

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer
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“The Meaning of Membership”
I Corinthians 12: 14-20

You know when you walk into a sanctuary to be married or into a delivery room to witness the birth of your children, that your existence is about to be altered, even if you cannot guess how much. But there are times when a life-changing event sneaks up on you, and even when you experience it you don't really fully appreciate its significance at the time. Such an event happened to me many years ago when I was in college. I was one of those college kids who made it to church almost every Sunday morning, which marked me as a strange duck among my peers. I had actually joined a church fellowship early in my college career that was very alive and had a real spirit of excitement to it. The pastor seemed to know a lot about the Bible, and the congregation was obviously growing and attracting a lot of young people, especially pretty girls. But even though I was a member of the church for several months, I was never really involved. One day, I was sitting in the sanctuary before the service when I suddenly felt a powerful inner conviction, a conviction so strong that it was almost like an audible voice. Words formed within my head: *“This is not the place for you.”* I heeded that voice. I rose, saying a word to no one, elbowing my way past the crowd that was thronging in. I walked down the street on a sunny Sunday morning and found a small house church that was in fact more conservative than the one I had just left, but it was warm, informal and inviting. In truth, I didn't remain at that church very long either, but it served as a springboard to my faith, propelling me on a spiritual pilgrimage that made my life very different from what I had anticipated. I soon joined a church in which I became a member in the truest sense of the word.

Now what do I mean by that, a member in the truest sense of the word? I mean that when Paul uses the word “member” of a church, he uses it in an organic, physical way. He means something palpable, something vital, something necessary to the health of the body. Paul doesn't think of the church as an organization. He thinks of the church as a living organism with each member comprising living tissue within that organism, performing a vital function, fulfilling a necessary role. When Paul uses the word “member,” he is describing people as the eyes, the ears, the mouth and the hands and the fingers and the feet, the sinews, the tendons, ligaments, muscles and lifeblood of a living organism, the body of Christ. When Paul uses the word “member,” he thinks of someone performing a vital function that contributes to the health of the whole.

At one level we all understand this truth. I think of my own family's celebration of Thanksgiving. We are at that stage in our lives where all generations of our family are still present, the old and young, giving our gatherings unusual richness. But there are also people present in our household at Thanksgiving who are not members of our family by blood or by marriage, yet they are present at our table because they share a long history of rich relationship with us and are as vital to our family as any genetic relation. They are integral parts of our family unit and members in the most important sense. Their presence among us is as vital to our happiness as that of anyone else.

How very different is Paul's concept of “member” from our common use of the word! When someone says, ‘I am a member of that club,’ he or she may mean only, ‘I pay dues to that club,’

or 'My name is on the roll at that club.' There is nothing vital about that concept of membership. Used in that sense it means only a loose association with an organization, the exact opposite of membership in the Biblical sense. Membership used in that sense means 'My name is linked with that organization, but the organization is not a vital part of my being, and I am not a vital part of its being.' A name on a roll, a check sent to a club, a loose association -- how very different is that concept of membership from the one that Paul described!

When we come to our Lord's table, we must ask ourselves,
'What kind of a member am I of the body of Christ?'
Is my connection with Christ just one of a loose association?
Is it only that my name is on a roll?
Or am I truly a part of the living tissue of Christ?
Do I perform a vital function for Christ's body?
When our Lord says to us, "This is my body broken for you,
this is my blood poured out for you,"
he is saying to us, 'I commit to you with the whole of my being.'
He is saying, 'I have given myself to you absolutely, emptied myself completely.
I have become a full member of the human race, without reservation.
I have identified with you unreservedly, in all of your vulnerability.
I have aligned myself with you in all of your need.'
Part of the glory of Advent is celebrating a concept of God in which
God pours out the divine self to become fully a part of the human family.
The other part of Advent's glory is that in fully becoming part of the human family
God opens us up to the invitation to become fully part of the divine family.
Our Christ becomes fully a member of us, wholly, unreservedly, absolutely,
that we might become fully a member of his body in just the same fashion.
Christ says to us, 'Do not be a spectator, do not be a bystander.
Do not remain an observer of Christ's fellowship!
Do not have only a loose association with my body,
but be grafted into it, like a branch grafted into a living plant.'
That is the opportunity that is available to us as we accept the invitation
to gather around our Lord's table.

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer
November 30, 2008, Communion Sunday
The First Sunday of Advent