

# Hanging Together

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Colossians 1:15-20

I suppose I am one of the lucky ones who gets to say that I got to grow up at the time of the Beatles. Born five years before the formation of the Fab Four I can remember the early Beatles songs emanating from the car and transistor radios of my family. “Help, I need someone.” “Love, love me do.” I want to Hold Your Hand” – and from there I got to listen as the Beatles put out one after the other Billboard top ten songs. I’m sure I was sitting in the living room when Ed Sullivan introduced them to America. I got to listen over the years to my father’s commentary on the Beatles. As well as to the family debate concerning the accuracy and/or truth of John Lennon’s claim that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus Christ. I am glad to say that I was around while these four guys from Liverpool were making musical history. At the time we probably did not appreciate this mystical union of artists. Something happened when these four young men came together and wrote and performed. Something that could not have happened had they not “come together” – excuse the phrase. And so when the Beatles decided to split up in 1970 – a pall fell across the musical world because everyone knew that it was the end of an era – nothing like it would ever happen again. And so for the following ten years the predominant question was, Would the Beatles ever get back together? It was a question born out of not just a sense of nostalgia – but also out of sense held by many that the Beatles were better together than they were apart. That something bigger than themselves took over when they were together than when they were apart. Something mystically creative and transcendent occurred in their union.

And so when John Lennon fell to an assassin’s bullet – so fell the hope of experiencing this mystical union again. It would never be the same.

When the great minds and visionaries of the American experiment assembled in the summer of 1776 to consider and then sign Thomas Jefferson’s seminal document of democracy, “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights...” – this claim against the British monarchy one of the superpowers of the world – it is purported that Benjamin Franklin said as he stood over the document preparing to sign – “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.” What Franklin said, if in fact he said it, was not only practically true – the founders of our country had put themselves at great risk and that their only hope for success was in their bond – it also points to a deep and abiding spiritual truth embedded in the nature of our humanity.

E Pluribus Unum are the words indelibly imprinted upon our country’s currency and seal “Out of many, one”. Out of many, one.

Dare I suggest though that Franklin and Jefferson and Washington’s great effort toward unity and equality and community was not the first experiment in such matters. For us, the flag in that corner is superseded, isn’t it, by the flag over there in that corner that bears the same colors. For the flag in that corner points us to an even more seminal moment in human history when the New Testament church was born with a vision that all are one in Christ. All are one in Christ. And that in Christ all are one.

He is the image of the invisible God, so we read in the Letter to the Colossians, the firstborn of all creation; In him all things hold together. For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body,

the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

In him all things hold together ... and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things. (Not some things? But all things?) whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace by the blood of his cross.

Something is going on here. For there seems to be this current that flows from the beginning of the New Testament to its end – that would want to point us to something fundamental about our existence on this earth – and that is we experience the fullest expression of our spiritual existence when we embrace our oneness. Out of many, one. Not out of many, many. But out of many, one. That in Christ all things hold together ... and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things.

You see, there is something greater than ourselves that is manifested when we are together. The sum is not equal to the parts. The sum is not even the same as the parts. The sum is what brings the parts together.

C.S. Lewis in his great book *The Four Loves* speaks from his own experience about friendship and the deep bond he found in his weekly gathering of colleagues – a group called the Inklings. And he

marveled at how random it can sometimes seem that friends can find each other from a variety of backgrounds and choices and careers and glom together and experience this great communion. But then he says this, “But for a Christian, there are, strictly speaking, no chances. A secret Master of the Ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples, “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you,” can truly say to every group of Christian friends, “You have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another.”

I have chosen you for one another.

I got chosen a couple weeks ago. I got chosen to serve on a federal jury up in Tampa for a week. Me and seven other people – complete strangers – spit out by the computer and herded into the courtroom, examined by judge and attorneys and somehow and for some reason chosen. Eight of us to enact justice. And our mission was to reach a unanimous verdict on the case before us. Unanimous. Eight very different people with all sorts of backgrounds and opinions and political persuasions – but out of many – one verdict. And for five days we listened to testimony and eventually commiserated, all with this sense that like or not we had been chosen for one another – but beyond that we had been chosen for something bigger than ourselves. The sum was greater than the parts. A higher principle was a stake. Justice was being sought. And we didn’t have the option to excuse ourselves from each other. Not even to become a minority. We had to remain until we were one. And after a time we

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became one. Not everybody felt exactly the same way, but in the end we were one.

Something extraordinary, miraculous, mysterious and world changing happens when human beings in their togetherness surrender themselves to something larger than themselves. Beautiful music, the founding of a nation. The enactment of justice. Irreplaceable friendship.

So when the apostle Paul writes his letter to the church at Corinth hardly a few sentences into his letter he addresses the age old problem of people picking sides. People trying to make the case that out of one – there are really many. Jurors in the courtroom digging in their heels and saying, “It’s either my way or the highway.” I like the gospel as taught by Apollos. I like the gospel as taught by Peter. I like the gospel as taught by Paul. And you can imagine that already they were starting to meet in separate homes – thinking that each of them had the complete handle on the truth. And what temptation there must have been for Paul because one of those factions had his name on it. A caucus had formed around him. Think of where he could take this. The gospel according to moi! He could write books and appear on television and name his ministry after himself – Apostle Paul Ministries he could call it. But later what we will read in this amazing letter is Paul telling the Corinthians that they are not a random collection of people to be pulled apart at the first little disagreement – but that they had been chosen for another to be the body of Christ. The BODY of Christ. Not the committee of Christ. Not the loose association of Christ. The organic body of Christ where the foot cannot say to the hand I have no need of you. Nor the eye to the ear that you do not belong to me. Paul says, Oh no, that would mean its not a body. You are the body of Christ. Because the truth is all are one in Christ and in Christ all are one. And the church gets to be the living out of that for the world to see. Chosen not against the world. Chosen for the world to see this mystical reality that in Christ – all are one.

Do you remember the story of Solomon when he is approached by the two women and the one baby? Two women attest to being the mother of the one baby. And each presents her case unconvincingly. And it is the wisdom of Solomon to take his sword and prepare to divide the baby in two. And the real mother is revealed when she realized that the body and life of the child are more important than her claim upon it. That is less important that the body is with her – than it is for the body to remain intact.

A friend of mine sent me this story the other day.

*The other day I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, “Don’t do it!” He said, “Nobody loves me.” I said, “God loves you. Do you believe in God?” He said, “Yes.” I said, “Are you a Christian or a Jew or a Muslim?” He said, “A Christian.” I said, “Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?” He said, “Protestant.” I said, “Me, too! What denomination?” He said, “Baptist.” I said, “Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?” He said, “Northern Baptist.” I said, “Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?” He said, “Northern Conservative Baptist.” I said, “Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?” He said, “Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region.” I said, “Me, too!” Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?” He said, “Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912.” I said, “Die, heretic!” And pushed him off the bridge.*

Presbyterians, of course, are not immune to such a story. At last count, just within the U.S. we have 28 Presbyterian denominations. Which is so strange because we Presbyterian are so vehemently Trinitarian. It’s imbedded in the creed we recite every Sunday – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is three and God is one. Out of many, one. And it is deeper than that – for it is the very nature of God to be in relationship ... the relationship of Father, Son and

Holy Spirit. The dance of the trinity as some have called it. And it is the very nature of God to sweep us into the dance. This is the Church – those who have been chosen to show the world that this is what makes the world go round. And how silly if any one of us would look across the dance floor and say, “Well, I don’t want to dance with him, or I don’t agree with her and won’t step on the floor.” How silly. For in him all things hold together ... and through him all things are reconciled. The music is better when we are together. The body’s only chance at life – is when we surrender our claim.

For we are one in Christ, and in Christ all are one.



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Church of the Palms

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