

# CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF “THE WAY”

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## ‘Brother’ [and ‘Sister’] is More Than a Title

by Chris Thomas

The subject of reconciliation runs deeper and wider than the current debate that orbits around racial tensions within the church, or even wider society. That is not to say that it doesn't relate to racial reconciliation, it does, but it flows ever outward in far more expansive streams than that. In Christ, reconciliation sits at the very heart of why I may meet a fellow Christian on a plane, or sitting in a cafe, and though they are a stranger in every sense of the word, I will leave that brief meeting with a warm heart and genuine joy at meeting a ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ in Christ.

I grew up in a church tradition where it was common to refer to each other as ‘Brother Gordon’, or ‘Sister Margaret’ (if, of course, your name happened to be ‘Gordon’ or ‘Margaret’), and for many years I assumed it was just a quirk of our somewhat odd traditions. But I was wrong. Though I was aware of the family analogy the Bible uses to describe Christians, I had never fully considered the implications of what it means to be ‘one in Christ Jesus’. ‘Brother’ or ‘Sister’ is more than a title, it is a declaration of partnership in the grace of God. We are not only co-heirs with Christ individually (Romans 8:17), but we *mutually* enjoy the experience of being fellow heirs with Christ. Or as Paul rejoices in, as he opens his letter to the Philippians, “you are all partakers *with me* of grace” (Phil 1:7). So even as he later rejoices over their renewed concern of him, and even despite his announcement of contentment in both lack and plenty, Paul enjoys the partnership of mutual investment as the Philippian church *shares* in his trouble (Phil 4:14).

*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (Eph. 2:13-16)*

Yes, this matters greatly as I consider the implications of racial harmony in the body of Christ, but it also impacts how I live my life in relation to *any* member of God's family. The fact that you truly have brothers and sisters in Christ makes a difference in how you approach engagement with your local church, it makes a difference how you engage with fellow believers online (especially when you may disagree with them), and it makes a difference to how you think of your ‘own’ possessions, time, and energy.

I was recently struck by this reality as I prepared to preach through the book of Revelation. Consider John's attitude to those who would receive this letter: *I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. (Revelation 1:9 ESV)* John, though in exile, though separated by distance and tide, declares his *partnership* with his readers—a *brother* and *partner* in tribulation, in the kingdom, and even in patiently enduring.

What would happen in your church, or in mine, if we truly overtook the superficial nod to family we often hold, and actually embraced what it means to be brothers and sisters in Christ? What miracles may unfold in our churches, and maybe even in our neighbourhoods, if we were to contend with, not each other, but the fierce embrace of our partnership in the gospel of grace?

*By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:16-18 ESV)*

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## The Key to Making the Most Out of Congregational Worship

by Tim Challies

It's good to go to a conference or a concert and to sing with hundreds or even thousands of strangers. There is something majestic and soul-stirring about gathering with other believers and using the common language of song to join together in worship. But I believe it's far better still to go to a local church—to your local church—and to sing with just the few people who make that church their home.

To understand why I believe this, we need to establish a key premise: that singing is not just a vertical act, but also a horizontal one. Of course we sing *to* God, but we also sing *for* one another. God is the object of our worship, but our singing is also a means of mutual encouragement. In our singing, we all have equal opportunity to proclaim truth. When we open our mouths to sing, we all take on the role of teacher, of encourager. My words go to you—and your words come to me—as challenge, rebuke, edification, comfort, encouragement (see Colossians 3:16).

Singing is an act of community, and the key to making the most of singing is to know the people who make up that community. This means your enjoyment of singing as an act of Christian community varies with your knowledge of the people around you. The better you know them, the more they can challenge and encourage you—and you can challenge and encourage them—in this way. When you know their story, you know their song. Let me show it to you.

Over there is that man who has told the church how he has battled long and hard to overcome an addiction. He's told you how he has often grown weary in the battle and how he has sometimes suffered serious setbacks. But he has repented and persevered and seen victory. And as you glance in his direction, he is singing of the assurance he has: "Still the small inward voice I hear, / That whispers all my sins forgiven; / Still the atoning blood is near, / That quenched the wrath of hostile Heaven. / I feel the life His wounds impart; / I feel the Savior in my heart."

Not far from him is the young lady who has battled a serious illness, who is awaiting test results, who is uncertain what her future holds. Yet she is proclaiming the depths of her faith in God. "When peace like a river, attendeth my way, / When sorrows like sea billows roll / Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say / It is well, it is well, with my soul."

Near the front is the young man who was raised in a Christian home but who rebelled and ran and explored all the world had to offer. He drank deeply of that stagnant water and found himself unsatisfied. And now his hands are raised as he sings, "But as I ran my hell-bound race / Indifferent to the cost / You looked upon my helpless state / And led me to the cross / And I beheld God's love displayed / You suffered in my place / You bore the wrath reserved for me / Now all I know is grace."

Beside him is the good church kid, who was raised in a similar family but who never went through that same kind of "younger brother" rebellion. But while he, too, professes that he is a believer, he's also declaring that his hope is not in who he is or in what he has done. "Not what my hands have done / Can save my guilty soul; / Not what my toiling flesh has borne / Can make my spirit whole. / Not what I feel or do / Can give me peace with God; / Not all my prayers, / And sighs and tears / Can bear my awful load."

There is the woman, recently widowed, still grieving, who sings, "For all the saints who from their labors rest, / who Thee by faith before the world confessed; / Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest. / Alleluia, Alleluia!" Beside her is the young lady who has suffered so deeply at the hands of others, who has recently endured another terrible blow. And out of love, you sing God's own encouragement to her: "When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, / My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply. / The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design / thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine."

Then there's the person who is exploring the Christian faith, who is thinking about what it would mean to come to Christ, who is grappling with all it will cost. And with him in mind and in view you sing, "Ye sinners, come, 'tis Mercy's voice; / The gracious call obey; / Mercy invites to heav'nly joys, / And can you yet delay?" Nearby is the young adult who has had to choose between Christ and family. She has been cast out, abandoned for her faith. But here, with you, she's singing, "Abide with me; fast falls the eventide; / The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide; / When other helpers fail and comforts flee, / Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me."

Do you see it? When you know the people, you know their song. While you sing *with* them, you sing *for* them. You sing not as fifty or a hundred individuals, but as a single community. You sing to minister and you sing to be ministered to.