

## The Source of Incorporation

**1 Corinthians 12:1-13** (Note that vv. 12 and 13 are added to the Epiphany 2 lectionary reading.)

### INTRODUCTION:

How does a church treat its new members? That's an important question!

This sermon is the first in a series of three on "assimilation" of new members, also called "incorporation." (These sermons prefer the latter word, for reasons to be noted later.) However it be termed, here is a fuller description of it: "The process of becoming an active participant in a congregation, by which 'they' become 'us' – the children of God living together in Christ's love. Included are formation of a Christian way of life in vocations, habits, and desires for Christian living" – Dr. W. Mart Thompson, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

We are not talking about people simply becoming better acquainted with one another. INCORPORATION HAS ITS SOURCE IN GOD. Why? Our text shows that God is the source of faith and of the church's unity.

- 1) God as source of faith (vv. 1-3, 13)
  - a. "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (v. 3).
    - i. I think it was Kierkegaard who noted that people may come to the church with all sorts of problems, but the church will remind them first of the underlying malady that they are sinners and cannot make their own way to God. In the church, this is the first thing that everyone is: a sinner.
    - ii. The Good News is that Christ died for sinners and rose again. In baptism, God incorporates you into His dying and rising (Rom. 6:1-11; Gal. 3:27).
  - b. God gives not only faith that believes, but also something to believe: "Jesus is Lord."
    - i. This may be the briefest confession of the faith. Yet it includes all the doctrine in the Ecumenical Creeds, or Luther's Catechisms, or the *Book of Concord*.
    - ii. There is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5). God wants His people to respond to Him by saying the same thing. (See 1 Cor. 1:10; Phil. 2:2.)
- 2) God as source of the church's unity (vv. 4-13)
  - a. "In one Spirit we were all baptized [by God!] into one body" (v. 13).
    - i. The body of Christ, the church, was there before we were baptized into it. It is one because there is one God; see vv. 4-6.
    - ii. We have been *in-corporated*, brought into the body. This happened by the power of God, before we consciously and formally "joined" a congregation.
  - b. Incorporation into the body depends on Christ.
    - i. If you had a bunch of helium-filled balloons and you wanted them to float in the air close together, what could you do? You could tie strings to them, tie the other end of each string to a different chair, and push the chairs together. But if you tie the end of each of the strings to a single chair, the balloons will cluster quite closely as they float. The closer we draw to Christ, the closer we

will draw to one another. The unity of the church depends not on members' own qualities or the things that we might do to come closer to one another. It depends on Him.

- ii. Our fellowship with one another is not direct, then, but through Him. For fellowship is "communion." That is, we share in a common thing (1 John 1:3). The common thing is the forgiveness that Christ gives: "Everything, therefore, in the Christian church is ordered toward this goal: we shall daily receive in the Church nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs. . . ." (LC Creed 55).
- c. The main means of ongoing incorporation in a congregation is worship.
  - i. Worship returns us, in repentance and faith, to our "baptism into one." We confess our sins and receive forgiveness.
  - ii. If worship does not hold the place of centrality for incorporation in the church, the church's unity will drift and become instead sociological or even political. But one should recognize the presence of the church not sociologically but Christologically. See John 10:27.

#### CONCLUSION:

Congregations sometimes start thinking a lot about assimilation when church attendance becomes sporadic, or a bunch of members transfers out, or because church people seem to have no roles to play in the organization. These concerns are all valid, in the appropriate places.

But this sermon has emphasized what belongs in the first place. The big reason to give attention to incorporation, underlying all the rest, is that incorporation has its source in God.

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Epiphany, 2022