection Questions:

1. Diversity can be viewed as a burden and a blessing, a painful problem and a wonderful gift. Create a chart with positive and negative descriptors for diversity at the top. Think about your congregation and list experiences where diversity was initially perceived as positive or as negative in the appropriate column. What effects did responding to this diversity have on your congregational community?
2. Imagine your congregation or area church as an organic body, in which many diverse organs all have their own essential functions. What are the essential functions of being Christ’s body on earth? Who is carrying out which function? Are any essential functions missing altogether?
3. In the section, “A Body Like No Other,” the early church is described as being built up of those who had never gotten along, added to from society’s pile of misfits and rejects. If this strange organism of the early church is beautiful in God’s sight, how might God be at work, retrieving, reconciling and re-creating congregational situations we might be ready to consign to the scrap heap?
4. The images of the church as couch potato or on a respirator (page 45) are as challenging as the image of God creating us anew, giving the church the breath of life (page 45), is inspiring. If the health or fitness of the church can be assessed by how it “works together at the messianic task

of befriending the world with its creator,” how healthy is our church? What medicine or fitness plan is needed to improve its health? Conclude the discussion of this question by reading Colossians 3:12-17.

Entering into Prayer

Shift from an interactive to a more reflective mindset. Become quiet in God’s presence and allow God to guide your imagination as you picture the church as the body of Christ. Ask God to help you see from his perspective so that you might also see beauty where the world sees only foolishness or a trash heap. Sing HWB 587 *Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life*.

Prayers of Gratitude

Reflect on the teachings that have blessed and inspired you in these *Season of Prayer* sessions and thank God for the unfathomable riches of the Gospel. Thank God for the writer of this material, who offered his gifts for the purpose of building up the body of Christ. Thank God for signs of health and beauty (in God’s eyes) in the church at the local, regional, national, and international levels. You may also want to use the prayers of praise found in HWB 680, 683, 685 or 689. The following prayer, adapted from STJ 125, may also help you express your gratitude:

Prayer of Gratitude

God of all kindness,
Who sees beauty and possibility in many places where we do not,
Who continues to hope where we despair,
We thank you for the many ways your love and perceptiveness engages our lives.

Your song fills our mouths with laughter and singing.
Your light reveals hope in the dark corners of our discouragement.
Your Spirit breathes life into our tired living.

For this we thank you, Lord
For this we worship you.

Accept our sacrifice of song in your church on earth
And grant us a part in the music of your church in heaven.
Accept our sacrifice of trust in your church on earth
And grant us a vision of what you are working in us.
Accept the sacrifice of our lives
And grant that they become a fragrant offering.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Prayers of Petition

Have a large supply of candles available to symbolize the prayers of petition and intercession. It may be appropriate to begin this session with prayers of confession. The prayers of confession in STJ 131, 132 and in HWB between 693 and 696 are suitable. Prepare and offer spontaneous prayers, silently or aloud, that respond to the challenges of being a faithful church within our current contexts. Pray for help in building up church body parts that are weak, diseased, broken, with the special care we devote to parts of our physical bodies when they hurt or have been injured. While amputation is the most traumatic “solution” we can imagine for our bodies, it is often the not so secret wish we have about each other in the body of Christ, whether we think locally or more globally. Ask God to forgive and transform this attitude. If other specific areas where growth is needed have become clear to you, bring those requests to God, silently or aloud, as you light a candle and place it in your worship centre.

Prayer of Sending and Blessing

The words of Colossians 3:12-17 are full of blessing and sending elements. Savour the words of blessing as God’s gracious gift to the church by reading verses 15 and 16 as a blessing. Thank God for this great gift. Let it work in you. Then read the entire section again as a sending, or commissioning, for your service with the reconciling Gospel of Jesus Christ in our world.

Hymns

HWB 403	<i>The church of Christ in every age</i>
HWB 420	<i>Heart with loving heart united</i>
HWB 587	<i>Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life</i>
STJ 63	<i>Lord, you give the great commission</i>
STJ 64	<i>Somos el cuerpo de Cristo (We are the body of Christ)</i>
STJ 80	<i>Christ be near at either hand</i>

You’re not alone, we are one body by Bryan Moyer Suderman, available as part of the soundtrack of www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/498.



OUR VISION

God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world.

STATEMENT OF IDENTITY AND PURPOSE

God calls, equips and sends the church to engage the world with the reconciling Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We are a community of disciples of Jesus,
A part of the Body of Christ,
covenanted together
as congregations,
area churches*, and
a national church body.

Gratefully responding to God's initiatives and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we commit ourselves and our resources to calling, equipping and sending the church to engage the world with the reconciling Gospel of Jesus Christ.

* Once known as area conferences, Mennonite Church Canada is making a move to shift its language and terminology toward area church as an act of recognition and affirmation that church happens at many levels beyond the congregation, including the regional. This shift is in keeping with having already named ourselves officially as Mennonite Church British Columbia, Mennonite Church Alberta, Mennonite Church Saskatchewan, Mennonite Church Manitoba, Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, and Mennonite Church Canada.

Download this statement (available in 13 languages) at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/48

From the Foreword: I'm delighted that Tom Yoder Neufeld has written this guide. Tom is an excellent teacher who brings together passions for the church, for Christian faith, and for careful reading of biblical texts. As he writes below, "If Jesus, Paul, and other writers of the New Testament could be nimble in their use of metaphors, so should we as we contemplate them, meditate on them, let them seep into our imaginations, and prayerfully let them shape our lives." Tom has shown us how to be nimble in our reading of the metaphors. I pray that we will have the courage to follow his example.

–Dan Nighswander, MC Canada Witness Worker in South Africa and former General Secretary of Mennonite Church Canada



About the Author: Tom Yoder Neufeld (ThD, Harvard Divinity School) is Associate Professor of religious studies (New Testament) and Peace and Conflict Studies at Conrad Grebel University College, in Waterloo, Ontario, where he has been teaching since 1983. Before this, Tom was a hospital and prison chaplain, and a pastor in Thompson, MB and Boston, MA. Tom serves in his local congregation, First Mennonite Church, Kitchener, ON, as Sunday school teacher, song leader and as an occasional preacher. He

also volunteers in the wider church and community as a frequent preacher and teacher, and on the Formation Council of Mennonite Church Canada. Tom contributes to meeting the urgent need for pastoral and theological leadership in the Mennonite Church through his collaborative work in its various institutions which are devoted to leadership formation and education. He has written the Believers Church Bible Commentary on *Ephesians* (Herald Press, 2002), and most recently *Recovering Jesus: the Witness of the New Testament* (Brazos, 2007). These and other resources by Tom can be found at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/500.



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