

Stubborn Baptists

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1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

Movement 1 – Problems in Self-Esteem

Josh was not a bad looking fellow. He wasn't drop-dead gorgeous, he wasn't anyone who would stand out in a crowd, or would land a job as a *Ralph Lauren* model, but he was not a bad looking fellow either. Josh was not a stupid person. He did not have an IQ of 180, he was not brilliant, but he was not stupid. He could manage tasks, he could solve problems, and he could think for himself. Josh was a likeable fellow. He was not the kind of person who demanded attention when he enters into a room, he was not the kind of person who attracted others to him with a magnetic personality, but on the other had, he could hold a conversation, he laughed at peoples jokes, and he was seldom annoying. He was not notable, but still good to have around. Josh was an average kind of person in many ways, yet his life was below average. He did not get the top jobs for which he aspired. He did not receive all of the lauds that he could have earned. Josh constantly lost his jobs, failed in relationships, and did not have much success in his life. Josh carried himself with slumped shoulders and a humble look. He was someone you might or might not notice in a room. We may wonder why someone, who has gifts, would have such a difficult time with life, and in this case it is mostly because Josh has a low self-esteem. Josh would look at other people around him, people with brilliant, obvious gifts, and overlook his own gifts. Josh discounted anything he had to offer. Josh denied any hope on his own horizon. Josh had a low self-esteem and it affected his whole life.

Do you ever wonder if you are worthwhile? Do you have a low self-esteem? Do you ever wonder if you have something worthwhile to contribute to society? Do you have a high or a low self-esteem?

Maybe you are working on a project and find out that everyone on your team has more education and more experience than you do. You find yourself surrounded by people with PhD's and you only have your GED. Maybe you join a summer softball league and find out that everyone else has played in college and on club teams and you have only played on the family wiffel ball team. Maybe you join a gourmet cooking class and realize everyone has been to France at least once and you have only been to the bakery where the owner speaks French. How would you feel in these situations? What would your self-esteem be in these situations? Would your confidence go up or would it go down? Would you wonder why it is that you are in this room, on this project, on this team, or in this class? What would happen to your self-esteem?

Dr. Stephen Treat, the executive director of the *Council for Relationships*, an organization offering counseling, therapy, and training, once said that people either think they are stupid or that they are smart. Individuals, in their most basic self, either have a high self-esteem or a low self-esteem. Where are you? Are you someone who walks in the limelight all of the time? Are you someone who holds their head high, or do you lurk in the shadows with your head held low, hoping no one will notice? When you hear the words of Homer Simpson, “Trying is the first step to failure,” do you shake your head in disbelief, or do you nod with agreement? How is your self-esteem?

Paul was writing to a Christian community full of individuals with high and low self-esteem. Some in the community were bragging that their faith was stronger than others. Some were bragging that their gifts were better than others. If you could speak in tongues then you were better than someone who could only teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If you could prophesy, then you were better than someone who could only preach. If you were baptized by a certain person, then you were better than others. Education, wealth, and social status all impacted the relationships of the Corinthian community. A pecking order of spiritual gifts, and other gifts was created and emphasized in the community. You could imagine that there were some

individuals who felt slighted, who felt disheartened and who had a low image of themselves due to the standards and expectations created by the community. Some may have wondered if they had anything worthwhile to offer to the community at all. Some may have wondered if they had a legitimate faith in Jesus at all. It was a community of ordering, of hierarchy and of low self-esteem, of exulting some and lowering others. This was a community Paul was writing to.

What about you? Do you wonder if you have anything valuable to offer to the community? Do you wonder if your gifts are worthwhile or even necessary? Maybe you hear others pray and wish you had the same spiritual depth. Maybe you hear others preach and wish you had the same command of language. Maybe you look at larger churches and wonder what Lower Merion Baptist Church has to offer to the community and to Christ. Maybe you wish you were baptized by a specific pastor. Maybe you wish you could memorize more of the Bible. Maybe you look at yourself and wonder if you really can call yourself a Christian. Maybe you have had that moment when you feel like you are standing in front of the Lord, but you have nothing a value to offer. Have you ever had that moment, that experience of wondering if you were indeed worthwhile? How is your self-esteem?

Movement 2 – Finding the Best Cookie to Copy

Sometimes, to build up our self-esteem, or to gain a false sense of security, we find someone we see as worthwhile, and copy with that person does. Sometimes we look for someone who seems to be doing well and we follow that person and act like that person. We listen to the prayers of others and we try to copy those prayers. We watch the others act and we try to act in a similar way. We gain security through the happiness of others.

Maybe you know that person who is always following someone else. This is the co-worker who dresses just like the boss, acts like the boss, and even cuts his hair like the boss. Maybe you know that person who talk and walks and dresses like a certain celebrity. Maybe you know that person who doesn't have an identity of his or her own but instead is always copying the identity of others.

How much of that person is in you? How much of you looks to others and copies what others do because it seems to go well? We all do this to a degree with fashion, with fads, and with patterns of living.

Marketers ask celebrities to use their specific products because many of us will follow our heroes, our celebrities when we choose the type of clothing, the car, and other different aspects of our lives to live. We find those who seem to have the best and we copy that life. We find the person with the most and we emulate that person. It is like we just bit into the best tasting cookie, and we want to become cookies made from the same batch and cut from the same mold, so we do whatever we can to become shaped by that cookie-cutter.

We especially see this in dieting. A dieting trend takes storm because we notice that a handful of individuals have done well with that particular diet, and everyone tries to capture the results. Remember the Atkins diet? How much of that diet was fad and following?

This past Wednesday night I heard a sermon about accents in the world. The preacher lamented the loss of accents in America; he complained about the stigma of accents and noted the ubiquitous nature of accents in the American landscape. As a Latino, he remembered trying to hide his accent, trying to be like everyone who spoke in a “normal” way. His accent made him different, and he was taught as a child that his accent made him less than worthy. So he worked and tried to change and shape his accent to match the “norm” of America. Our nation is becoming more and more homogenized through a lack of self-esteem; when we fit in, we feel good about ourselves.

Even in churches we find people following people, mimicking and copying what seems to be the most popular, or the best. Often preachers try to emulate other preaching styles because it seems to work well with the populace. It is a common question to ask a preacher whose style of preaching most heavily influences him or her. Yet there are those who are influenced by others, and then there are those who copy

others. There are those who are influenced by T.D. Jakes, and those who try to copy T.D. Jakes. I remember hearing a Lutheran try to preach in a Baptist style. His arms were waving around; he was shouting at the top of his lungs, he was jumping up and down. It didn't seem right, it didn't seem authentic, and his congregation did not know what to make of his antics. He was copying a different style, one that seemed to be popular and successful, but that did not match his own personality or the personality of his congregation.

Churches seem to be in this constant circular holding pattern, copying each other, and following the trend that seems to be the most popular. If one set of songs seem to bring in more and more people, then shouldn't we all adopt those songs? If one style of music seems to attract more people, then shouldn't we all adopt that style of music? Even beliefs and doctrines and preaching topics are passed around with the winds of culture. For a while evolution will be a popular topic to preach about, and then maybe abortion, and then maybe homosexuality, and then maybe hybrid cars versus diesel cars. We are given voting guides to tell us what Biblical values to be concerned about. We are told which issues we need to pray about, we are handed a mold of our worship, our prayers and our spirituality. The focus is not to preach about Jesus, nor is it to preach to the specific needs of a community, but to jump on the doctrinal bandwagon and preach what everyone else is preaching. It may not feel authentic, but if other churches are doing it and thriving, shouldn't we follow suit?

There were members of the Corinthian church who were just following those who seemed to have the best gifts, the most favored spirituality, or the deepest connection with Christ. They said preaching in tongues was the most important. They said that those with money were the most important. They said that those who could demonstrate their salvation were the most important, and the community followed them. The community stepped into the mold made for them, so they all could look alike, sing alike, preach alike and be alike as a community.

It does not surprise me that the world calls for conformity. It does not surprise me that the world expects us to give up our individuality, our uniqueness, and our very souls and conform to the lock-step march that chases the super-self and the dollar. Yet it surprises me that so many churches fall into the same lock-step path. So many churches look to the handful of growing churches, of super-sized churches, and follow their lead. So many churches give up their individuality, their uniqueness, their spirituality to the power of a few and expect that they will be well taken care of. Do we think so little of ourselves? Do we trust so little in Christ that we need to follow others in order to feel worthwhile? There is a procession going on, a march continuing and the world and churches march, following those held up on a pedestal, those held high and glorified for others to fawn at and worship. Do we need to follow; do we need to get in line to feel any sense of worth?

Movement 3 – Listening to the Spirit

We have been given gifts by God. We have all been created holy. We all have been blessed. We are all unique and special people loved into being by the Lord. We have all been given gifts by God. We need to remember this.

Paul is calling the community, and Paul is calling us to listen to the Spirit to discern our gifts and to own our gifts. Remember, it is the Spirit that unifies us, that grounds us, and keeps us connected. It is the Spirit that calls us and challenges us, and is always with us. This is the advocated Christ promised to be with us after his ascension. This is the imminent nature of God. Remember the Holy Spirit. We are called to pray and listen to the Holy Spirit moving around and among us. We are called to sit and to trust the pull and the wooing and the lure of the Holy Spirit calling us. We are called to remember our baptism, that moment when we knew the Holy Spirit was with us, to remember that feeling and to listen again to the whispering of the Holy Spirit in our ear. The Holy Spirit will lead you in discerning your gifts, will lift your eyes to the blessed nature of your gifts and will give you the assurance that your gifts are holy and are precious.

Take time in prayer each day and listen to the Holy Spirit. Take time in a small group with your friends, and listen to the Holy Spirit among each of you. Take time in worship, when the choir is singing, when the pastor is preaching, when you are lost in the power of the hymns, and listen to the Holy Spirit. Don't listen to others telling you what gifts are more important and what gifts are less important. Don't let others tell you what your gifts should be. Listen to the Holy Spirit, the divine and creating wind pull you into the person God has created you to be.

What is the Holy Spirit calling you to do? Who is the Holy Spirit calling you to be? The Holy Spirit will call you to service and a ministry that will match the very gifts given to you by God. Do you hear the Spirit calling you to work with the children, to teach them, play with them, and encourage them in their faith? Do you hear the Spirit calling you to visit the sick, to sit at their side, to be present with them in a time of despair? Do you hear the Spirit calling you to work for justice, mercy and righteousness? Do you hear the Spirit calling you to raise the anger of the holy for all of the wrongs in the world, or to offer peace to the gathered for all of the wounds they carry? What do you hear the Spirit calling you to do?

Listen to the Spirit, because you are being called to live into your gifts. Listen to the Spirit and take a chance with the Spirit. Listen to the Spirit and follow the Spirit, regardless which way the rest of the world is going. Do you feel the wind of the Spirit pulling at you, calling you to sing, calling you to write, calling you to lead, or calling you to pray? The Holy Spirit is calling you to live into the gifts God has given to you.

I remember in seminary I knew a number of people who were following their call 20 years after they first had that pull from the Spirit. They knew God had called them into the ministry, they had felt the pull of the Holy Spirit, but they held back. Some were afraid that they did not have the abilities. Others were afraid that they did not have the spiritual depth. Others just denied that they could offer anything worthwhile to the church. Yet after years of wrestling and struggling, they finally listened to the Holy Spirit and began to train to become ministers of the Gospel. You could see the regret that they had waited, and at the same time you could see the joy that they had finally listened. They had the gifts needed to serve a church, they had the passion, all they had to do was listen.

Don't wait, but listen and serve. We all have gifts. We all have been created gloriously and wonderfully. We have been loved into existence and we are worthwhile. Listen to the Holy Spirit, the very Spirit that was present when you said 'yes' to Christ, that first Baptized you and made you whole. Listen to that Spirit, and take a chance with the gifts that you have been given by God.

Movement 4 – Stubborn in our Gifts

We need to claim our gifts! We listen to the spirit, and then claim the gifts we have been given by God with boldness and bravado. We need to claim our gifts! We have gifts, we all have goodness and a worth to share. We need to claim our gifts.

We need to claim the diversity of our gifts. We claim them without comparing our gifts to others, without measuring their worth to other gifts. Some are called to teach and some are called to preach and some are called listen and some are called to prayer. Yet no one gift is more important than another. The theologian Mirsalov Volf talks about the church as a community modeled after the Trinity. Just as in the Trinity there are three different parts with different aspects and different gifts, we have different people with different callings and different gifts. And just as we would not claim any part of the Trinity to be more or less important than any other part, nor would we claim that any of our own gifts are more or less important than any other gift. We need to claim the diversity of our gifts.

My brothers and sisters, we can claim and live into our gifts by being a part of a particular movement of Baptists. I know there are already enough Baptists out there. There are the Southern Baptists, the American Baptists, the Progressive Baptists, the National Baptists, the Regular Baptists, the Two Seed in the Spirit Predestination Baptists, the General Baptist, the Freewill Baptists, the Alliance of Baptists, the

Corporate Baptists, and on and on. So for me to suggest that we look to another Baptist movement may feel overwhelming, or redundant. You are probably saying to me, “Pastor, we don’t need to start another Baptist movement, the Baptists we belong to are just fine.” I agree, but hear me out; I’m not calling you to start something new, but to reconnect to something old. I am calling you to be a part of an old, and perhaps forgotten aspect of the Baptist; the stubbornness of the Baptists. Remember, Baptists were known for being argumentative, contrary, anti-authoritative, and stubborn. When Obadiah Holmes went to Boston to preach again and again, even though he was warned against it, he was being a stubborn Baptist. He even endured the sting of the whip because of his stubbornness. John Leland was jail numerous times because he would not register as an “accepted” preacher even though other Baptists were registered. He believed it was wrong for the state to sanction religion, and was stubborn in his belief. Rodger Williams was so stubborn that when he was exiled from Massachusetts, he would not wait until spring, but left in the winter and nearly lost his own life. Will Campbell was so stubborn in the gospel that he preached and ministered to members of the civil rights movement and to members of the Klan even though both groups did not like it.

I’m calling you to be a part of the Stubborn Baptist movement. This is a movement of Baptists that won’t let anyone tell them who to be, what to do, or how to follow Jesus. This is a movement of Baptists that scowls at the march of churches following lock step the trends of the time. This is a movement of Baptists that sits firm with arms crossed when others call them to go along and not make a scene. This is a movement of Baptists that refuse to be told that their gift, that their relationship with Christ, that their understanding of ministry is wrong, or misguided or not with the times. I am calling you to be a part of this movement; I am calling you to be a stubborn Baptist.

These are the Baptists that cause trouble, these are the Baptists who always challenge the status quo, and these are the Baptists who are never happy with compliancy. These are the Baptist who stomp their feet when others are told that their gifts are not worthwhile. These are the Baptists who rise from their chair when others are told to sit down. These are the Baptists who holler and scream when they are told what doctrine to hold dear and what issue to get excited about. The Stubborn Baptists believe in following the Holy Spirit, and not letting anyone tell them otherwise. The Stubborn Baptists believe in honoring their God-given gifts and not letting anyone tell them they are trash. The Stubborn Baptist worship the way they see best, serve the Lord the way they see best, and follow Jesus the way they see best. Join with me in the movement of Baptists. Be stubborn Baptists, claiming your gifts and not letting anyone hold you down.

Movement 5 – Unity in the Spirit

Yet we must not turn our eyes from each other. I’m calling you to remember the community, to remember the communities of the church as you hold up your own gifts. I am encouraging you to be stubborn, but not to the point where you turn your back to the church community. I am asking you to hold firm to your gifts and your ministry, but not to the point of excluding everyone else. We are to turn our eyes to each other.

Volf reminds us to look again at the Trinity for a model. He reminds us to look at the way the three separate aspects of the Trinity are in unity with each other. He reminds us of the pharacoric dance that the three aspects of the Trinity engage in; God creator, Christ redeemer and the Holy Spirit the sustainer. They dance with each other, fully separate and full united. In a similar way, we are to stay engaged with each other. In a similar way, we are to look to each other, and to stay in the dance with each other. We are to hold each other up; we are to turn each other around, allowing our gifts to shine for the greater good of Christ. We are to let other’s gifts shine, and let our gifts shine, and stay united in our gifts at the same time.

Do you hear what Paul is calling us to do? We are to lift each other up, we are to look at those who may seem the most insignificant and make that person the most significant. Then we are being a community. We can’t be so stubborn that we go off and do our own thing. If have been called to teach, but will not be a

part of the church, then there will be no one to learn. If you have been called to listen, but will not be a part of the church, then there will be no one to speak. If we go our separate ways, we will have eyes and ears scattered about and no body. We need to look to each other, we need to lift each other up, and stay connected with each other.

This is the other part of being a stubborn Baptist. To be as stubborn as to make sure that there is always room for others, even if it means compromising your own level of comfort. To be as stubborn as to demand that the doors stay open, even if it means people you don't know may enter. Be stubborn in creating space for all of God's children; be stubborn in making room for all of those called by Christ, even if it is someone who rubs you the wrong way. Even if it someone who you see as the feet of the body, they must be lifted up. The theologian/philosopher John Caputo writes in his book *The Weakness of God*, that radical hospitality between us and the stranger is the way the kingdom of God is fully realized. Here in the church we are to practice this radical hospitality; we are to make room for all those who are seen as unimportant, we are to lift up the lowly, and we are to exalt those that that the world has dismissed. Be stubborn as you demand that this be a church that includes others, that makes room for everyone, and that celebrates their gifts. Be stubborn and demand that we look at each other, and never neglect each other.

Movement 6 – The One True Church

We can be the church that God calls us to be. We can be the body of Christ that God has gathered us to be. Here in this church, as this church we have everyone we need to be a good church, to be the one church of Christ, to be the true church of Christ. We can be that church, if we only listen to the Holy Spirit, if we only hold up each other's gifts, and if we only live into the people that God calls us to be. We can be that church.

This is the church of one body – Christ's body. This is the church of one identity – Christ's identity. This is the church of different people, of different gifts, but one faith, one Lord and one baptism. This is the true church that God is calling us to be.

We will have troubling times. There will be times when we will be uncomfortable with the diversity. There will be times when we will not want others to be a part of our community, but we need to remember that in the one Spirit we all were baptized, and all have a place in this church, around the table.

We will have difficult times. We will have times when we wonder if we are as good as other churches. We will have times when we wonder if we are as good as other Christians. Remember that we are all given gifts that are all necessary and all valid in the eyes of the Lord. The church of 30 people is just as important as the church of 3,000 people. Because we all have one faith, one Lord, and one Baptism.

Let us become the body of Christ. Let us lift up each other's gifts in celebration. Let us make room for each other's gifts in the body. And let us always remember that we are held together not by our own successes, nor by our own gifts, but by the one faith, the one Lord, and the one Baptism.

AMEN