

BODY LANGUAGE

by Elaine Stedman

I recently received an e-mail from an early PBC intern in which he reminded me of an amusing incident that occurred when I did some team-teaching with a woman who is an excellent Bible teacher but who has a style very different from mine (and superior to mine as well). After one of my sessions, one of the women in the audience remarked, "You and Kay are diabolically different, but your message is the same." I console myself to this day that she really meant "diametrically different."

I regret with you that our dear Ray cannot be here today to speak to you, and I recognize that I'm a very inadequate substitute. But my prayer is that the essence of the message will be the same.

In a recent sermon delivered at one of southern Oregon's largest and most vibrant churches (in which my grandson is now a pastoral intern), the pastor-teacher warned about what he termed the "Sardis syndrome." Let's read about it in Revelation 3:1-3: "These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent."

The pastor went on to describe the process of dying that historically has occurred in the institutional church. You may be familiar with the example he cited of those magnificent cathedrals all through Europe, many of them built to accommodate congregations of four thousand, where the average Sunday attendance is about twenty-eight. This was his summary of their decline: God invests his **m**essage in a **m**an, which becomes his **m**inistry. Then the **m**inistry becomes a **m**ovement, implemented by **m**achinery. Then a **m**onument is built to an institution. And finally it becomes a **m**ausoleum.

I am so grateful that PBC is not a mausoleum, that Jesus is alive in you, his body of believers. I believe that this is so because there is a Biblical tradition that has prevailed as a vision for this part of Christ's body. From my perspective, this is rooted and grounded in the language and love of the written and living word of God. That keeps this body of believers a living witness to the vitality of our living Lord.

THE ONE HEAD OF THE CHURCH, JESUS CHRIST

The foundational message and the primary focus of PBC has been from its inception, and continues to be, that the church, which is Christ's body, has but one Head, the living Lord Jesus Christ. All the members of the body take their direction from that one Head. That perspective was clearly stated in the theme adopted by the five businessmen who started PBC: "To know Christ and to make him known." It's simple, but it has profound implications. That perspective was clearly articulated in the first message that Ray Stedman preached to the small group of about ninety men, women, and children meeting in the little room they had rented in the Palo Alto Community Center in September of 1950. The text for that message was Ephesians 4:11-16:

It was he [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare [or equip] God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ [perfection found in Christ].

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here

and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

The supremacy of Christ as Head of his church is clearly the primary focus of this passage. There's no room here for stardom for any of God's people who share the common goal of growing to spiritual maturity in the knowledge of Christ and using at his discretion the spiritual gifts they have received from him.

Now please indulge me while I do what grandmothers do best, turn historical.

THE EARLY YEARS AND THE FOUNDATION OF BODY LIFE

Turn the calendar back to 1948, where, by Dr. J. Vernon McGee's account, five businessmen "met in a telephone booth" and shared their vision for ministry on the Peninsula. Gus Gustafson was soon after called to his heavenly home. But Ed Stirm, Bob Smith, Cecil Kettle, and Harry Smith were men called of God, well-known for their commitment to national and overseas missions, and thoroughly engaged in a variety of other local outreach ministries. Their mutual ministry commitments bonded them together spiritually, and they began to meet for Bible study, fellowship, and prayer. Their Bible studies proliferated into outreach home Bible classes, and the nucleus of believers continued to grow until it became feasible to rent a little room in the Palo Alto Community Center, where they gathered regularly for Sunday worship.

Often, friends of these men, three of them Dr. Jack Mitchell from Portland, Dr. J. Vernon McGee from Los Angeles, and Dr. John Walvoord, President of Dallas Seminary, would be visiting preachers (as some will remember, Ed Stirm use to call them "visiting firemen") at the Sunday gatherings. The ministry, now called Peninsula Bible Fellowship (PBF), was incorporated so that it could receive necessary funding. (They were very carefully avoiding the word "church," because they did not want to start a church.)

They engaged a post office box. One day in that box there were three letters from Dr. Mitchell, Dr. McGee, and Dr. Walvoord, respectively, each having written without the knowledge of the others, and each recommending that a certain young man graduating from Dallas Seminary be considered for ministry with PBF. The man, as you have guessed, was Ray Stedman. Just at this time ("coincidentally," of course), Bob Smith, who was then working at Ed Stirm's Ferry Steel Company as an engineer, needed to make a trip to Texas. So it was decided that he should go to Dallas to interview Ray.

Now the scene changes to the Dallas Seminary campus, spring of 1950, where Ray and I and eventually our two tiny daughters had occupied a trailer for four years of Ray's seminary training. Here we first met Bob Smith. It was love at first meeting, so clearly designed by the Holy Spirit who had knit our hearts together with a common vision for ministry. Bob made it very clear that they did not want to start a church, but conveyed their interest in having Ray come to Palo Alto for an interview following graduation in May. This nontraditional agreement suited the Montana maverick Ray beautifully! The May meeting of all five men resulted in that same sense of kindred spirit so evident with Bob and Ray in Dallas.

In September, after Ray's privileged summer of travel with Dr. Harry Ironside, we returned to Palo Alto, where Ray preached his first sermon at Peninsula Bible Fellowship from the Ephesians text that we read earlier. It seems that the notes from which he preached have disappeared. I searched for them, but in vain. So I can give you only my faltering recollection, bolstered by what I know was its Biblical thesis.

Ray viewed the church as a living organism, in contrast to an organization or an institution. That disallowed the traditional clergy-laity division. Based on the Ephesians passage, among others, the view he shared with his fellow PBF co-laborers was that particular members of the body of Christ were gifted by the Spirit to train and equip the entire body for ministry. This was the foundation for the concept now known as "body life." The exposition of Biblical truth for the edification and maturing of believers would be the centerpiece of worship necessary for equipping the saints for their ministries. This was a radical departure from the generally-held view of the church as the center for evangelism.

Home Bible classes designed for outreach to nonbelievers were already in place, and the number of believers was swelling as the witness of God's people was used of the Spirit to bring nonbelievers to neutral and unthreatening places where the word of God powerfully drew them to saving faith in Christ. There was never any apology for teaching the straight, pure word of God, and it did its work. The body was teeming with new life and exuberant new believers. And although Ray was preaching Sunday mornings and evenings and Wednesday nights at prayer meetings, teaching one of the home Bible classes each week, and meeting on campuses and in homes with junior-high and high-school youth, it was nonetheless a team ministry with spontaneous participation from the elders and the other believers. They appointed additional elders as time went on, including Bob Roe and Charlie Luce, and things just got better! They continued to add more elders as the need arose.

With continued outreach, the congregation outgrew all of the Community Center facilities, and they purchased acreage in an unsettled fringe of Palo Alto. Everybody wondered why in the world they would purchase property way out here!

THROUGH THE JESUS MOVEMENT YEARS

I have found a little scrap of note paper with sketchy notes from which Ray gave a summary in 1960 entitled *Ten Remarkable Years*. He comments on the signs of health in the body with words like these: "Growth and development without drives, bell-ringing, or professional fund-raisers, pressures," and then "increased staff; and now summer interns." But there are three larger points.

First is unity. "Ten happy, healthy years," he says. "Mutual concern, quick response to needs, frank discussion, forgiving attitudes." Notice that this is not a head count-it's a heart count. Second is "influence: modeling for other churches." Both of these he attributes to the following: "(1) Bible-centered ministry. [That's why you hear the word of God faithfully preached Sunday after Sunday.] (2) Adherence to Ephesians 4:11-12, the ministry of the saints within the body. (3) Seeking the mind of the Lord with unanimity."

The notion of unanimity is of eminent importance, since it places equal value on each man as a servant, uniquely and individually responsible to his Lord, the Head of the church. This observes Jesus' warning in Matthew 23:6-12 that his disciples must not follow the example of the Pharisees who loved places of honor and hierarchical titles: "...You have only one Master...the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

Ray's third point is a statement of his vision for the ten years: "(1) Settle down and raise a family. Reproduce new church bodies, keeping attendance below a thousand, expanding classes." You may know that there are at least five churches in this area that are spin-offs from PBC that we happily participated in. There are also many churches across the nation that have patterned their church government and the training of saints after the models that took place here. We're so grateful for that. "(2) Train young men for missions and pastorates." Little did any of us suspect the phenomenal events for which the Spirit was equipping us that were to take place during the next few years. The principle of the nurture of believers in Bible truth, preparing them to reach beyond themselves to a needy world, was God's way of preparing us for the radical changes that would take place in society and in the quiet, respectable, traditional congregation that became known as Peninsula Bible Church.

When Ray and I arrived in Palo Alto in 1950, we found a city of quiet dignity, perfect climate, and quality education amid enchantingly green hills and flowing orchards. The population was about thirty-five thousand. What a privileged environment for our two babies, eight months and two years, and the young couple we were. But during the childrens' elementary school years this seemingly idyllic scene was invaded by air raid alerts. Do you remember? Frightened children were dismissed to their homes, fearing a bomb attack. Some people were building bomb shelters, and there was talk of erecting public facilities as well.

Then there was Vietnam. And beatniks became hippies, the "flower children." The drug culture emerged. Cubberly High School became center stage for revolutionary upheaval.

PBC, that quiet, well-ordered congregation, was caught in the middle of these baffling, frightening phenomena. Jesus himself was asking admittance for barefoot, bearded escapees from the kingdom of darkness. With fear and trembling we opened our doors. They tinkered with our self-righteousness, infected us with their contagious excitement, and shattered our complacency. And I finally had to give up my hat and gloves.

The Biblical principle of the Spirit's gifting of Christ's body for ministry created a welcoming environment for this "invasion." In the Sunday evening meetings, where we learned to identify various scents including the aroma of pot, barefoot, straggle-haired youth crammed our turf and our hearts. That astounding opportunity to combine the teaching of the Word with the sharing of life experiences marked the inception of "body life," a term now endemic in the evangelical vocabulary. Ray eventually wrote under that title to spread the news of God at work in his people.

As the news of the phenomenon of the body life meeting traveled, envoys were sent to learn how to reproduce this happening. It was, indeed, a spectacle of truth and love, blessed and owned by the Spirit of God, and used at his sovereign direction. We had the feeling of being bystanders to the movement sometimes called the Jesus Movement. To the extent that it was rooted and grounded in basic biblical principles, it was right and good. And the contagion was indeed exciting. For us and for the church at large, however, it was essential to realize that this was a movement of the Spirit of God, whose action is like the wind. To use the words of Jesus, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going." (John 3:8.) No one can build a tabernacle to contain God's glory. It is unthinkable folly to build a monument to the unsearchable judgment and ways of Almighty God.

The fire lit by the Spirit to illumine Biblical principles became the paradigm for the life of the body here at PBC. Wherever God's people meet together, the principles of edifying one another with Biblical truth, along with honest sharing and earnest prayer, are the norm. The goal of Ephesians 4, a growing maturity along with commitment to serving, is the Biblical heritage that I pray will always continue to flourish as the members of the body respond to the faithful teaching of the word of truth.

But there is another Biblical principle, a Siamese-twin truth, without which the body will drift into the empty, lifeless performance of self-centered introspection.

NEW-COVENANT LIVING

The body of Christ receives its nurture from the indwelling life of Christ, from communion with him so intimate that Jesus described it as eating his body and drinking his blood. We cannot edify one another unless we first partake of him. Then from that resource we can impart to one another the essence of his life. The issue is character. The source is the Lord Jesus Christ himself. This is New Covenant living at its core. This is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27), his character expressed through his people, a shared glory. The energy of that indwelling life of Christ will propel us into serving others as acts of worship and gratitude to him for his gracious provision of life and truth and love. Metabolizing his unconditional love, we have resource for loving others. Freed by his forgiving grace and mercy, we are motivated and empowered to forgive others.

Secure in the knowledge that we are not our own, but bought with an incalculable price, we know whose we are, who we are, and why we are here. It is that secure identity, that source of unquenchable joy, that makes all of life sacramental. His body was broken, his blood poured out for us. Now in him, through him, to him we "offer [our] bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God" (Romans 12:1), a poured-out doxology of praise and worship to Christ Jesus, "in [whom] we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Let me quote from Ray's book *Authentic Christianity* :

"The authentic Christian life is essentially and radically different from the natural life lived by a man or woman of the world. Outwardly, it can be very much the same: involved with making a living, going to school, getting married, raising children, mowing lawns, buying groceries, getting along with neighbors. But inwardly, the basis of living is dramatically different. Christ is a part of all these things! He is the motivator of every wholesome action, the corrector of every wrong deed or thought. He is the giver of every joy and the

healer of every hurt. He is no longer merely on the edges of life, acknowledged on Sunday but absent through the week. Christ is the center of everything. Life revolves around him. As a consequence, life comes into proper focus, a deep peace possesses the heart, strength grips the spirit despite outward trials, and kindness and joy radiate abroad. This is really living!

Once we truly understand and appreciate what Jesus Christ has done for us, it is impossible to keep it a secret! The wonderful story of new life in Christ absolutely shouts within us, demanding to be shared with others who still struggle with guilt, despair, shame, and hostility. Whenever we see another hurting human being, we know we have an opportunity for sharing." (1)

It is not optional to learn the great doctrines of the faith: the virgin birth, the atonement purchased at infinite cost on the cross of Christ, the resurrection, the second advent. This is the bedrock of Christian faith. But the doctrine of incarnation, God clothed in human flesh, is the ongoing heritage of his people, the essence of which is simple and utterly profound. It is you in Christ and Christ in you. That is who we are. That is our new authentic identity.

"Getting people to understand this fundamental union with Christ," a young man wrote in a recent letter, "and its implications for them as ministers of this new covenant, where literally it is Christ from within using willing men and women to make him visible, to be his eyes, voice, touch, is mind-boggling. This process is tough, because after we are born again, we still have a long way to go as babes. We must grow up in maturity through tribulation, which takes away our self-sufficiency and makes us cracked pots that can let the treasure within be seen from without. Bob Roe sums up the new covenant so well: 'Christ died that I might live. I must die that Christ might live in me.'"

This is the message that God gives to every person who by his grace through faith enters his family. This message is our ministry. It can never be reduced to a method or institutionalized. Its very essence is life, the living Christ himself, who "died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again...Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation...." (2 Corinthians 5:15, 17.)

PASSING ON THE TORCH

The wind of the Spirit still blows where he chooses. One of the most astounding ministry developments now current in this body is the outreach on the worldwide web. It's interesting that some of the main instigators whose gifts and vision God has used to propagate this ministry are all "wilderness" refugees who came to Christ during the Jesus Movement days. Now the fruit is being seen so clearly. Lambert Dolphin, for example, and his remarkable team have been used by God's Spirit to put on-line PBC's ministries, including the Ray Stedman Memorial Library. If you want a spine-tingling experience, check into the amazing way that Lambert and another former hippie, Ted Wise, are using their spiritual gifts and God-given abilities to fulfill the Great Commission. It's amazing grace to see the way God is using the worldwide web. Something that the enemy meant to use for our destruction, God is using for our redemption, worldwide. Ray still travels worldwide, and I can even go with him, and neither one of us gets fatigued!

But this is only one of the more visible ways in which God is using this body, you his gifted persons, to minister to a decadent and needy world. Let me remind you, there are no "Mickey Mouse" chores in God's economy. When God assigns you his ministry, don't concern yourself with what anybody else may evaluate it to be, in God's sight it is major. It is his redemptive work in you. It is amazing grace. Never trivialize a job that God has given you to do. It doesn't matter whether anyone else even sees it happening. I think so often of the prayer ministry, which is so vital to all of this, without which none of it could endure or bear any fruit. And yet when these people pray, only God knows.

There is a great hunger in my heart to pass the torch to a new generation. If you're looking for a ministry, may I suggest that you can do nothing better than to pour your life into the young. If you are young, give yourself to someone younger. If you are older, retire into loving servanthood. In his article in *Moody Monthly*, Dr. Joseph Stowell quoted Howard Hendricks as saying, "you spend your life climbing the ladder of success only to find when you reach the top that it's leaning against the wrong wall." Then Stowell adds: "Most of us have

been so busy building a life, we've forgotten that life is really about building a legacy."2 We have a legacy in the written and living word of God. It is our splendid and high calling to leave not monuments to past human successes, not empty, burned-out shells of wasted human endeavor, but the fragrance of Jesus, which will linger long after the clay pot is gone and forgotten.

I want to close with a word from the Lord from Revelation 3:7b-8, 11-12a, which I believe is fittingly addressed to the church in Palo Alto:

"These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name...

I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God."

On that little plot of ground where Ray Stedman's body rests, waiting for the redemption, there is a little plaque that says simply, "He was a faithful steward." That is his legacy to the body of Christ. I trust it will be your legacy and mine to another generation. By the grace of God alone, a faithful God, we can be faithful to our high calling in Christ Jesus.

NOTES

1. Ray C. Stedman, *Authentic Christianity*, © 1996 Elaine C. Stedman. Discovery House Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 174.
2. Joseph Stowell, *Moody*, © Moody Bible Institute. Chicago, IL. January-February, 1998 Issue, P. 6.

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