

The Strengths of the Body

~ Dr. R. C. Sproul Jr. ~

I'm a shepherd, twice over. First, and foremost I serve as a pastor of a local Reformed and Presbyterian church. Second, and dragging their tails behind them, I have kept, fattened, killed and eaten sheep, the woolly kind. My experiment in sheep keeping was simply the next step in my often humorous, rarely successful attempt to enter more fully into an agrarian lifestyle. For several years I kept chickens and that experience was in its own way terribly profitable. Each egg, that is *egg*, not each *dozen eggs*, probably cost me in the neighborhood of a dollar, but I found my profits in derivatives. That is, I wrote about my many failures as a chicken farmer. Said stories appeared in a magazine I publish, and I suspect, drove sales more than anything else. The Chicken Report was much loved, but is now as dead as my chickens.

I spend most of my time dealing with words. The only way my hands are apt to get dirty is from dust on my keyboard. So why would I go through all the hassles of trying to raise some of my food myself? What possible benefit could there be in having me, a fool or a farmer, tend sheep or chickens when others can do so much better? One of the iron laws of economics after all is the Law of Comparative Advantage. It asserts that both nations and individuals

ought to produce that for which they have the greatest comparative advantage. Short, uncoordinated older men like me, for instance, ought not to try to make a living as a professional basketball player. Canada, as a nation, would not likely thrive were they to seek to build their economy around growing pineapples and bananas. This principle is what drives the practice of the division of labor, which in turn is rightly understood to be part and parcel of our prosperity. But there is a cost. Take the division of labor principle too far, and we find, not surprisingly, men alienated from their work. If a man spends his life simply packaging widgets, work would soon become drudgery.

Most of us are comfortable specializing in some skill sets, but uncomfortable with others. That is, not every man needs to be a rocket scientist, but every man does need to cultivate a spirit of repentance. Not every man needs to understand how electricity works, but a man ought to know how to change a light bulb. Some jobs we can hire others to do for us, but some we must do ourselves, even if we think we're not very good at it. And if a man knows himself at all, he knows that he faces a temptation to manipulate these categories to his own benefit. The same is true of the church.

The church at Corinth was a mess. It was rife with divisions, which were driven in turn by petty pride. It was so lax in its discipline that its members were caught up in such sins that even the heathen were appalled. Like sinners before and after, the Corinthians baptized their sins by parading them around as badges of theological zeal. I am of Paul. I am of Apollos. I am of Cephas. It boggles the mind to imagine such sin. It in turn, however, calls us to remember the *RC Sproul Jr. Principle of Hermeneutics*. If you don't remember this interpretive principle, here it is in a nutshell: Whenever you see someone in the Bible doing something really, really stupid, do not say to yourself, "How can they be so stupid?" Instead say to yourself, "How am I more stupid?" We have not outgrown the folly of the Corinthians. We have instead entered more fully into it.

Before we get to the folly, let us consider how Paul dealt with it. He spent much of his first epistle trying to get this wayward church to remember a rather simple metaphor. He reminded them that the church of Jesus Christ is a body. He reminded the saints at Corinth of at least two critical points in giving the body metaphor. First, he affirmed that each part of the body is necessary for the well-being of the whole. The eye cannot say to the foot, "What need have I of you?" Second, Paul reminded his readers of the unity of the people of God. When the finger hurts, the whole body hurts. We need, in short, to remember the importance and value

inherent in our differences, and we need to rejoice and live in light of our unity.

This brings us back to the *RC Sproul Jr. Principle of Hermeneutics*. When we see the church at Corinth falling into this kind of folly, we need to expect that we in our day, in our context, are given to falling into the same kind of error. Lo and behold, there we are. We make both the mistakes that Paul had to deal with centuries ago. We make them with respect to individual members of the body, and we make them with respect with different aggregates in the body, with respect to denominations, and denominational families. We not only deny the body-ness of other parts of the body, we likewise deny the connectedness of all the parts of the body.

Last night, in the providence of God, I found myself in a doubly cross-cultural context. I was having dinner with a young Christian couple who were neither American nor Presbyterian. They were instead British and Pentecostal. I'm delighted to report that they have, of late, come under the influence and teaching of men I greatly respect who, though not Presbyterians, are deeply committed to Calvinism, that school of thinking I think Biblical, and which is rather far afield from most Pentecostals. (And I fear, most British.) My young friends were noting how refreshing it was to find within the Reformed camp a bevy of smart minded thinkers. They raved about the scope of knowledge of the men they were studying, the clarity of thinking, and the commitment to biblical integrity. I

thought it a fitting time to amuse them, and give them something of a picture of the broader evangelical world with this old joke. "There was," I explained, "an ecumenical meeting among a group of Baptist pastors, Pentecostal pastors and Presbyterian pastors. During the meetings, a fire broke out in the room. The Pentecostals all pointed and shouted, 'Fire! Fire!' The Baptists pounded the table and shouted, 'Water! Water!' While the Presbyterians intoned, 'Order, order.'"

There is no sin in different parts of the body being more gifted in certain parts of the calling of the whole body. Feet should do walking chores, and Canadians should not try to grow pineapples. There is a perfectly fitting and appropriate division of labor within the body. But the ghosts of the Corinthians still haunt us. Truth be told, we all act in accordance with these tendencies. If I'm looking to find someone with a passion for the lost, someone willing to preach Christ with unction, I know I can find men like this among the more Pentecostal in the body. I would not call my local Anglican minister. If, on the other hand, I needed a thorny theological conundrum solved, I doubt I would call the Pentecostal. I would, more likely, call the Presbyterian. Finally, if I'm seeking to plan an order of worship to honor a great man of the faith in his death, or to construct a wedding liturgy that will honor the couple, and our Lord, I likely wouldn't call the Presbyterian. Instead I'd call the Anglican.

The sin comes in when the Pentecostal thinks himself a far better Christian than those Presbyterians with their dead orthodoxy, and those Anglicans with their Spirit-suppressing rituals. The problem is when the Anglican thinks himself a better Christian than those hyper-emotional Pentecostals, and those hyper-rationalistic Presbyterians. And of course, my own temptation is to think myself, as a Presbyterian, a far better Christian than those frantic Pentecostals and those smells-and-bells Anglicans. This we are all guilty of. We not only overplay strength of our strengths and the weakness of the other guys' weaknesses, we also, at least implicitly, suggest that our strength is the one that really matters.

The second problem touches on what drove me to be an actual sheep farmer. The division of labor is a great blessing, but it has its limits. The more deeply we embrace this division, the more in danger we are of becoming like those specialists who know more and more about less and less until finally they know everything about nothing. No man, for instance, ought to pride himself on his deep commitment to serving in the pastorate, if it means he neglects his calling to his wife and children. No man can cover the sin of neglecting his wife on the grounds that he is more gifted as a father than as a husband. To put it another way, all God's children ought to have demonstrable passion for the things of God. And having such a passion does not diminish the value of other giftings. All God's children ought

to be careful, thoughtful, sober theologians, studying God and His Word diligently. And in that Word we find that we all, not just the Anglican wing of the church, are commanded to worship God in the beauty of holiness.

That we fail at this is evident in the process by which our churches grow. There are, I suspect, rather few second generation Pentecostals. On the one hand this is a sign of weakness in the nurture of covenant children. On the other hand, the world is full of full Pentecostal churches. Where are all these people coming from? Evangelism. Out of the passion that is a hallmark of Pentecostalism, out of the sound conviction that God acts in space and time, we see Pentecostals bringing in the elect from the four corners of the world. Both Anglicans and Presbyterians know what to do when the subject of evangelism comes up. First, we blush, and hope no one notices. Next, we whip out our historical credentials, reminding our accusers of Edwards, Wesley and Whitfield. And then, in the quiet corners of our own dark minds, the Anglicans remind themselves of the importance of beautiful worship, and the Presbyterians remind themselves of the importance of sound theology.

Presbyterian churches, by and large, do slightly better, I suspect, at covenant nurture. It is not unusual to find second and third generation Presbyterians (though often the younger generations find themselves forced to leave their parents' particular Presbyterian denomination because of rampant apostasy,

despite our vaunted theological care.) But, the next largest group in the Presbyterian church is certainly not those we faithfully evangelized. It is instead those who were won to the faith in other denominational families, who grew tired of the mindlessness from whence they came, and so determined to cross the street.

To mix a metaphor, however, the tracks keep going further down the line. The Anglican church, I suspect, is weaker at covenant succession than the Presbyterians. Like the Presbyterians, there are precious few recent converts to the Christian faith there either. Instead, their pews are filled with the bodies of those who found Presbyterian worship insipid. (To be sure there are those who took the express, and went straight from Church Lite to High Anglican.) Ask an Anglican about their faith journey, and I suspect they will be able to show you their ticket stub. Anglicans would do well to remember the obvious. The tracks do keep on going, and just as Presbyterianism is sometimes but a station on the way to Anglicanism, so likewise the dark forest of Rome lies ahead on the tracks.

What then ought we to do? We ought to be on alert for our own weaknesses. We ought not to be satisfied doing only those things that we do well, and ought instead aspire to do all things we have been called to do as unto the Lord. We ought to learn to value the contributions of the other parts of the body, so much that we too want to participate. We ought, in short, to obey all that He

commands. We ought to strive to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, that those who were once lost might be found, that they might live a life of single-minded passion, that they might

study to show themselves approved, that they might glorify in their worship Him who is the express image of the glory of God.



Dr. R.C. Sproul Jr. is the founding pastor of *Saint Peter Presbyterian Church* in southwest Virginia, the founder of *Highlands Ministries*, the husband of one, and father of seven.