

The Outworking of Incorporation

1 Cor. 12:31b-13:13

INTRODUCTION:

As an old saying puts it, “You can choose your friends, but not your relatives.” We do not choose our fellow church members, either. Yet along with them, as we have seen, we are baptized into one body. These fellow members may be people for whom we would not otherwise have much affinity.

St. Paul told Christians: “Bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2). Sometimes we may end up bearing one another *as* burdens.

If incorporation is going to amount to much in practice, love stands out as an ongoing need in the church. It comes as no surprise that after describing the church as the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul by inspiration added 1 Corinthians 13, the great “love chapter.” This is our text today. For INCORPORATION HAS ITS OUTWORKING IN LOVE.

1) Love that excels (12:31b-13:3)

- a. So far, we have not said a lot in these sermons about the situation to which Paul wrote in Corinth. That church was riddled with factions. People there took great delight in their own experience of certain spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues and impressive knowledge. They took good gifts of God and made poor use of them (13:1-2). Unsurprisingly, this misuse did not nothing for their unity. So Paul wanted to “show you a still more excellent way” (12:31b).
- b. Even spectacular self-sacrifice amounts to nothing without love (13:3). For it is “love which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:14). Such love sees the marvelous variety within the church (noted last week) not as oppressive, but as opportunity – an occasion for service.
- c. In 1879, Dr. C. F. W. Walther said: “You see, the devil’s craftiness is that if he cannot plunge a church group into false doctrine, nor destroy their unity in confession, he then tries [to destroy it] through their lives. He creates divisions among the members. One person offends another, perhaps without wishing to do so. The second person then becomes angry and imputes malice to him. And if the offense was great enough, perhaps even intentional, then true brotherly fellowship has been destroyed, and the result is that there is no longer any real joy of standing in confessional fellowship with the offender. And that is precisely what the devil wants! Especially when those at the top do something that makes another person feel hurt and angry, then it is easy for Satan to suggest the thought to a member of Synod: ‘Who knows whether he is even doctrinally sound? If you could uncover a bit of false doctrine, then you would be thoroughly avenged!’” Walther went on to quote a maxim of Luther: “Where there is no love, there doctrine cannot remain pure” (C. F. W. Walther, *Essays for the Church: Volume II 1877-1886* [CPH, 1992], 55 and 58).

2) Love that gives (13:4-7)

- a. Love “does not insist on its own way Love bears all things” (13:5, 7). With these and other verbal strokes Paul sketched a picture of what love is and is not. One of my former seminary professors tells of caring for his wife when she contracted COVID. He had to do almost everything for her. “At such a time,” he observes, “it hits home all over again that love is not a feeling.” Love gives.
- b. In this, *agape* love differs from what the world identifies as love. People speak of a “love” that craves the companionship of others. However, this desire “cannot stand the breaking up of a fellowship that has become false for the sake of true fellowship.” At the same time, it cannot “love the enemy, namely, the one who seriously and obstinately resists it” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gemeinsames Leben*, hrsg. Gerhard Ludwig Mueller and Albrecht Schoenherr [Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1987], 29-30, my translation.)
- c. The love of which Paul wrote is the strong kind of love with which God loves us in Christ (John 3:16; 1 John 4:10). This is the love of God that creates the church and will sustain her.

3) Love that endures (13:8-13)

- a. “Love never ends.” Other blessings, significant ones, will take their place in the past (13:8-10), but even in glory the church will be loved and will love. Love will never go out of style for God’s people. So why should our lives now not be filled with love that reaches out to others in a variety of practical ways? (The preacher may go on to list some.) “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (1 Jn. 3:16).
- b. “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (13:13). Love does not receive the forgiveness of Christ; that is faith’s role. Love responds to this forgiveness with abundant fruit. “Faith and hope have to do only with God. But love has infinite offices outwardly toward humanity” (Ap V 105 [IV 226], *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 116). Ultimately, faith will give way to sight and hope will be realized, but love will keep going on.

CONCLUSION:

Incorporation is a spiritual reality, but that does not make it strictly mental. It has its source in God, who brings people into the church as He creates faith and sustains us in it here and now through Word and Sacrament. Furthermore, incorporation has its recipients in flesh-and-blood human beings, people blessed by God with faith, our fellow members of the body of Christ. And incorporation has its outworking in love, real-life self-giving service that mirrors what Christ has done for us.

Ken Schurb
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