

# Reflections by the Pond

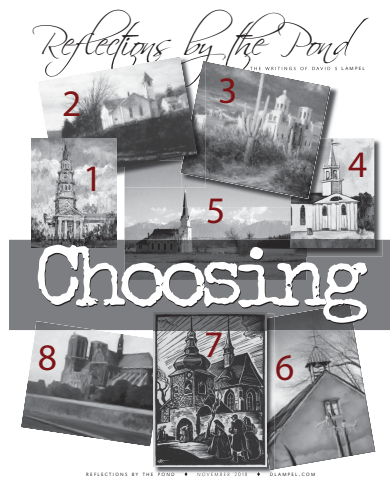
THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S LAMPEL



# Choosing



*Many Christians select a church home the way some people select art for their living room.*



Cover Artists: 1. George Pate; 2. Thomas Jones; 3. Richard Iams; 4. Hartley; 5. Warren Taber; 6. William Haskell; 7. Warnecke; 8. Hopper.

Issue #823, November 2018.

Reflections by the Pond is published monthly at [dlampel.com](http://dlampel.com) and is © 2018 David S. Lampel. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture is from the New American Standard Bible (Updated Edition). This and all of our resources are offered free-of-charge to the glory and praise of Christ our Lord.



# Spirit Work

**A** LONG TIME AGO, IN A LAND FAR AWAY, Linda and I visited one of those ubiquitous traveling “art” sales held in a local rented hall. “No painting over \$49.95!” the TV ad had screamed. Freshly wed and poor, for two kids just starting out the event sounded like a perfect opportunity to inaugurate the decoration of their first house. As advertised, the spacious hall was brimming with paintings of all styles, shapes and prices—but “none over \$49.95!”

Did we peruse the selection with an eye toward investment? technical quality of the execution? artistic mastery of the painter? quality of the frame? a mystical connection between the piece of art and our souls?

No, we were looking for something that would go with the color of our living room furniture. Oh yes—and, most of all, within our rather paltry budget.

We did find a painting that met our limited criteria—it was green, as I recall—and for a few years it graced the walls of our living room and, later, our bedroom. Today that painting is buried in an anonymous box somewhere out in our garage. I can’t even remember the subject matter—only that it was green.



Some people select a church for its location: it is close to their home, or freeway convenient. Some select a church because it is popular, favoring the multi-thousand member mega-church over the tiny neighborhood parish—while some select it for just the opposite reason. Some people join a church where their friends attend, or where there are children their own children’s age. Others revel in the grand architecture, or the vaunted reputation of the senior pastor. Some just like the fact that the pews are padded, and that the preacher ends his sermon in time for noon pot roast.

Worship style is a critical factor for many. Are the “old” hymns still sung (preferably from an actual hymnal), or does the congregation

sing simple choruses projected on the wall? Is the Call to Worship reverent or jubilant? high church or low? Is there speaking in tongues? ecstasies? lifting of hands? Is there a choir? a “praise band?”

Are the people friendly—but not *too* friendly? Are there youth programs? missions? the appropriate amount and kind of fellowship?



So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

*Ephesians 2:19-22*

After more than five years of worshipping at home, because we had been taking care of my mother, Linda and I some time ago were just beginning the process of finding a new church home. It would be dishonest for us to say that none of the foregoing was entertained in our



minds as we visited churches in our area. The traditions with which we were most familiar and comfortable were well-defined: conservative evangelical, substance over flash. We also could admit that some styles of worship in vogue today were repellent to us, standing in the way of our worship, rather than encouraging it. But these temporal considerations cannot be the basis by which we “choose” a church home.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will...

*Ephesians 1:3-5*

When you really get down to it, there is very little personal, human choice involved in our relationship with God. In Christ we were selected out—by God Himself—to be part of His family: the church. And the only way to “choose” the right church home for worship, service, and fellowship is to let God Himself—through the ministry of the Spirit—do the choosing.

But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

*1 Samuel 16:7*

Just as man is incapable of accurately judging the heart of another, he is incapable, on his own, of knowing his place in the vast and mysterious organism that is God’s family. For God to be glorified—the ultimate purpose of man’s existence—God must be permitted to rule. The Spirit must be the one who fits together the many and varied stones that comprise the holy building that is the church.

Is the doctrine of the local church sound? It matters. Is the word of God faithfully and accurately preached? It matters.

Does the local church sing from hymnals or from words projected on a wall? It doesn’t matter. Is the church within walking distance or is it miles away? It doesn’t matter. Does the pastor wear a suit and tie, or t-shirt and sandals? It doesn’t matter. Is there a choir or a praise band? It doesn’t matter.

Is this the local church you are to join?

Only the Spirit will tell you.

*When we walk with the Lord  
In the light of His Word  
What a glory He sheds on our way!  
While we do His good will  
He abides with us still,  
And with all who will trust and obey.*

*Not a shadow can rise,  
Not a cloud in the skies,  
But His smile quickly drives it away;  
Not a doubt nor a fear,  
Not a sigh nor a tear,  
Can abide while we trust and obey.*

*But we never can prove  
The delights of His love  
Until all on the altar we lay;  
For the favor He shows,  
And the joy He bestows,  
Are for them who will trust and obey.*

*Then in fellowship sweet  
We will sit at His feet,  
Or we’ll walk by His side in the way;  
What He says we will do,  
Where He sends we will go—  
Never fear, only trust and obey.*

*Trust and obey, for there’s no other way  
To be happy in Jesus,  
But to trust and obey.*

John H. Sammis

# The Good Stuff

I will meditate on Your precepts  
And regard Your ways.  
I shall delight in Your statutes;  
I shall not forget Your word.

*Psalms 119:15-16*

IN OUR QUEST TO UNEARTH the congregation with which God would have us unite, we began considering—or at least visiting—the churches of denominations heretofore not included on our list of possibilities. After all, ours is a God of wit, of good humor, and of a logic not always in tune with that of mortal man. Perhaps He had in store for us a spiritual dwelling unimaginable before yesterday.

So one Sunday found us seated in the church house of a venerable and familiar denomination in our small town. In contrast to our visits at most other churches, this time we were in at least surroundings of a tactile familiarity. The pews (actual pews!) were hewn from oak. The windows were old stained glass, most put in place and dedicated around the time of the First World War. As in other worship centers today, the parishioners were attired in a variety of styles, but in this place more of the women wore a dress, and more of the men wore a tie. The pre-service ambiance was not silent, but it was hushed, for us a nostalgic and welcome air of reverence.

The first half of the worship service felt to us as if we had stepped back in time, back to an era when worship was serious and respectful, when God was considered someone with whom one did not trifle. The prelude was played by an organist. The choir (an actual choir!), wearing robes, processed down the center aisle to their seats in the loft—where they remained for the entire service. The call to worship was lifted from Scripture, and the congregational singing was from the hymnal (an actual hymnal!). There was an offertory, and after the plates were filled, they were presented at the altar to the strains of the “Doxology.”

During the playing of the offertory, however, and confirmed during the sermon that followed, I noticed what was to me a rather strange thing: no one had brought a Bible with them to church. During the reading of Scripture, and

the subsequent sermon, we could not find one person that was even bothering with the convenient pew Bibles. As far as we could tell, we were the only people in the entire assembly that had brought a Bible with them, and that were actually using it during the sermon. To us, this was a strange turn indeed.

But then, that curious behavior seemed to be an appropriate companion to the message of the day. I don’t wish to be unkind, and certainly would not impugn the pastor’s good intentions, but to this old Baptist his abbreviated sermon more accurately could have been termed a “devotional”—and an insipid one at that. No wonder no one carried a Bible to this service: considering the content of his message, there really was no good reason to refer to the pages of Scripture.



Where we live, autumn is the time of harvests. Every day (and sometimes into the night) the farmers will be out in their fields reaping the bounty of the crops planted last spring. Every day fields that yesterday were brimming with dried and brown soybean plants, or tall golden stalks of field corn, are left bare—bean fields stripped down to the soil, and corn fields left stippled by what is left behind, unused by the harvester.

We all go through harvests of one sort or another. Some people harvest on a daily or weekly basis throughout the year, spending their wages for food picked at the local supermarket. Some buy raw food, and some pay a little more for the kind that takes less time in the kitchen. Most buy some of both.

Then others harvest just a few times per year, from the soil, food that requires more processing than any other. Take pumpkins, for example. When the autumn temperatures drop dangerously close to freezing, it’s time to harvest our pumpkins. The orange fruit are snipped from their vines, set in the cart hitched to the trac-

tor, and taken to the house and arranged on the deck. There they are cleaned of garden mud and dirt. Once they have set awhile to ripen fully, each pumpkin is sliced open, the seeds removed, the hard outer skin cut away, and the remaining flesh cut into chunks. The chunks are cooked awhile, then pureed, then cooked some more before being portioned into the canning jars. Finally, the full, sealed jars are placed in the cooker for another three hours.

Around this time of year apples, too, are harvested. They are picked from the orchard and collected in baskets. Back at the house, each apple is peeled by hand and cut into chunks which are cooked in a little water until soft. Then they are mashed, and cinnamon and sugar added. Once the mixture is boiling, the applesauce is ladled into quart jars and sealed.

Most people with whom we come into contact blanch at how labor intensive some of our harvest can be. They much prefer buying their food already prepared. Their applesauce comes in a jar from the grocery shelf, their pumpkin in a can from Del Monte, or even their pumpkin pie already prepared and stacked in the frozen foods case. When faced with all the work involved with our harvest, most demur—and run screaming to the nearest full-service supermarket. Yet, sitting around the dinner table, everyone agrees that Linda's applesauce, her pumpkin pies and bread taste the best, because they're made from the good stuff.



For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

*2 Timothy 4:3-4*

Some people today prefer the supermarket approach to the things of God as well. They prefer

their religion preprocessed and predigested for quick, effortless consumption. Some don't want to be a part of the harvest at all, but choose to pay others to do the work. For sermons, they want their ears tickled; for reading, nothing more challenging than a soothing and easily digested paraphrase.

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction... But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

*2 Timothy 4:1-2,5*

But God—the whole God, complete and unfiltered—is to be found in His word. Those who insist on getting Him only secondhand—and then, barely so—are missing out on all the good stuff.

We all make our choices, and those in this household won't throw any stones regarding where some people obtain their food. Some people prefer to work hard at their chosen profession for the expressed purpose of having sufficient funds to pay others to do the work of the harvest. We, on the other hand turn that around, preferring to work as hard as we can at the harvest, so that we can get by with fewer funds. One way is not necessarily better than the other.

Except when it comes to God. He reveals Himself in His word, whole and ripe for the picking. It may take a little more effort, and it may not always be easy, but what grows there is truly—and only—the good stuff.

*Thy Word is like a garden, Lord  
With flowers bright and fair;  
And every one who seeks may pluck  
A lovely cluster there.  
Thy Word is like a deep, deep mine;  
And jewels rich and rare  
Are hidden in its mighty depths  
For every searcher there.*

*O may I love Thy precious Word,  
May I explore the mine,  
May I its fragrant flowers glean,  
May light upon me shine.  
O may I find my armor there,  
Thy Word my trusty sword;  
I'll learn to fight with every foe  
The battle of the Lord.*

Edwin Hodder

# Awakened in the Church

...for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

*Galatians 3:28b KJV*

WHEN LINDA AND I BEGAN OUR SEARCH for a church home, our priority was clear. Because Jesus established the order of importance of God's commandments with love for God above love for man, that has always been ours as well.

One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

*Matthew 22:35-40*

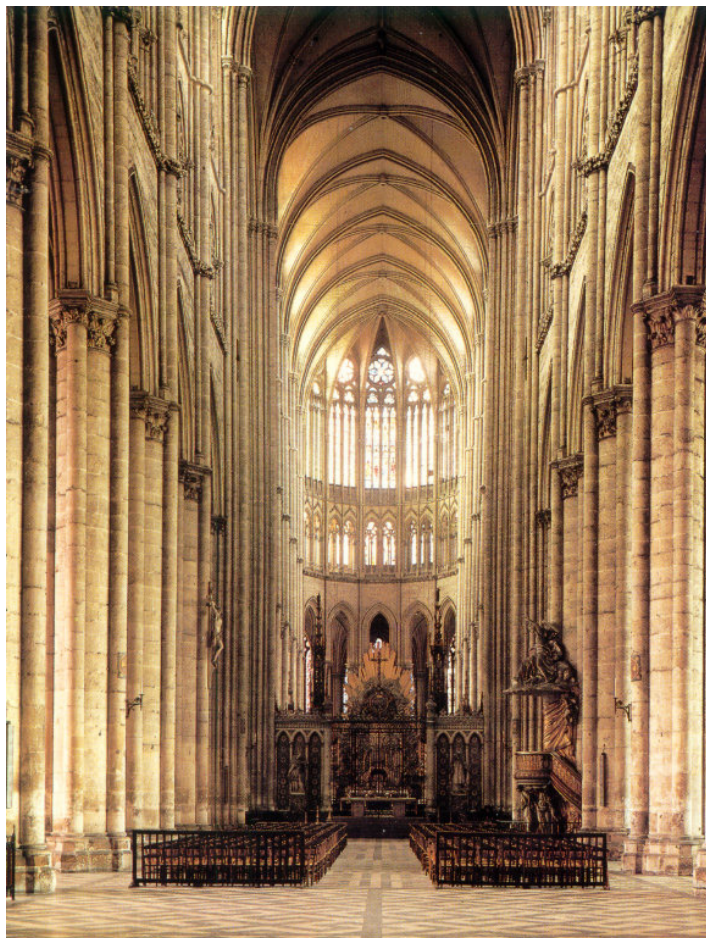
We have long held that love for God (worship) in fact energizes our love for brothers and sisters in the faith (*koinonia*, i.e., "fellowship"). They work together, validating each other: Without communal worship, our fellowship is just socializing; without fellowship, our worship is just vacuous mysticism. But Jesus placed one before the other. Worship, a demonstration of our deep and abiding relationship with God, comes first.

So in the search for a church home our first consideration was the quality and authenticity of its worship. Everything else should follow, so long as that critical starting point was in place. In our minds, corporate worship would be the "drawing card," as it were, that would energize us to once again gather together with believers of like mind and purpose. So long as we could participate in authentic, God-honoring worship every week, we could live with most other perceived "deficiencies" in the church body.

But as we all know, our God has a deliciously ironic sense of humor.

So Elijah said to the prophets of Baal,  
"Choose one ox for yourselves and prepare it

first for you are many, and call on the name of your god, but put no fire under it." Then they took the ox which was given them and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, "O Baal, answer us." But there was no voice and no one answered. And they leaped about the altar which they made. It came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside [i.e., relieving himself], or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened." So they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them. When midday was past, they raved until the time of the offering of the evening



sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.

1 Kings 18:25-29



My good wife of almost forty-eight years and I share a decided lack of enthusiasm for the company of others. We do not find our sustenance in the congregation and noise of human beings, but in the quiet and solitude of the Creator's nature. On a temporal level, our needs are met not by social interaction, but by peaceful communion with our Maker. Thus, it only followed that corporate worship—public communion with, and adoration of, God—would be the first consideration in our search for a church home. We gave little thought to the more social side of Christ's body: learning and remembering names and faces, potluck dinners, group Bible studies, etc. These would follow, as necessary, but worship would be the critical yardstick with which one church body would be compared to another.

Little did we anticipate that God would turn this around on us. Once we had settled on a local church where we could worship, He began to do a work in us. Quite unexpectedly, God supplanted the church's corporate worship with its people as the font of our sustenance. In the inversion of God's humor, it became the *people* that drew us each Sunday to His house. During the week we thought about these people—their joys, aspirations, and sorrows; we recalled to mind what they had said; we prayed for them; and we looked forward to gathering together with them—especially around the study of the word—come the next Sunday morning.



We had not changed our position that God sets worship of Him as man's highest priority. As stated in the oft-quoted Westminster Catechism, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever."

Indeed, this experience had borne that out. For without our steady, adoring relationship with Him, God may not have bothered to teach us this lesson. At the same time, without that holy communion, we surely would have missed the point of it all together!

In Christ, believers enjoy a relationship with a *personal* God. As much as He is high and holy, God is also among us in the persons of the Son and the Spirit. He knows us because He dwells with us; He understands our trials and frustrations because He experienced them when He trudged this soil for Himself; He cares about us, loves us, and desires only our good.

With His intimate knowledge of our lives, the Lord determined that what Linda and I needed, right now, was not more and more gloriously spectacular corporate worship, but to become acquainted with like-minded souls, to come inside from out in the cold, to become part of a family—the local representation of the universal Body of Christ. He wanted us to once again make contact with some of His other children—our brothers and sisters in the faith.

So, in His good humor, God brought us precisely to that which we had all along been trying to avoid.

And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 2:44-47



# Pastors: The Eloquence of a Life

**A**FIFTIETH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY, celebrated in the current church building of my old childhood church family, brought back many memories—not so much of the honored couple, but of the two ex-pastors in attendance. And, by extension, every other pastor I had while growing up in that church.

The two men at the celebration were “retired”—if it is possible for a pastor to retire completely. They are more gray than before, a tad thicker around the middle, and their attire less formal than it once would have been at such an occasion. From across the room Linda and I were struck by the aging that had occurred in them since we last saw them, decades before.

Up close, however, shaking their hands and exchanging memories, we immediately realized that they were the same gracious men of character and warmth we had known before. Time does not erase the essentials of someone called by God to pastor His flock. And in a moment we were reminded of all the many reasons these men had held our respect for so long.



I grew up in the First Baptist Temple, corner of Second and State streets in Marshalltown,

Iowa—a building torn down long ago when the congregation built a larger church-house on property south of downtown. I don’t remember one word of any sermon preached to me in that old church building—that majestic stuccoed edifice filled with comfortable, worn oak and old stained glass. During my childhood in that building, now relegated only to memories and faded snapshots, a succession of three different pastors, unnumbered interim pastors, and various visiting evangelists held sway over my upbringing. To this day I don’t remember a word they said—but I do remember *them*.

Mom and Dad started me going to church while I was still cradled in a woven basket. The smell of old wood and Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes has papered my lungs since birth. While still young enough to be fascinated by Dad’s mechanical pencil (always carried inside his suit coat) to keep me quiet during the service, and be entertained by the string of paper figures crafted by Aunt Norma’s painted fingernails—while still too young to understand the words being said, I was being influenced by the men behind the pulpit.

Not all were kind men, but all were men of God. All three were great preachers, but only two were great pastors. As those men and their ministry have passed into memory, it is not their preaching I remember, but their pastoring.



The ability of a preacher to rouse the spirit and inform the mind with brilliant oratory is a cherished gift from God. The value of his or her ability to explain the word and ways of our heavenly Father cannot be underestimated in the life and edification of the church. We appreciate their practiced skill at holding our attention while God’s word is illuminated. It is a rare and special gift.



But a gift perhaps even more rare is that of the pastor. The two gifts are not always equally combined in one man: One may be a master behind the pulpit, but a miserable failure at the bedside; likewise, one may be filled with compassion and empathy for parishioners, but do a poor job of preaching the word. God does not always give both gifts to one man.

I don't remember the words of the gospel I heard while growing up. I don't remember the stunning orations, the brilliantly crafted, three-point sermons. I don't remember the logic and persuasive arguments used to draw me to the Lord. What I remember are the men: their kindness; their behavior, both at church socials in the basement and on the street; their willingness to counsel a troubled and confused teenager; their steady and dependable presence at times of sickness and death; and, most of all, the simple example of their life.

The sermons were important, to be sure. But I don't believe there was a simple cause and effect relationship—as if the pastor one day offered the evidence, then, having concurred, I walked the aisle to shake his hand. But, small piece at a time, the gospel of Jesus was steadily poured into my heart by both their words and their lives, so that one day, at the tender age of seven, I accepted Christ as my Savior.

That moment of salvation came about because of many influences on a young life. It came,

first, as the result of living with godly parents who loved me and had dedicated their lives to raising me into the image of the Son. It came because of Sunday morning devotions after breakfast, and shining shoes on Saturday night with my dad in preparation for worship the next day. My salvation came about as the result of sitting before patient teachers in Sunday School, with their picture Bibles and flannel graph stories; from standing next to Dad's ear-piercing, yet earnest singing of hymns, as well as listening to the more ear-pleasing sounds from Mom singing in the choir; and from all of us singing the "Doxology" over heaped offering plates.

All these influences came together to fashion a life—a new life—in Christ, but the pastor seemed to be the point at which they all came together. In that holy, reverent setting of dark-stained wood and old smells, the pastor brought together in an orderly fashion all the pieces of evidence that, when in place, smoothed the way for the supernatural touch of the Holy Spirit.

The pastor's life holds the evidence for life in Christ. It portrays Christ to a cynical and doubting world. It proves the veracity and practicality of God's word. It speaks with an eloquence lacking in even the most gifted orator.

May God pour out His blessings on every pastor.



Prescribe and teach these things. Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe. Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.

*1 Timothy 4:11-16*

# Faces

ODD, THE PROCESS OF STRANGERS becoming familiar acquaintances, then, perhaps later, becoming 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 reference. 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 perfunctory 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 do they dress during the other days of the week? What are their lives like when they have removed their better 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 a first visit, one leaves knowing little more than was known before.



The disciple of Christ steps into this situation with an advantage: Just about every person behind the anonymous faces is already a brother or sister. For the believer, 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.



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 is now a familial group of distinct, colorful, rather interesting individuals. The transformation is sufficiently remarkable that we wonder—perhaps 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.



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*

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 so far beyond that of 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, cheeks 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.

*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

# Life in the Body

OUT OF ALL THE BEASTS WITH which we live—a congregation which includes wild turkeys, possums, squirrels and chipmunks, rabbits, raccoons, groundhogs, and the odd badger and bobcat—few are as destructive as the deer.

During my weekly sojourn about the property in the summer, mowing off the grass, it is my habit to take mental inventory of all the nooks and crannies: the progress of the growing things, the rotted oak limbs that have fallen, new holes and runs made by moles—as well as all the latest nibblings of our hooved friends.

They fancy the fruit trees, and the mature apple, cherry, and pear trees in our orchard have all been pruned from the bottom up by the browsing deer. But also on their diet are the decorative bushes, gladiolus, red twig dogwoods, hostas, evergreen trees, elm tree seedlings, and, of course, anything and everything planted in the vegetable garden. Practically anything we set out will quickly become appetizer or main course for a deer dinner.

In the spring and early summer their voracious gaze falls lovingly upon the delicate and sweet-tasting new growth in the gardens. So we take extraordinary measures to protect that which we hope will grace our dinner table later in the season. Eventually we erected continuous fencing around the entire perimeter of the vegetable garden. The taller fence stops the deer, while the base of finer fencing stops the rabbits.

So the garden is now (mostly) safer from the hungry critters.

Still, it is impossible to fence off every living plant, bush and tree on the property, so the nibbling proceeds apace. But then, bless their hearts, just when the steam is really building behind our ears, a young doe will bring her little fawns around for our appraisal. Usually around dusk, when the descending sun has painted the west lawn a deep amber glow, they will come by—the doe cautious and attentive to her little ones, the fawns prancing about, too young to know fear.

The mother will often use our fences to teach the fawns how to leap, effortlessly gliding over first, then turning to coax the little ones over with low grunts. The fawns will get all sick and nervous, running back and forth before the fence bleating their alarm, sure that they can't possibly duplicate their mother's feat. We watch and we smile, and—forgetting all about the beans and peas and apple trees that have been mangled by their appetite—we are grateful for the opportunity to be a part of these little dramas.



For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

*Galatians 3:26-28*



Life in the body of Christ can be very much like living with deer.

Just as in any other assemblage of humans, the maneuverings of the relationship-dance can be messy. The presence of the unifying Spirit does not nullify the presence of weak flesh. Both are combined in what at times can become an unsightly *mélange* of well-intentioned, but ultimately self-protective individuals.

The members of Christ's body—the church universal, as well as the church local—may, on occasion, play out the worst of the species. Like voracious deer, we nibble away at each other, gossip and fret, say hurtful things that leave gaping wounds. We play one person against the next, finagle our way onto committees, ingratiate ourselves to those in power while snubbing those who are not. Even when we think we may have found a way to rise above all the politics of “church,” just when we think we have made some tangible progress in our way toward the example of Christ, one of His other children comes along and chops us off at the knees.



And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

*Ephesians 4:11-13*

Yet, as brutal as life can be in the body, these same people can also be a source of great strength and consolation. The body of Christ is comprised of individuals who laugh together, weep together, and earnestly care about each other. We encourage, we inspire each other, we sit by hospital beds. We hold each other by the hand through hard times, and we hold each other up when trials are more than we think we can bear. We rejoice in seeing each other's children grow and mature in the Lord. And every person in the body is another rung on the ladder leading us upward to Christ.

We are not just fellows in a club; we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are kin. We are all of the same blood type: the blood of Christ. Thus we are ready and willing whenever a transfusion becomes necessary.

In the flesh, members of Christ can be as voracious and consuming as anyone else. But in the Spirit, we are prepared to give our lives for each other.

This is the paradox of the deer—and the dear people in the body of Christ.

When Christians say the Christ-life is in them, they do not mean simply something mental or moral. When they speak of being “in Christ” or of Christ being “in them,” this is not simply a way of saying that they are thinking about Christ or copying Him. They mean that Christ is actually operating through them; that the whole mass of Christians are the physical organism through which Christ acts—that we are His fingers and muscles, the cells of His body.

*C. S. Lewis*

# Artifice: A Clever Expedient

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

*Ephesians 4:14-15 NIV*

ONE CHILLY OCTOBER MONDAY, some twelve or so years ago, this writer and his good wife suffered through something we had until then avoided at all costs. Until then, in three and a half decades of wedded bliss we had never permitted such an outrage upon our respective persons. It was brutal. It was painful. It was, in a sense, humiliating. But, for the common good and the enrichment of posterity, we did it. We clenched our teeth and we did it.

We sat for our portrait.

Mind you, it wasn't our idea. No, after a long run of thoroughly respectable, perfectly adequate, text-only directories, our church (bless the elders) decided it was high time to spruce things up a bit with a pictorial directory.

Well then, what's a body to do. What is one to do when one is a few doors past middle-age, more than a few stone beyond svelte, and in possession of a thinning pate for which hair is becoming only a wistful memory. One, of course, convinces oneself that one is far too old for unseemly vanity, and, sigh, goes ahead and does it. Besides, no one wants to be relegated to that embarrassing last page of the directory wherein are listed the names of all the members who either didn't show up for their sitting or opted to, instead, go with their high school yearbook picture from 1973.



Our appointment was for six-o'clock, and the waiting area felt like that cold corner of the gymnasium where all the wallflowers perch while waiting for the quarterback or head cheerleader to ask them to dance. And our nervousness was not assuaged when at last the door flew open and the photographer emerged. Clearly he had been mainlining caffeine since the early hours of the day. He was as hyper as a ten-year-old living on Frosted Flakes and Coca-Cola.

"Hey! How ya doin'? Right through here. Beautiful, beautiful. David can sit right here—

right here. Linda-super-model right here. That's it, nudge right in there. <flash> Hey, where ya from? What's that? Where's that? Oh yeah, great—great! <flash> Is that east of Indianola? West, huh. Yeah great. Linda-super-model. Fabulous!" <flash>

Would the torment never end.

After another wait in wallflower purgatory, we were ushered into the sticky lair of The Sales Pitch. Immediately we were shown the dramatic contrast between a woman's face lined by the ravages of time, and the same face magically transformed into reawakened youth. Intended Lesson: One would have to be a drooling idiot not to pay extra and have one's glorious visage retouched.

"Hey, how ya doin'? Take a seat right here on the left. How ya doin'? Where ya from? Winter-set? Is that east of Indianola? Now let's see what I can do for ya here."

Lord, just take me now.



No one expects to sit down for a portrait and calmly discuss the finer points of premillennialism vs. postmillennialism theology. These two fine gentlemen had a job to do, and they were doing what was necessary to make a living at it. God bless them. It is surely a miracle that they weren't drooling idiots by the end of the day. But no one beyond the age of eighteen believes that they really were interested in where we live, or that Linda (as beautiful as she may be to her devoted husband) really looks like a supermodel. They were simply employing a tool of their trade—artifice—to persuade semi-willing subjects to cooperate quickly and efficiently.

However, while artifice and guile can be acceptable behavior for traveling photogs, it cannot be acceptable behavior within the body of Christ.

For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you.

*2 Corinthians 1:12 NKJV*

Jesus put it more succinctly:

"But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one."

*Matthew 5:37 NKJV*

In the world in which we live such artifice and guile are perfectly normal. Indeed, such behavior is considered an essential tool for modern survival. Reputations are won, and fame and fortune come to those who build themselves up from a shaky foundation of fast talk and questionable integrity.

But Christians are not of this world, and we are not to subscribe to the same rules of behavior.

When it suits their purpose for the moment, the uninformed love to paint a picture of Jesus as a first century flower child, dispensing daisies and sweetness with a simpering simplicity and a wan smile. But that is not the Jesus of the Bible. Go ahead and read all those words colored red and you will soon discover that the God-Man was quick to call a spade a spade. Whether addressing a follower, a family member, or a religious leader, Jesus spoke the truth with a remarkable clarity and directness.

Now when He had spoken, a Pharisee asked Him to have lunch with him; and He went in, and reclined at the table. When the Pharisee saw it, he was surprised that He had not first ceremonially washed before the meal. But the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the platter; but inside of you, you are full of robbery and wickedness. You foolish ones, did not He who made the outside make the inside also? But give that which is within as charity, and then all things are clean for you."

One of the lawyers said to Him in reply, "Teacher, when You say this, You insult us too." But He said, "Woe to you lawyers as well! For you weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers."

*Luke 11:37-41,45-46*

The followers of Jesus today must also be followers of the truth. They are to speak to each other with consideration, but also with clarity and integrity. Superficiality is a trait of the world—not the body of Christ. We are to speak to each other—and, indeed, everyone around us—as if Jesus Himself were a part of the conversation.

For, of course, He is. ♦

...not walking in craftiness...

This means not resorting to something simply to make your own point. This is a terrible trap. You know that God will only allow you to work in one way—the way of truth. Then be careful never to catch people through the other way—the way of deceit. If you act deceitfully, God's blight and ruin will be upon you. What may be craftiness for you, may not be for others—God has called you to a higher standard. Never dull your sense of being your utmost for His highest—your best for His glory.

*Oswald Chambers*