

# ***“Convictions”***

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***Isolation is the enemy of spiritual growth.***

***Romans 12:1-8***

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## ***Essential or not***

Week 3 of “Corinth 101” is about what makes Corinth, Corinth. A newcomer to Corinth expressed it to me like this yesterday: “When I went to church before, it felt like my shoes were on the wrong foot. From the first Sunday we walked in here, the shoes were on the right foot.” That doesn’t happen for everyone. When it does, I think it’s because of what we’ll talk about today.

This past weekend, Linda and I traveled to Delaware for a Thompson family wedding. The elevator in our hotel had a sign in it with the caption, “Essential and...Non-Essentials.” That is the same language we use when we talk about who we are at Corinth. The poster included a picture of a woman eating a pint of ice cream. The implication is that ice cream is a non-essential, if you can believe it....

I’m not in the hospitality industry, but I would guess the “essentials” for a hotel are a clean bed and bathroom, and a secure lock. That’s it. But people don’t choose their hotel only for the essentials. The non-essentials (a TV, pool, ice cream) matter too. In fact, I would guess that non-essentials matter more when people are choosing a hotel.

For the last two weeks in “Corinth 101 for Everyone,” we’ve been talking about the essentials. The core is Jesus, the Son of God who died and rose again for our salvation. He is our Lord and Savior. Last week the sermon was about the next ring of essentials – the historic and broad consensus throughout Christian history – the doctrine

of the Trinity, God the Father as Creator of all things, the virgin birth and second coming of Jesus, the Holy Spirit as equal to the Father and the Son.

Separating those essentials – the core and the confessions – from non-essentials is what makes Corinth, Corinth. Today we will address areas of faith we call “non-essential,” but it doesn’t mean they’re unimportant. They’re *very* important – even more so than ice cream in the hotel snack shop. We call them “convictions.” The reasons these beliefs and behaviors are important is because they’re based on the Bible. But unlike “confessions,” Christians have a hard time agreeing on the convictions.

Let me give you some examples. Baptism: babies or only on profession of faith? Total immersion or a little dab will do? The Lord’s Supper – what does it mean and who can take it? A woman’s role in the home and in the church. Predestination v. free will. Human sexuality. The end times. Creation and the age of the earth. Marriage and divorce. Pro-life and pro-choice. Speaking in tongues and other miracle-gifts. Praying to Mary and the saints. The list goes on. The one we’ll focus on today is how the church is structured and organized. How do we “do church”? I’ll give you our convictions.

Most of these areas are (sadly) reasons that churches and even entire denominations have split. Here at Corinth we don’t think they’re reasons to separate, but that doesn’t mean these topics are taboo. We like talking about them. We may tell you (individually or as a church) what we believe about them, and that we believe what we believe because it’s in the Bible. But we know not everyone agrees. And when we disagree, we want to remember that it’s the essentials that unite us.

These convictions are important because they are based on God’s Word. We trust the Bible. It’s our authority for what we believe and how we live. In the Apostle Paul’s words, “All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable” (2 Timothy 3:16-17) for Christian understanding and practice. Every sermon and most classes and groups at Corinth focus on study of the Bible.

The third session in the Corinth 101 class is about convictions and connections. We’ll talk about some of those areas where Christians tend to disagree – and why the “Reformed” in our name is what points us to the Bible to talk about them. We’ll also give a lot of detail about how to make connections here at Corinth.

When we want to know how to make connections in the church, we turn to the Bible. You’ll find the basic outline of what we see in the Bible about our connections on the front of your bulletin: You matter, you belong, and you serve.

### ***The body***

*You matter* (vv. 1-2)

“Therefore,” Paul begins this chapter, “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy....” Paul is connecting what he’s getting ready to say with everything he’s already said in chapters 1-11. When he speaks of “God’s mercy,” he’s talking about what we have called the “Core” and “Confessions” of the Christian faith. He’s written extensively about sin and judgment and about what Jesus Christ did to remove the condemnation we deserved and declare us righteous. Such mercy!

In view of that, Paul says, “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.” The “body” matters in the Christian faith. It matters so much that in Jesus God took the form of a human body. He became just as much “body” as you and I are. Then his body was killed, crucified, for our sins. The first part of Romans says that we must not let sin reign in our bodies (6:12), and it also says that God will redeem our bodies (8:23). Bodies matter.

Here in Romans 12, Paul says your body matters. You must offer it as a “living sacrifice,” in contrast to Jesus, who became a dead sacrifice. You keep living, but your *body* must be given to Jesus because of the mercy he has shown you. Other religions, ancient and contemporary, say that only your soul matters. We do believe the soul matters – it’s the part of us that connects to God. But our bodies will be raised as well, and what we do with them right now is our “true and proper worship.”

Paul says that when we think about offering our bodies to God, we must not be conformed “to the pattern of this world.” The world says, “My body belongs to me, and what I do with it is my business.”

Paul says God wants to change how we think about our bodies. He wants to transform us by the renewing of our minds. We must strive to conform the actions of our bodies to “God’s good, pleasing, and perfect will.” I have a lot of biblical convictions about the use of my body. They include biblical convictions about sexuality, about health, about what I let my eyes see and hands do and where I let my feet go.

When other Christians have different perspectives or make different choices about their bodies, I have to remember this is not the “core” or the “confessions.” But I can never say “The body doesn’t matter” if I am a follower of Jesus. To say that “you matter” is not only about your soul. Your *body* matters to God. It’s a living sacrifice.

*You belong* (vv. 3-5)

Paul extends and alters the “body language” in verses 3-5 of our text. Remember, this is the section of Romans where he is telling us how to live our lives “in view of God’s mercy.” What does it look like to live a life that is so aware of what God has done for us in Jesus that we are living sacrifices to him?

The first place Paul goes is connection to other believers. This life of response to God’s mercy absolutely requires relationship to others. That’s where you learn what it

means not to be conformed to “the pattern of this world” but instead “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Believers in Jesus don’t think, “I can figure this out for myself.” They think, “If I’m going to live a faithful life, I need help!”

Paul says, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment....” That word implies moderation and balance. Don’t put yourself too high but don’t put yourself too low. You are amazing but only because of what God can do and only in proper relation to others. On your own you’re nothing.

That’s why when you think of “the body of Christ” (one of Paul’s favorite ways to describe the church), think of yourself as only one “member” of the body. You’re not the whole body. You’re a toe, or an eye, or a ligament, or an ear, or an elbow. And here’s the key phrase – as a “member” of this body you belong – not just to God but “to all the others” (5).

The metaphor can’t be stretched to its extreme without ruining it, but what if your toe said, “I know the rest of the body wants to work out today, but I refuse”? What if your ears said, “I don’t feel like listening today; somebody else do my job”? It’s absurd, right? The members of the body need each other. There is intentional variety in their function. You belong, and you’re needed by all the other body parts.

*You serve* (vv. 6-8)

Paul makes a further application in verses 6 and following. He’s already talked about different “members” of the body having different “functions.” Now he states more literally what some of those functions are – prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, and showing mercy. It’s not an exhaustive list, because he lists many other functions elsewhere.

Here his point is two-fold. First, remember these are “gifts” given to you by “grace.” Whatever you do and do well, you can’t claim credit for it. You didn’t gift yourself. Your abilities – spiritual and otherwise – are a sum total of your genetics, your experiences, your opportunities, and maybe your choices along the way.

No Olympic athlete can claim they got to their world-class level by effort alone. Who their parents were, where they lived, their coaches, their health – so many factors contributed to the excellence they developed in their chosen sport. Paul wants believers never to forget that what they can do for God is entirely because of what God has done for them and in them. It’s a gift.

Second, these gifts are made to be used. These functions are made to function. These parts of the body are designed for the benefit of the rest of the body. So whatever your gift is, you should use it. It’s part of offering your body as a living sacrifice. If you’re not engaged in service in and through the body of Christ, you’re greatly diminishing what the whole body can do for him.

## ***What then?***

Today in the Corinth 101 class, we'll take several of these issues further. You're welcome to join in person or on Zoom. I'll put up that same slide about areas where Christians disagree, and you can ask me how Corinth handles any of them. I'll tell you why being a "Reformed" church shapes how we use the Bible. I'll share a little more about how Corinth is organized. We'll talk about specific ways to belong and to serve.

As far as "Corinth 101 for Everyone," here are some practical considerations, and they all flow from this basic idea: your body matters to God. So what does that mean?

*Study the Bible diligently, but humbly.* This comes back to what makes Corinth, Corinth. When people walk in here, they tend to sense two things – one is friendliness and welcome. The other is that we preach the Gospel and teach the Bible. Holding these two aspects in balance is intentional. In the words of John 1, it's "grace and truth or that came through Jesus Christ."

"Grace" means that we will meet you right where you are. Our denomination has a tag line, "No matter where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." We don't require you to be at a certain level of maturity or to agree with us on our convictions. We believe God's Word will do the changing. So we'll urge you to read and study the Bible. We'll base every sermon on the Bible. We'll try our best to get you connected to small groups where we study the Bible. But none of that is an entrance requirement. You don't have to behave to belong.

If you come to church and everyone is a mature Christian, we're doing something wrong. If everyone at Corinth is serving with their gifts, following biblical sexuality, engaged in a study group, promoting justice, reading the Bible, praying, or whatever else we think is important, we're doing something wrong. If we all agree on what the Bible says and means, we're doing something wrong. We've become a church for only people who agree with and conform to our standards. That's not grace.

We want to love people where they are, and learn to study the Bible diligently, but humbly. We study it in community, remembering that the church has often lived with blind spots, even for generations. We could be wrong. But we know that all Scripture is God-breathed and we'll keep studying the Bible as God's self-revelation.

*Refuse to isolate.* Isolation is the enemy of spiritual growth. To put it crassly, God wants butts in the seats. Don't hear that as a comment about COVID – about shutdowns or social distancing. There are always special circumstances we have to wrestle with, and this entire year has been special circumstances.

The general principle is that the New Testament knows nothing of Christians who say, “I love Jesus but I don’t want to be a part a church.” Jesus said, “I will build my church,” and the rest of the New Testament is about the joys and struggles of being that church.

Here at Corinth we have a certain way of doing church. They are our “biblical convictions” about church. We don’t insist that our way of thinking about church is the only way or even the best way. I can just tell you that getting your body into proximity with other Christians is a critical discipline – face to face, heart to heart, mind to mind – studying together, praying together, serving God together. Yes, the church can be a frustrating place because it’s an imperfect community of imperfect people. But it’s Jesus’ church and it’s Jesus’ way of changing lives. So refuse to do Jesus on your own. You belong with the rest of the body.

*Make a choice today to (re-)connect.* It’s time. In your bulletin today was a yellow insert. It’s the same sheet we’ll give out in Corinth 101 class today. Some of you have forgotten that being part of a church is not just becoming a member or attending a church service. It’s connecting with the rest of the body. If you’re not currently connected to some kind of small group and/or a ministry team, today’s the day to make the first step. You can fill out that sheet and drop it in the offering box on your way out, or leave it on your pew, or hand it to me. Checking those little boxes is not an absolute commitment to connect in a certain way. It’s a starting point. We’ll follow up.

Even the choices there represent how Corinth does church. We realize people connect in so many different ways, and we don’t insist on everyone joining a Sunday School class or life group or on everyone serving on a mission team or working in the HOPE Garden. What we do is offer this whole smorgasbord of ways to belong and serve. It’s our biblical conviction that you need both. But if you’re not ready yet, we won’t force you.

Corinth is a culture of grace. We have all sorts of biblical convictions – individually and collectively – but very few essentials of what to think or how to live except the core and confessions. We believe people are at different places spiritually when they come into the community, and they grow at different rates. Our job is just to keep pointing you to Jesus and to God’s Word and let him do the rest.

The world says, “We’ll accept you as you are because you’re OK as you are.” We say, “We’ll accept you where you are but we won’t leave you there.” Let’s get on this journey together, a journey of allowing God’s word to change everything about us. Amen.