

CHURCH & CULTURE

Independence & Individuality vs. Interdependence

1 Cor. 12:12-27; Pat Cameron; June 6, 2010

Last week, Jerry focused on secularism v. theism. Secularism is the view that there is no need or room for God in conducting most human affairs. Secularists can be religious too, but if so, religion is a private affair that has no connection with the rest of the individual's life or that of the culture.

The alternative, theism, is the view that there is a reality beyond the realm of human culture that is present and active in the affairs of humanity; and the ultimate source of human life and destiny. Christians, and many persons of non-Christian traditions, often call this reality "God." For Christians, Jesus is the best representation of how God relates to the human world. Following Jesus is the way Christians seek to know God and to shape their lives according to God's will.

This morning, I want to focus on another dichotomy between the way our culture see things and the alternative point-of-view that the Christian faith provides. This time, I want to shift from God-to-people relationships to people-to-people relationships. Although there are many differences between cultural and Christian perspectives on human relationships from which I could have chosen, I've decided to focus on the emphasis in our culture on *independence* and *individuality* v. the emphasis of the Christian faith on *interdependence*.

But before I begin talking about these themes, I think it's important to say that I don't see "independence" itself as a negative term. In the book of Exodus, the Hebrews assert their independence from their slave masters in Egypt. God directs prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos to speak words that are independent from what kings and priests would have liked to hear. Though firmly rooted in his Jewish heritage, Jesus speaks and acts independently from many of his culture's social conventions. And the early Christian community, originally composed of

Jews only, asserted its independence from Judaism when gentiles, as well as Jews, were allowed into its fellowship.

If we fast-forward to the age of the Protestant Reformation, alternative vessels for the church were formed that were independent from the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The early Anabaptists wanted to be independent from both Protestants and Catholics who were fighting territorial wars in Europe; whoever ruled the land determined the brand of Christianity that all its citizens must follow. The Anabaptists stood for voluntary, not mandatory, church membership, and, they insisted that baptism is for adults only-- perhaps, in part, because the practice of infant baptism hadn't worked very well to transform the warring Christians,. Because they dared to be different, to be an independent body of Christians that stood apart from the other church reformers, Anabaptists were ridiculed, persecuted, and martyred.

So two cheers, but not three, for independence. It is not independence itself, but independence in our culture that invites an alternative value for the church. Unlike the positive examples of independence that I've mentioned, independence becomes distorted when it is linked with another cultural value: individualism.

Individualism is an extreme emphasis on the welfare of the individual, as opposed to the welfare of others. My needs, my happiness, and my success are my ultimate concerns. I may consider myself to be a Christian and may even be a regular church-goer—if church fills me and makes me feel good. Yes, I know there are many problems in my community and the world, but I don't like to focus on negative things. I strive to have a positive attitude. Why get down about something I can't do anything about?

Many commentaries have been written on the problems associated with an over-emphasis on the individual. Parker Palmer, in his book *The Company of Strangers*, notes that we live in a fragmented culture that encourages individuals to isolate themselves; there are insufficient opportunities for meaningful social interaction (Parker: 20-21). In his post-World War II book, *The Irony of American History*, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr says that individualism has been elevated to the status of a creed, something to live and even die for. Niebuhr writes, "Many young

men who have been assured that only the individual counts among us, have died on foreign battlefields” (Niebuhr: 8-10).

Because the individual is #1, we are encouraged to make independent decisions and take independent actions. Our reference group for what we buy, where we live, and how we invest our resources, is often a group of one—ourselves. Perhaps others in our families, but hardly ever the church. We don’t want anyone else telling us, or, often even advising us about, what to do.

Perhaps, not so much for the older adults in this congregation, but for the a generation or two behind us, there is a general distrust of people and institutions that represent authority. Why should I listen to that teacher, that preacher, that employer? I know what works for me, and no one can convince me otherwise.

In Dr. Mark Taylor’s research on traditional college students,-- these are children of baby-boomer parents, born between 1982-1994--there are some disturbing indicators about where this over-emphasis on individualism and independence is heading. Generation NeXt, as these students are called, often had non-authoritative parents, parents who tried to be friends with their children, presumably because they knew their children would rebel against authority-figures. They imposed few or no consequences for negative behavior or lack of respect, and so this behavior and disrespect has carried over into the classroom. Schooled in self-esteem, these students have an over-inflated sense of their own self-importance. They believe they’re entitled to express themselves in all situations, and they have a high regard for their own opinions. They tend to overrate their skills, expecting they can be anything and do it all. Not surprisingly, the research shows that these students are lacking in a sense of community (“Generation NeXt Students”)

In response to the excesses of individualistic *independence*, the Christian community offers a culture of *interdependence*. Not to be confused with *co-dependence*, an unhealthy practice of meeting one’s own needs by meeting other’s needs—needing to be needed-- interdependence is mutual dependency—we all need each other to be whole. I don’t often consider *Wikipedia* as an authoritative source, but its definition of “interdependence” rings true: Interdependence is ... “being mutually and physically responsible to, and sharing a common set of principles with, others.”

Although the word *interdependence* is not found in the Bible, 1 Cor 12 provides a helpful image for what interdependence in the church looks like. (Read 1 Cor. 1:12:12-27 here). The Corinthian church had problems. There were factions, based not so much on doctrinal disputes, but on loyalties to particular leaders. Some claimed special knowledge or spiritual wisdom that made them superior to others in the church that didn't possess this wisdom. There was also an emphasis in the Corinthian church on individual freedom, without considering how certain behavior might affect weaker Christians. So we might see this passage from 1 Corinthians 12 as Paul's admonition to the Corinthians, as well as his vision for what this church could become if it truly became "one body."

"For in the one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves of free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (13). The starting point for Paul's analogy is the baptism which all of the members have received. This means that all of the members have publically acknowledged their allegiance to Jesus and to represent through the church, his body. Here Paul also mentions the diversity of the church's members, which he will expand upon as his analogy unfolds.

"If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body" (15). There is diversity among the various members of the body, but all of them belong, and all of them make significant contributions to the life of the church.

"If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?" (17). There is a balance in what each member contributes to the body; none of the members dominates the community or negates the gifts of others.

"If all were a single member, where would the body be?" (19). One member does not make a body. It doesn't make sense to go it alone. Without being interconnected to the other parts, there is no body. We all need each other.

"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you, nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" On the contrary, the members of the body that seem

to be weaker are indispensable” (vv. 21-22). Some members of the body may not be as strong as others, but strong or weak, they are essential to the life of the church .

“..[T]hose members of the body we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor; and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect, whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has arranged the body, giving greater honor to the inferior members, that there may be no dissention within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another” (23-25).

The theme here is modesty. There are certain parts of the body that are less respectable to reveal in public. In Paul’s thinking, even though these members of the body might be considered “less respectable,” they receive the greatest respect as far as clothing goes. Likewise, those people in the church that might be the least respected by the culture, God has made as part of the body where they will be treated with the utmost respect.. God has placed these people in our midst to be part of this interdependent community.

“If one member suffers, all members suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (26). Just as a sick stomach makes us feel bad all over, the suffering of one member affects the whole church. We bear one another’s’ burdens. And if one member is rejoicing, the other members rejoice also. Because we are one body, one member’s celebration is a celebration for all of us.

This vision of the church doesn’t do away with the important role of each individual’s unique contribution. When individuality is disconnected from independence, it has a proper role in the life of the church. Interdependence honors the role of each member; each member is needed to make the body whole.

To what degree does this congregation measure up to the body imagery of 1 Cor 12? Are we a community of interdependence—and to what degree? Are there still areas where we still holding back, reluctant to take the full antidote to the toxic mixture of independence and individuality?

If we truly become Christ's body, everyone belongs and everyone is needed; if we all bear each others' burdens and share each others' joys as if they were our own, then we'll become a whole body, healthy enough to welcome the stranger. This congregation can become an important oasis for people who are tired from their desert journeys, exhausted from traveling alone; thirsty for a people to belong to, hungry to be part of a body that accepts them for who they are, no matter how strong or how weak; a community that shows them the way to the abundant life they can have with Jesus and his followers as traveling companions.