

2024 Synod Assembly Theme Series

Reflection #4



“One body in Christ”

In.

People use this little word many different ways each day.

“In” can mean that:

- something is popular. “*Orange is the in color right now.*”
- someone is in a position of influence with others. “*She’s got an in with another member of the club.*”
- something is moving. “*He is going into town.*”
- someone is present somewhere. “*There were many people in the meeting.*”
- something is within, or enclosed or surrounded by something. “*She is in the house.*”

This week I am reflecting on that little word “in” which is part of the focus verse for the 2024 Synod Assembly, “One body *in* Christ,” from Romans 12:5 – “So we, though many are one body *in* Christ, and individually members one of another.”

St. Paul sometimes used the same word(s) that had different interpretations in different letters, depending on the Christian community to whom he was writing. It is important to bear that in mind. Paul was always writing to a specific Christian community in a specific place, with its own unique context, its own gifts, and yes, its own issues and challenges. His messages to the Christians in Corinth sound different than the message he sent to the people in Philippi. And indeed, those early churches were as different from each other as we are in our congregations and communities are different from each other here in the SW MN Synod.

The phrase “in Christ” appears in many of Paul’s letters; but notice the similarities:

- “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are *in* Christ Jesus.” Romans 8:1
- “For as in Adam all die, so also *in* Christ shall all be made alive.” 1 Cor. 15:22
- “Therefore, if anyone is *in* Christ, there is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” 2 Cor. 5:17
- “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one *in* Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28
- “...making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things *in* him, things in heaven and things on earth.” Ephesians 1:9-10

All of these texts provide a reminder that we are fully in the presence of Christ and belong to Christ. That identity is not ours because we signed up to join a club. It is given in Holy Baptism, as Christ gathers God’s children “in” himself. That means we are one with each other in Christ. We belong to each other. We are one, amid our diversity.

When Martin Luther gave his lectures on Romans from 1515-1516, he taught that in this section of Romans, Paul begins to focus on how we behave toward our neighbor. Luther had some things to say about how much concern the church was giving to church buildings, the accumulation of property and the many things that pull human hearts away from loving our neighbors. Over five centuries later, we understand some of these preoccupations.

Some of us are concerned about aging church buildings that were planned for a time when the church was the center of the community and enjoyed the privileges associated with that place of prominence. Today, we love those buildings; they hold such precious memories of baptisms, confirmations, fellowship, and funerals. In this changed culture, we know that many are struggling with how to maintain those beautiful structures. We want to leave a legacy for those who come after us. We wonder what the shape of congregations will look like in the future.

While there are many questions that face the church these days, being “in” Christ provides both promise and direction.

You are “*in*” Christ. This is the promise: “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God *in* Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:38-39.

You are “*in*” Christ. Your direction for the present and the future is clear: Love God. Love neighbor.\

For reflection or conversation:

- Might others get the impression that my church has insiders and outsiders, or feels like a club? If so, how?
- Why is it hard to love all the neighbors Christ brings with him when we are baptized or come to the Lord’s Table?
- Will following Jesus ever be an “in” way to live? What would the world look like if it were?
- How might you be blessed – and surprised - if you were to see others as “in” Christ with you?

+ grace and peace,
Bishop Dee Pederson

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Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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