



Odd, the process of strangers be- coming familiar acquaintances, then, perhaps later, becom- ing friends. One steps into a roomful of strangers for the first time; each face is a mask representing an unknown: no background, no common history, no point of refer- ence. Just a face, perhaps a voice and a handshake. A greeting is proffered, but is it real? Does it give voice to genuine interest, or is it just another per- functory recitation?

Who are these people? What do they believe, what do they stand for? What are their names, and to whom do they belong? What do they do, how are they dressed during the other days of the week? What are their lives like when they have removed their good clothes, when they have removed their Sunday face?

The place itself is unfamiliar. Four walls without personality; they speak little of what has transpired within their comfortable but polished embrace. Has

this been a place of joy, of triumphs? Has it known the weeping of sorrow, the bile of anger and deceit? Does worship occur here? Is there communion with the Lord, or just each other? Even with the few clues of the first visit, one leaves knowing little more than was known before.

A Common Bond

The disciple of Christ steps into this situation with an advantage: Just about every person behind the anonymous faces is al-

ready a brother or sister. For the Christian, visiting a church for the first time is a little like joining an in-progress family reunion at which everyone shares his last name—but who are all long-lost cousins heretofore unknown. The common bond is one not of familiarity and affection, but of blood.

Christ's blood.

"The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may

be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.”

(John 17:22-23)

Like two strangers on a blind date, there is usually a bit of bobbing and weaving to the introductions. We smile pleasantly, we shake hands, but we hold back, wishing only to reveal small portions of ourselves at a time. The veiled façade we present is less outright deception than an act of self-protection. We carry too many scars from those times we have too-quickly bared our soul to another. So, over the ensuing weeks, we measure out dribs and drabs of ourselves—our personality, our beliefs, what we know and what we don’t, our interests and disinterests, our strengths and our weaknesses.

Shock to the System

Over that same time, however, our perception of the others begins to change. Faces that were originally blank slates become familiar, nuances of expression reveal themselves. Anonymous voices take on new colors; words and phrasing become identifiable, associated with individuals. Unique behavior becomes not only noticeable, but anticipated: we can now foresee an individual’s response to a spoken word, an event, or the behavior of others.

And soon, catching us by surprise one day, we realize that what had been an amorphous, faceless mob has now a familial group of distinct, colorful, rather interesting individuals. The transformation is sufficiently remarkable that we wonder—if only for a dizzying moment—if on our behalf perhaps the people have somehow undergone a transformation of personality. But no; they have remained who they are throughout. What has changed is our perception—and thus, our relationship to them.

For the believer who has long been separated from the rest of the body, rejoining a local fellowship can be a harrowing experience. The insulation of solitude will,

over time, strip away defenses and good manners. Having become acclimated to private worship, and fellowship limited to our holy union with Christ, we venture forth ill-prepared for the sometimes messier habits of the church. More comfortable with the supposed purity of our worship closet, the clumsiness of corporate, public worship can be a shock to our system. We quickly lose patience with those who haven’t yet learned how much better *our* way is than theirs. We are confused and irritated by the softer, less-defined edges that evolve within a community of disparate souls; words and activities that, in our private domain, were direct and succinct, become more homogenized when practiced in a group.

*Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.*

*Before our Father’s throne we pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, our comforts and our cares.*

*We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.*

*When we asunder part, it gives us inward pain;
But we shall still be joined in heart, and hope to meet again.*
(John Fawcett)

And we wonder how in the world *this* could be the better way.

Two Hearts are Better than One

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.
(Hebrews 10:23-25)

But as one Sunday passes into another; as the sea of shapeless, forgettable faces morphs into a community of distinctive personalities; as we learn more, bit by bit, about these individuals, and they learn more about us—as strangers become

brothers and sisters, we are reminded that a unity of like-minded souls is something far more than the sum of its parts.

Within the family of the local congregation the Holy Spirit is magnified beyond the numeric instances of His indwelling. The ministry of the Spirit increases exponentially with every two believers; one hundred Christians in a room infuse it with far more Spirit than one times one hundred. He is pleased to envelop and pervade to a greater degree everyone present when “two or more are gathered.” And it is in this way that corporate worship is magnified beyond the solitary believer in his closet.

Similarly, the work of solace, compassion, and support is expanded when more

than one are given the opportunity to practice these very Christian acts. One holding up one other can be a helpful, but lopsided support. But one on either side not only can support, but straighten. And it is when even more are added around the one in distress that the mercy of Christ can truly take root and flower.

Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of

them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.
(Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)

In the family of God, the face—that unique configuration of eyes and nose and mouth—is but a preliminary and fleeting mark of identification. Soon we recognize one another no longer by that which lies on the surface, but by that which dwells in the heart.