

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Grace: Key to the Church's Life



LIFELINES

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In last month's column I used the image of the orchestra to highlight the importance of each member in the church playing his part in the Lord's mission, each one using his gifts in harmony with the others. This month I want to share what I believe is the key to living and working together to accomplish the Lord's mission.

I believe the key is grace — and I hope with this column to suggest how grace promotes such cooperation and teamwork.

In Romans 12, Paul encourages the church to use its gifts, as he writes to them: "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use

What grace says to us is this: whatever gift(s) God has given you exercise for the good of the whole. Give thanks for the gift which you have, not denigrating your gift because it's not as prominent as someone else's. Give thanks for the gift, for it comes from God and is meant to be used!

them." (v. 6) Grace bestows gifts to be used, with the implication, "for the good of others."

In making this exhortation, Paul begins from the vantage point of grace. He begins the paragraph in which this exhortation is embedded in this way, "For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but

to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him." (v.3)

Grace promotes teamwork because it engenders humility, for when one realizes that what one has is a gift, pride of position and accomplishment decrease . . . Grace also engenders thankfulness. When one is surprised by what he has not worked for or deserved, gratitude wells up inside . . . Humble, thankful people are fun to be with and to work with. The perspective of grace enables the church to work together with joy.

By beginning from the perspective of grace, Paul is modeling for the Roman Christians the proper attitude for participation in the body of Christ. He is not telling them what to do. He is bidding them. Grace does not pressure; grace does not force or cajole people into acting. Grace invites. Grace encourages. Grace inspires. Such an encouragement is more likely than pressure to evoke a willing, cheerful response.

Grace promotes teamwork because it engenders humility, for when one realizes that what one has is a gift, pride of position and accomplishment decrease. Rather than boasting of oneself, he has the Donor to praise. Paul knows that his insight into the body of Christ and the proper functioning of each of its members is a gift given to him. It's not something he has figured out or discovered. It's an insight granted him by his Lord. Humility, therefore, is the

attitude to accompany his sharing it!

Grace also engenders thankfulness. When one is surprised by what he has not worked for or deserved, gratitude wells up inside. Grace can do this, because it is God giving us what we do not merit.

And guess what? Humble, thankful people are fun to be with and to work

with. The perspective of grace enables the church to work together with joy.

Unfortunately, the way of grace is not natural. Since sin has affected us, we tend to look at others' gifts from the perspective of our own. If teaching is my gift, then that becomes the most important, and I tend to judge the other folks' gifts on the basis of my particular gift. Instead of having God in the center we place ourselves there. Forgetting the

When we see how grace releases us from self-centeredness, trains us for godly living, grants us good judgment about how individual gifts serve the health of the whole body, empowers us to exercise those gifts to build up the body and promotes an attitude of humility and thankfulness, I think you will agree with me, there's nothing more important than grace for the church to live in love and witness to the world with its words and works.

source of our individual gifts, we end up judging, evaluating and critiquing others' gifts on the basis of our own. That's not grace, but self-centeredness — sin. Others are not built up, but torn down.

When we remember that it is God who gives different gifts to His people, we will hopefully realize that our job is not to critique and judge others' gifts, but to recognize that each one has a contribution to make. God bestows His gifts in diverse ways—not for competition between the recipients of His gifts, but for enriching and strengthening one another. They're gifts of grace, unearned on our part, but received to be shared, that the whole body may function effectively.

Although the gifts can be evaluated on the basis of their relative worth for building up the church (as Paul does in I Corinthians 14), all gifts have edification as their purpose. God makes us different and gives us differing gifts that we may have something to share with one another. If we were all identical, who would need anyone else or his gifts? Paul's familiar illustration of this is the human body. We have a variety of different parts, each called to do its part, that the whole body may prosper.

Recognizing in this way that the variety of gifts flows from God's grace, we can be guarded against a judgmental attitude which looks down on some of the gifts and elevates others. Grace counters the notion that some in the church are unnecessary or unimportant. Every gift is valuable.

What grace says to us is this: whatever gift(s) God has given you exercise for the good of the whole. Give thanks for the gift which you have, not denigrating your gift because it's not as prominent as someone else's. Give thanks for the gift, for it comes from God and is meant to be used!

Sometimes, however, our churches do not display the humility and thankfulness that promote mutual care and respect. One insists that his way is right; another insists that her way is right. We line up sides, each seeking to prove the rightness of our position, rather than trying to understand the other's perspective. Instead of unity we have division! What is wrong? We've forgotten grace! We've forgotten our stance before God and one another, and as a result we end up fighting instead of loving one another! How sad when grace is neglected and forgotten! We Lutherans claim that grace is central, but sometimes it looks like sin is.

Perhaps it's helpful to recall how Paul connects grace not only with salvation but with Christian living. In Ephesians 2:8-10, he stresses that we are saved by grace through faith, apart from works of the law. But then he goes on to say that we are "God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good

works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

In Titus 2:11f, the beginning of one of the Christmas epistles, Paul asserts, "The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world." Grace has appeared in Jesus Christ. It is conveyed through this one person and yet filled with blessings for all people. It rescues from sin, death, and the devil. It opens the future to us but that does not mean it should have no influence on our current situation.

Grace is a power to shape and mold us to live as new people now, people who have been liberated from preoccupation with self to live for others. Grace trains us like a coach disciplines his team that we might pursue God's goals. Grace is a declaration which says "you're okay; your sins are forgiven," but its implications do not stop there. As Luther says somewhere, "God forgives us that we should stop sinning; it is not the permission of sins but their remission." Indeed grace turns us around by forgiving us that we may live in accord with God's purpose of serving others. Grace is the key to the church's life!

When we see how grace releases us from self-centeredness, trains us for godly living, grants us good judgment about how individual gifts serve the health of the whole body, empowers us to exercise those gifts to build up the body and promotes an attitude of humility and thankfulness, I think you will agree with me, there's nothing more important than grace for the church to live in love and witness to the world with its words and works.

Grace is the key! Let's live on the basis of it, and our churches will be places where God's work gets done and his mission is advanced!

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