

Romans 13:8-14

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Embracing the Authority Jesus Gives Us

There's a saying that I heard once on a radio show called *Prairie Home Companion*; the host, Garrison Keeler, who is a devout Lutheran, made a comment about a particular Christian denomination, and I think it can true of Methodists, so rather than offend anyone else I'll just apply the saying to Methodists. Garrison said that when you have one Methodist you have a theologian; where you have two Methodists together you have a congregation; and where you have three Methodists together you have a *division!* How many of you have belonged to a church that split? What was the reason? Once upon a time the reasons for church splits were doctrinal – The Eastern and Western Churches or the Protestant and Catholic Church during the Reformation. Nowadays the reasons for church splits vary dramatically. I was reading a newspaper article on the internet on Thursday and found some rather humorous stories about church splits; the winner was a church in Centerville, Georgia, a town with total population of about 5,000 people. The problem started in 1911 when the church split over whether to take the offering before or after the sermon – the church that split off from the Centerville Presbyterian Church became the Centerville Reformed Presbyterian Church. Four years later another split occurred over whether to have flowers in the sanctuary or not, and thus the Trinity Reformed Presbyterian Church of Centerville was established. Between 1915 and 1929 another SEVEN splits occurred, and by 1931 we had the "Westminster Trinity Covenant Presbyterian Reformed Church of Centerville. By 2012 disputes between members had resulted in 48 Presbyterian churches in Centerville, the latest being result of the conflict

over whether it was a violation of the Sabbath Day to check one's email, and the newest church to evolve from the conflict was the "The Presbyterian Totally Reformed Covenantal Westminsterian Sabbatarian Regulative Credo-Communionist A Millennial Presuppositional Church of Centerville. One of the elders at the PTRCWSRCCAPCC was quoted as saying "I think we've finally got it right now, we have a church with 100 percent doctrinal purity. We're up to 6 people on Sundays now — I know that numbers are not important, but we're hoping to grow a little more." *

Boy, there is so much conflict within the church, conflict that too often leads to church splits or simply the loss of members. According to the Church Conflict Forum only about 2 percent of the church conflict was over doctrinal issues; 98 percent was over interpersonal issues. Some churches have split over the color of the proposed carpet; one church split over a piano bench — that one was resolved by going to two services where the piano bench was taken outside for one service and dragged back in the church for the next service. One church split over the spelling of the word "hallelujah" (hope I didn't offend anyone with the way I spelled it!); another church split over whether a certain Hebrew letter was pronounced "waw" or "vav."

As silly as these reasons sound, at the root of these conflicts is nothing other than (can you guess what I'm going to say??)... PRIDE – if people disagree on the color of the carpet and no one can give in to the opposing side, pride is certainly at stake, and as theologically important as the spelling of "hallelujah" is in the life of the church, I dare say that pride is again the culprit behind a church split.

Now we can laugh at the silliness of such cases, but we at Bethel shouldn't let ourselves off the hook too quickly. Think of some disputes that occur or have occurred here, disputes that you may have been involved in, and ask yourself if pride may have raised its ugly head in those instances. You had your own idea of what you believed to be the way things should go, and you either asserted some power and authority and got your way, or someone else asserted their power and authority and got their way leaving you feeling offended. Some of these disputes are ancient history here at the church, but the hard feelings still exist, and the grumbling still goes on – you feel like you should have gotten your way, and now you refuse to help your 'opponent' or anyone who supported your 'opponent.' Bethel may not have ever split over some issue, but that doesn't mean that people haven't just "split" in the sense of leaving the church because of conflict. There are cracks in our foundation, cracks that are formed by pride, which results from our failures as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Pride is a sin that results from our need to defend our egos, and our egos are essentially what we like to think of ourselves. Our ego is not our true self; it's what we want ourselves to be, and if we really looked deeply at what we want ourselves to be, it's pretty pathetic. We want everyone to laugh at our jokes. We want everyone to come when we need them. Guys, we want to live like the guys in the beer commercials, surrounded by beautiful young women who are fascinated with us. Ladies, I can't get quite that specific with you, but at core of our desire is power over our environment, power over people, *getting our way!* And the reason most marriages fail, the reason people leave the church or drive others to leave the church, the reason a church splits is that everyone wants it their way and can't abide with it any other way.

And pride has an ally in intelligence; pride and intelligence can be a very toxic mixture, because we can literally psych ourselves out. An intelligent person can jump through all sorts of logical hoops to convince themselves that they are right all the time, and they can apply that intelligence in battle against a less intelligent opponent, and thus get their way. If you go to any psych ward you'll meet very intelligent people who can

explain to you very logically why they don't belong there. The truth of that matter is that they are probably there because they pose a danger to themselves or others. The even sadder truth is that those who are very intelligent can be very hard to treat because they have become so good at defending themselves, at explaining their behavior and their beliefs, to the point where they can beat the therapists. They have explained their position so well that they convinced themselves that they are right. But watch what happens when you pose intelligent, critical questions to them. Do they listen? Not really. They roll their eyes, close their minds, and start talking over you. You want to talk about a real mess, take two such intelligent people who are intent on defending their egos, with two different ideas or proposals, and put them in the same room. Look for an exit because it might get messy. Intelligence facilitates our self-deception and makes it harder to come back to reality.

And we, the Church, are called to heal these people. Not to *be* these people, but to heal them. What's amazing is that Jesus gives his disciples authority to stand up to such people in the church, saying, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." You might laugh and say that no church you've ever attended has any right to say anything critical of you, that they're full of hypocrites and egomaniacs, but that doesn't erase what Jesus has said. You might say to yourself that the church has a long history of abusing power and wrongly condemning people, and you'd be right. But we are still authorized by Christ to exercise that power, to identify sin and to actually expel folks who sin against others and refuse to change their ways. It's not pastors who are given this authority; it's the Church. Why? Because the Church is the body of Jesus Christ, and as such we represent the world's salvation. We have a great responsibility, but we have to recognize that the power we have is not our own; it belongs to Jesus Christ. Inasmuch as we are disciples of Jesus Christ, we are granted that power and we exercise authority, not to pad our egos but to change this world into a place where egos no longer collide, where love and peace and justice rule the day. No, church is not just about praying and singing and taking communion; we are saddled with an awesome responsibility and we have been granted immense power and authority. And our past, present, and even future failures will not relieve us of the authority that Jesus has given us. Because without that authority we are no longer the Church. Jesus says, "I authorize you to be my BODY on earth. Now do what I told you to do."

Does that scare you? Does having the authority to bind things and loose things, to confront someone who sins against you or the Church make you feel uneasy? It should! It humbles me a lot, because I stand here railing about pride and ego and I know I have work to do in myself, but I pray that God would help me see what needs to change in me. I've been giving myself a little test lately; I've been taking mental note of everything anyone says to me that bothers me, and I've been asking myself why it bothers me. Does it bother me because I feel attacked, unjustly critiqued, or does it bother me because what that person says is not glorifying God, is not expressing love or grace or forgiveness or concern but rather hatred, impatience, stubbornness, indifference. Am I bothered because someone is telling me something that I should work on? The answer very often indicates pride. Sometimes I see my pride up close, and it's ugly, but I thank the Lord for letting me see it, because knowing the problem is half the solution.

I challenge you to do the same. In fact, take it a step further; ask yourself, "Who do I avoid, and why?" Is there a battle of egos going on? Are you avoiding people because you feel attacked when you're around them, or because you feel like you've been

attacked, and you're still licking your wounds? And if you say, "There's nobody I avoid," you're not off the hook yet. It could be that you have simply been winning all those battles of the ego and you're just content to be surrounded by your minions, by those you have conquered. Perhaps a better question you should ask is, "Are there people who are avoiding me?" Perhaps you are too threatening for them to approach.

Paul beckons the Church in Rome to do all things in love, in the kind of love that can defeat our egos, our pride. Love is the foundation of the church, and it's what justifies the authority that Jesus has given us. If we don't act in love, we have no authority. Let us embrace the authority Jesus has given us, which means that we must build up one another in love, we must sacrifice our egos and take on new life in Jesus Christ. Let us pray.

* <http://columbiadailyherald.com/sections/lifestyles/religion/splitting-hairs.html#sthash.pAnyCMdn.dpuf>

We bring the sacrifice