

Romans 8:16-17

*“The Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer **with** him in order that **we** may also be glorified with him.”*

Romans 6:6

*“We know that our old self was crucified **with** him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.”*

RSV

Ephesians 2:4-6

*“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace **you** have been saved), and raised us up **with** him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,”*

At the age of 12 I went to our high school football coach in Rhode Island and asked him what I needed to do to get ready for football next year, which would be my freshman year. The coach looked me over and then asked me, “do you play an instrument?” He said if I didn’t I might want to consider one, because that was the only way I was getting on that field. He told me as skinny as I was I would get hurt playing with the big boys.

Needless to say this kind of upset me. I went home and saved money from my paper route and when I had enough I had my dad take me to Sears and I bought my first set of weights. All I could carry at the time was the bar. My brother carried the box of 110lbs to the car, making fun of me all the way. For those who do not know, I still lift. I can be found at Dynabody Gym most mornings from 8 till about 9 or 9:30.

I built my body up by hard work and dedication. But not just by myself, I had help, a lot of help. My first training partner Don Menard pushed me hard during my high school days. Coach Hawkins and Coach Henderson pushed me in college.

And today I still lean on what these men did for me; also my parent's support all those years. Then there were the thousands of training magazines I read for tips in training. I did not develop my size and strength by myself, I had help.

This same support I received I have tried to pass on to younger lifters. If I notice someone doing an exercise incorrectly so as to receive little benefit and/or might be hurtful I usually speak up. This advice is given carefully, because many don't want to hear criticism in any shape or form. But even in spite of how many react to constructive criticism we are obligated to provide it none-the-less, but done in a way to lift up not tear down.

Some of the earliest writings in the New Testament are Paul's letters. Paul's mission was not just to spread the good news about Jesus Christ. His mission was also to join together all the different communities of the faithful, to create a true world-wide Body of Christ. This is why Paul wrote letters, not gospels. The gospels told the story of the Jesus, mini-biographies by eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' life. Paul's letters told the story of early Christian communities, the resurrected Christ's ongoing presence among the communities of faith. Paul's letters were intended to build up the Body of

Christ into one single, organic entity we call the Church. Think we missed the mark? As we heard last week; if we just look at all the churches which line our countryside we can see Paul's quest for one single entity called the church has not been achieved as of yet.

One of Paul's ways of talking about congregations is using what has been called "We -With" communities. "We" participate in God's mission in the world "with" God who is also at work in all the faith networks and diverse communities of faith. These "We-With" statements are mostly in Paul's writings, I located about forty or so, "We-With" statements, we read a few earlier;

We live and die with God (2 Cor. 7:3).

We suffer with God (Romans 8:17).

We are crucified with God (Romans 6:6).

We are raised with God (Ephesians 2:6).

According to author Robert Dale, "We-With" relationships are our theological prototype for connecting. Robert Dale develops this "We-With" theme extensively in his book *Sharing Ministry with Volunteer Leaders*.¹ Paul had several different "We-With" body-building practices. We ran across some of them in our Scripture readings this morning.

One “We-With” body-builder practice was Paul’s call for contributions to a collection for the poor in the Jerusalem church. This “We-With” body-building technique connected the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem to the Gentile Christians in far away Macedonia or Greece. As they took care of one another through Paul’s collection, the Body of Christ grew stronger.

Another “We-With” body-builder practice was the way Paul wrote his letters to one community while he was in a far distant place planting another community, reaching back and connecting the two communities together. Commitment, connection, compassion were the goals of Paul’s collection. Paul does not want to get to their pockets. He wants to get to their hearts.

How can we today reach the hearts of the world? We could do things the way Paul did them ... how do you think that would work today? How do you think Paul’s techniques would work today? We could do what was done during the 17th and 18th centuries ... what do you think? How about do what was done during the 19th and 20th centuries? Let’s look at Paul’s technique; it just might be something we need to look at rather than just dismissing it as useless.

What made Paul a great “We-With” body-builder was his adoption and use of the newest technologies of the day. To fulfill his “We-With” body-building mission Paul took his message everywhere while he kept writing his letters to the churches, and his letters were circulated in the form of codices ... books. See, these people did not have Bibles; let alone the books of the Bible. More to the point they did not have books period. Books were new technology in Paul’s day. People did not have books lying all around, more than that most people did not know how to read. This invention of using papyrus pages, which could be written on both sides unlike the animals skins which were used at the time, and could only be written on one side; these papyrus codices created a new medium for getting the Word out to the masses. These papyrus pages could be sewn together, which was new technology at the time.

We read in 2 Timothy 4:13 Paul telling Timothy, “*When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Tro'as, also the books, and above all the parchments.*” Paul asked Timothy to send his parchments, his “notebooks” to him while he was in prison. As Paul faced his own impending death sentence, his concern was not for what Rome might do to

his body, but instead Paul was more concerned with what he could do to continue building the body of Christ. That's why Paul wanted with him the complete library of his writings to the churches, so he could tell who-ever was helping him where to take them.

Almost immediately after his death, collections of Paul's letters, compiled in those shabby, often shunned papyrus codices, began to be passed around from church to church and eventually passed around the world. Those slim volumes using this new-fangled technology made up what we now call "The Bible" were the power weights for the new Church, used for building the spiritual muscles of a new community of faith, a community not determined by its geography, but bound together by their love of Christ and for one another.

Paul had a message which needed to be delivered, and he was willing to use any method available to him to get this done. Paul, under no circumstances was willing to compromise Jesus' message, but he was willing to do what-ever it took to deliver the message. Just like today, what do we have at our disposal to help deliver the message to the world around us? Earlier we agreed we did not want to do things like Paul had to ... we also

agreed we did not want to do things like they were done in the 19th or 20th centuries. If that is the case what do we have at our disposal today to preach God's word to the world that we are not only not using, but many are condemning the use of? What is available to us today that we argue over using?

The technologies of the day! The technologies of the day are what we should be using. Is that what we should use, today's technologies? If so, why do so many fight so hard to keep from using today's technology? It's said there is no place for any of that newfangled stuff in the church, it takes away from the worship service.

Let's look at how new technology takes away for worship. Organs and pianos were once banned from services ... said it took away from the services. No one had Bibles to read they were for the priests only. No one was allowed to see what took place here in the chancel area.

My point is too many are quick to tear down the body rather than building it up. We have so much at our disposal to get God's word out, but most are content living in the past and bringing those around them down at the same time.

My favorite image for Paul's understanding of this "We-With" connection is the giant redwood. The giant redwoods are almost exclusively found in California. These trees grow to massive heights and live for hundreds and some over thousands of years. They grow so large and so tall that the high California winds can topple them over quite easily. To stabilize themselves from just falling over in the wind, these trees do something quite unique. To stay upright in the wind the Redwood trees, whose root systems are very shallow, compared to their enormous size; these magnificent trees interweave their root systems with the nearby Redwoods and surrounding trees around them. They literally hold each other up.ⁱⁱ

This is what this book called "The Bible" does: it strengthens "me," my root system for "we-with" nourishment and mutual support. If we flip the word "Me" over and what do you get? "We!" It takes a "WE" to make and hold up a "ME." That's the power of connection, that's the power of being a "We-With" bodybuilder of Christ. We literally hold each other up by the Word of God and by serving each other. Do you feel held up this morning by your brothers and sisters in the Word?

Are you holding each other up this morning by the “We-With” Word of God?

Are you a bodybuilder for Christ?ⁱⁱⁱ Are you a bodybuilder are you about building the body of Christ, or do you spend your time tearing down the body with a bad attitude, or with an acid tongue, or with personal wants and desires? I'm a bodybuilder of God, are you?

ⁱ Robert Dale, *Sharing Ministry with Volunteer Leaders*, (Nashville: Convention Press, 1986), pp. 56-68.

ⁱⁱ Robert Dale, *Seeds for the Future: Growing Organic Leaders for Living Churches*, (Chalice Press, 2006), pp. 40.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leonard Sweet Sermons, Leonard Sweet, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 0-000-1415