

# The brain of Christ: a metaphor for diversity and leadership in the Church

(sermon by Craig E. Tenke on November 26, 2006)

The expression "the body of Christ" is used in different ways in scripture. It is used in a spiritual context to refer to the sacrament of communion, but another use is elaborated by Paul to *define* our relationship to one another: not merely as a fellowship or congregation, but The Church. "Now *you* are the body of Christ and individually members of it." "For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."

I was raised here. I grew up in that pew over there, where my mother is sitting. I learned that God is love, and that Jesus loves the little children. I learned the lessons of faith in the Bible stories, and I became comfortable enough in my faith not to balk when a Jewish friend volunteered that the sea that parted in Exodus might not have been the Red Sea at all. I came to cherish the imagery of the creation story in Genesis as the definition of God's relationship to mankind and the world. God blessed the world he created, and the faithful can experience that blessing at each new dawn.

In the heyday of the Brookhaven Lab, the space race, and the red menace, my secular education enticed me with the powers of the scientific method, a tool optimized to probe the mechanisms of the world around us. I held my faith up to the harsh glare of secular knowledge, and I turned it around and around, looking at it from different angles. I also scrutinized my fledgling appreciation of science through the eyes of faith.

As an adult, religion didn't seem all that relevant to me until my kids came along. That's when I began to wonder, "What am I teaching my children about God, about morals, and about our duty to mankind?" My view from the pew had been of good people doing their best with a mandate that was humanly impossible: love and care for one another, love your neighbor, love your enemies. My congregation fostered education and labored as well as it could, even though it wasn't quite at the forefront of social justice. I slowly realized that my personal pride in my denomination was, in some part, an idolatrous illusion that was reinforced by the swing of a cultural pendulum that had since reversed its course.

I never really knew that much about Presbyterian polity. I knew that we had a unique representational government, but it seemed that traditions like our monthly covered dish suppers and the symbolic mystery of communion were where the “religion” part was. It was a religion of familiarity, in which my family and congregation *were* the church visible.

I’ve since learned that freedom of conscience is one of our defining principles: God alone is Lord of the conscience. Even before the American colonies united against England, Presbyterians had their theological disagreements. For example, the Adopting Act of 1729, approved the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechism, but only after allowing for dissention on issues of church and state. Today, our ministers, elders, and deacons still agree to be *guided* by the Confessions of our faith. These Confessions include a number of documents, among them the Declaration of Barmen, made by the German reformed churches in response to Hitler’s efforts to nationalize the churches.

The struggle to do the right thing has been with Christians since the very beginning of the Church. In a sense, there were very basic misunderstandings and disagreements about *the anatomy of the body of Christ*. The book of Acts chronicles how the church first discerned that the Jewish laws that barred gentiles from their fellowship were *not essentials* for the followers of Christ. Sinners all, we turn *none* away from our doors. Knowing that none are worthy, we acknowledge our transgressions and strive toward the unreachable standard of Christ. Yet even so there *have* been standards from the very beginning. Even as Paul taught diversity, he also taught integrity. The key point has always been for us to be *a light* to a dark and needy world, rather than a *mere reflection* of it. The Church is not now, nor has it ever been, just a social club.

Earlier this year, I took part in a presbytery-sponsored program devised to parallel the General Assembly’s Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity in the Church. Participants were invited in order to assure that the broad theological spectrum of thought was represented. The intention wasn’t to discuss or debate our differences, but rather to bring to each other our own unique reflections on the significance of a passages from scripture dealing with our core beliefs as Christians. The focus was on the honest discernment of the essentials of our faith, yet the differences were there. *Paired viewpoints* emerged, taking the form of purity *versus* inclusiveness, separateness *versus* diversity, the Law *versus* the Spirit. How do you minister to the poor, the disenfranchised, and the world as a whole *without*

pandering to it and *degrading* the body of Christ? It was in this context that I first mused about the body of Christ from my perspective as both an elder and a neuroscientist. If the brain is the *body's* organ of leadership, control, and discernment, what might we learn from it about diversity in the body of *Christ*?

*Who is it* that makes up the body of Christ? Just what *is* a leader? The media like to talk about ministers and priests, but don't be misled: for Presbyterians, the issues apply not only ministers, but elders and deacons as well. In fact, in small congregations like this one, it's quite a large percentage of our membership. A show of hands: *How many of you have been ordained as elders or deacons?* Add to this those who are Trustees - not ordained, but leaders nonetheless. Moreover, in the priesthood of believers that is the Church, we are *all* called to God's service.

How does the brain help us to understand about diversity and leadership in the body of Christ? Probably the first thing they teach about the brain and nerve cells in school is that they react without nuance, firing all-or-none. Yet the activity that underlies decision-making is really *quite* nuanced, and even contradictory. Moreover, *dissent* is not only normal, but *mandatory* for the brain to function at all. Starting at the retina, the very first signal produced when a photon of light hits a receptor is *inhibitory*, something that makes it even *less* likely for a cell to fire.

*Nuanced* antagonism takes the form of *mutual* inhibition at *all* levels of the nervous system. To combine sensations into perceptions, small patterns of differences must be sharpened and contrasted. For example, if a white piece of paper is placed next to next to a black one, you will see bands on either side of the edge: the brightest white on the white side, and the darkest black on the black side. These illusory bands are so universal that the same response can be shown for the *very* few cells in the horseshoe crab retina.

Rather than inch my way through the visual system, I want to jump to some general organizing principles of what's arguably the highest level of processing in the brain: the cerebral cortex. Some cortical cells are extremely excitable. To them, everything demands action. When they sense, they react, and everyone around them reacts as well. They also signal others in faraway places to react as well. However, if this nature was left unchecked, the most meager event would cause an intense *focus* of activation, something that rapidly loses all relation to anything that may have gotten it fired up in the first place. The result would be a devastating pathological outburst called a epileptic focus. Because of the connectedness of the brain, secondary foci would repeat this disruptive pattern in distant regions as well. Clearly the unity we seek, either as individual humans or as the body of Christ that is the Church, is *nothing* like this.

There's something very Presbyterian about the cerebral cortex. It's constructed in modules that function together like a *committee*. Each and every excitatory cell is encrusted with inhibitory connections urging moderation, and every burst of activity is countered by a period of *forced* inaction. Each local region uses these same general rules to decide how to react its own nuanced, locally appropriate way. The end result: you recognize the face of your child; you remember her doctor's appointment; you share the joy of a walk along the beach.

What's the good of a nay-sayer? They don't *directly* accomplish anything! Well, sometimes they can *prevent* some pretty terrible things from happening. At other times, they can sculpt what is *allowed* to happen into something manageable, or even wonderful. Even though *every* call to action is greeted with reactionary opposition, *some* calls for restraint are more urgent than others. *Some* actions can lead to error, and others to *death*.

Day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, *everything* in the brain is counterbalanced and opposed, yet *still* things happen. Sometimes the *timing* is acceptable, even if the event isn't. Consider this: *most* wars occur against the outcry of pacifists, but then there are other wars that can't seem to provoke the same intensity of opposition. In effect, the opponents share complicity in the decision to go to "just war."

The visual system provides other examples of how the whole is more than just the sum of its parts. To see things in the world as they *really* are, you sometimes have to see through *blind spots*. We're *built* to connect the dots and see pictures through holes. This mechanism can let you see around the blood vessels and the optic nerve of a normal, healthy retina, or it can preserve sight in a gunshot wound victim.

We put together “the big picture” from what we perceive as a general pattern, or even a piece of a pattern. We detect spiritual health or moral decay the same way. Sometimes we are very, very right. Sometimes, we've horribly wrong. As noted in Ecclesiastes, there is nothing new under the sun. The cry of the prophets must be heard anew, generation after generation. As a kid in the days of the cold war, anti-utopianistic novels like Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984* gave us harsh caricatures of what humans might submit themselves to, but we *knew* that nothing like that could ever *really* happen here in America. Were *we* not the light of freedom in a world darkened by the shadow of the Iron Curtain? Didn't I see the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King march for equality on our grainy, black-and white television. Haven't we been *innoculated* against racism, sexism, and homophobia? And as Christians, don't we always seek peace first? Don't we always *do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God*?

In a recent book on Lincoln's presidency, Doris Kearns-Goodwin notes that Lincoln stunned America when he put his personal rivals in his cabinet. Lincoln said, “I had no right to deprive the country of their services.” Lincoln made room for disagreement in his presidency, and encouraged the dissenters to write up their ideas and positions. In the end, Lincoln made his own *informed* decisions.

Paul asked, “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?”

We *all* see through a glass darkly, we *all* err, and we *all* sin. That is the very *reason* for diversity. Where some have *disabilities*, other have *talents*. Yet where some *see* only weakness, there may be *strength*. A single nerve cell can't even *survive* outside of a body, yet it may play a critical role in leading it.

