

A Weak Church and a Strong Promise

1 Corinthians 12:11-13

By [Jonathan Eide](#)

Open with me if you will to 1 Corinthians 12. And while we're turning there, let's turn to God in prayer.

Lord, we thank You for this day and we thank You for Your Church. We pray that it would arise, and that it would arise at Jackson State, that it would arise in Indonesia, that it would arise in Ukraine and around the world and this nation. We pray that based on Your promises, one of which we'll be looking at here. We pray that based on the word that You have given us, the truth that You have given us that You will stand with Your Church and You will establish it and that You will make it arise. We pray that You would open the Scripture passage to us and to myself included this morning and we pray this in Your name. Amen.

Greetings from the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ukraine, a denomination that did not exist twenty years ago but it does today - many churches spread throughout the country; a troubled country right now. We'll talk about that in a minute but nonetheless, greetings from that denomination. My wife and I went to Ukraine in 1998 for the first time and began our work in church planting. We began with a team of church planting in the city that we were assigned to and we were starting to begin that work learning the language and starting to imagine what a church plant in a place like Ukraine or anywhere in the former Soviet Union in Slavic territory would look like. And I remember a gentleman took me aside, an older Russian Ukrainian gentleman, and my Russian was not perfect at the time but I remember that conversation well. And he said to me, "Listen, I just want to give you advice. I understand I don't believe what you believe, I understand what you're trying to do here, and I can just tell you it's not going to work. This people are not predisposed to churches. Those two things don't go together. There's not a lot of trust in the former Soviet Union. Trust in one's own circles much less trust outside of those circles. So establishing a thing where people would come and give money to and be open to spiritual counsel from and be somehow interdependent with - you're in the wrong place. This is the wrong country for that. It won't work" was his advice to me.

And seeing that, hearing that and realizing our situation in Ukraine and thinking about what the church would look like as we were at the time, we remember that Ukraine became an independent country in 1991, before that it was part of the

Soviet Union. And we got there in '98 so it hadn't been that long since the wall had fallen. It had a sporadic Protestant history but where we were and in much of Ukraine there really wasn't any Protestant heritage in general. So "What would the church look like?" and "Could it even work?" was our question. And it brought us to passages, brought me to passages like this where we are promised that it will. Let's read starting in verse 11.

1 Corinthians 12:11:

All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were baptized into one body - Jews and Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many.

A beautiful passage and a passage that our team, myself personally and others, depended on, as with other passages - not the passage itself but the promise that went behind it. The promise that He is about the work of building His church and no matter the context, no matter the difficulty, no matter the trust issues that the people that we're ministering to may or may not have, God has promised to establish His church. So let's look at this promise. I see it in verses 12 and 13 in two parts - that we are baptized into one Spirit and that we are caused or made to drink of that Spirit.

We are baptized into one Spirit. Paul often talks about one of his favorite phrases - "in Christ" - this new status that we have as believers, that we have a new status in Christ. Here he talks about "in the Spirit." Our baptism into one body symbolizes this. Christians find their home in the church. Anything else is in fact foreign. Romans 6 talks about this baptism. It mentions being baptized into Christ and into His death and into His resurrection. And all of those "intos" are talked about as "we," as "us," as "our" baptism. Let me read, stressing the we's and the ours starting with verse 3. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried, therefore, with Him by baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father we too might know newness of life." He makes the point here that we are baptized not individually into this thing but in fact together. We see the significance of the church coming out here. This reference from Romans 6 and 1 Corinthians 12 means that we are in fact united with Him. There's also a sense to which our baptism means that we have a new unity in fact with other believers. It's a spiritual reality that suggests a truth that has earthly implications.

That the spiritual reality of which baptism into water was a symbol - that's baptized into one Spirit - "caused to drink of that Spirit" is the next phrase from 1 Corinthians 12:13. We are given to drink this Spirit - something coming from

outside ourselves, not in us. It's less about how one becomes a believer and more about how one as a believer is united with others into this thing that we call the Church. It's not a political institution; it's not a club. It's not just a happenstance gathering of people once a week but it's in fact a body and it is a thing that really exists. And as believers, when one is baptized into the Spirit, one gains membership into this body. It's the Spirit that causes us to be part of this body it says. Christ manifests Himself by the Spirit to the world through His Church. The Spirit is on us and the Spirit is in us. On us symbolizing a sign and seal of our unity with Christ, and in us signifying our unity with this body of Christ we have around us. This is what missionaries hang on; they have nothing else. When you gather and there's a small handful of people that gathers on a Sunday morning, when there's economic hardship, when the economy's falling apart around you, when other things that would prevent you from believing, from what you're seeing is not what is really true about the Church, we go back to promises like this. Church planters, pastors, all of us as members of the Church have to believe and realize that there is a real body, there is something real that we're baptized into.

What does this look like for difficult, difficult times in a difficult, difficult place like Ukraine? Ukraine's obviously had a difficult year and by extension the Church has had a difficult year. Yesterday marked the one year anniversary of the revolution that ousted the president and set in motion a chain of events that over the past twelve months have included a completely new government including a short period where there was not any government. It included the loss of the Crimean Peninsula, it included a passenger jet being shot down with 300 people on board; it includes currently a war that has affected and is affecting 5 million people producing about 1 million refugees, a loss of 10% of its land, Ukraine's land, and about 15% of its people due to changing borders, not to mention an enmity that has developed between Ukrainians and Russians that borders on hatred.

When one goes through these dramatic, traumatic experiences they have a way of laser-focusing one's attention and priorities on the things that are in fact more important in life and away from the light things. When a nation is at war, the economy is in shambles, suddenly one's reminded of what's important. When your city is burning and there isn't any food on the table your first thought is not, "How am I going to be able to get to the gym to exercise this morning?" it's "Will there be a gym? Does the gym even still exist?" Will the question for us, as we've looked through and watched Ukraine over the past year as missionaries, as I mentioned the church there started in 1998 - well the church planting that we were involved in, the Presbyterian Church started in 1998. Other churches are equally young in faith - the pastors, the people in the church. Will the church survive? Can it make it through something traumatic and earthshaking like what is happening right now? Is it possible that these promises are really true in fact and that they will carry, that He will carry the church through this, even a young church as it is?

A couple of examples of what this would look like. Take, for example, an imaginary twenty-five year old citizen of the city of Yalta. The city of Yalta, you may remember, is a famous city. The Yalta Conference in 1945, with Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, was held there. It's a beautiful city. Our family has vacationed there on the coast of Crimea which was, or is, depending on who you talk to, part of Ukraine. And this twenty-five year old citizen was born into a country called the Soviet Union and he had, at one point, a passport from this country called the Soviet Union that broke up when he was very young, or she, and throughout most of their lives they held a passport from a country called Ukraine. Well that has changed now with the annexation of Ukraine on March 25 of last year and so now they have waited in line with two other million people from the peninsula of Crimea and have received Russian passports. This person, never having left their city limits, a twenty-five year old person, has had three passports in their lives and have been citizens of three countries with all the laws and currencies, three different currencies, and everything else that goes along with that. Stunning to think about and stunning to think about especially in light of the church. Is this thing called "the church" transcend these unbelievable changes that this person's gone through?

Take another example of a pastor I know in a city called Kharkov. This city is about fifty miles away from the Russian border and about a hundred miles away from the conflict zone currently that is in Ukraine that in fact is ever expanding. Just yesterday in fact! And it's a real possibility that in one year's time, six month's time, three month's time, who knows, that his city in fact will be on the other side or in the other side of the conflict, that the war that is at his doorstep will be the war in his backyard. It's a possibility for this pastor and for this church and for this city. He's a bright young man. He has opportunities. He could very easily make a few phone calls and leave his city, find a home in another city in Ukraine or probably in Western Europe if he wanted to. But he's watching this thing, this conflict, come closer and closer to him and asking this question, "I am the pastor of this church. What should I do?"

Take another example of a young man, maybe not so young anymore, a man in his early forties in a city in southern Ukraine. He's a ruling elder at one of our churches and they are without a pastor right now so he's acting as the pastor of that church. He's seen in the last twelve months his pay as an engineer drop about 200% because of the fall in currency that he receives his salary in. He has four children, he is serving as pastor of the church until the church can find another pastor, and he, last summer, got a draft notice. There's currently a draft in Ukraine for young men and he received this draft notice asking him to serve, because he's an engineer and a skilled man, to come and serve in the army on the front lines.

Without faith in these promises of verses 12 and 13, I would not fault these three men or these three people for just giving it up and saying, "You know, it was an

interesting experiment, this thing we did called the church for the last ten or fifteen years. It was helpful. I got to know a lot of people, I did a lot of networking, but I've got bigger things to think about now." How could this young fledgling church experience this unbelievable hardship - war, economic problems, changing borders even brings? It is, in fact, because of what we just read. It is, in fact, because of this thing - the fact that we are baptized in fact into one Spirit and that baptism is not done by us; it's done by the Spirit and that Spirit has caused us, made us to drink of Him. And as there is unity in the Trinity even, there is unity in the Church.

So what do these three examples look like for people who believe these promises? Well here's what they look like. The Church in Crimea is under greater persecution than when it was when it was part of Ukraine. It's more difficult to be a protestant believer in Russian than it is in Ukraine right now but the Church exists. It goes forward. It is established and it continues to be established. What does it look like for this pastor I mentioned near the conflict zone in this city called Kharkov? I asked him that question. I called him up. I said, "How does this work? You have a war approaching your city and your church and your people. How do you process that? What do you do about that stuff?" And his answer - I remember where I was sitting when he gave me his answer. One of those kind of moments. And he said, "Well, these are my people and this is my church. I will serve them and shepherd them no matter what country my city might be in." Now for us with Western ears it's hard to process what I just said. It was for me at the time. "I will serve my people no matter what country my city might be in." Well the city's not moving. The borders are what's moving! And this is not the answer that a restaurant manager would give, who can turn the placard on the door from "Open" to "Closed" and get in his car and drive west. This is the answer of someone, of course it reminds us of John 10 in the parable of the Good Shepherd - the hired hand versus the Good Shepherd. A beautiful answer from someone who has beautifully understood and in faith responds to what God calls us to here in 1 Corinthians 12.

An elder in Nikolaev that I mentioned, in this city in the southern part of Ukraine, who was called up for active service with four children and a church went into his local recruiting office, to his military office, and made the case to the officer there that he couldn't serve because of his responsibilities to his family and to his church. And he is still faithfully serving in that role. The church still does not have a pastor. He is still faithfully serving in that role and to those people and preaches every Sunday.

All these three examples show people in groups who have made the choice to recognize the spiritual reality above the physical reality. This is not because of the amazing missionaries that went to help to plant these churches. It's not even, although these are amazing men and women of faith in Ukraine that encourage and challenge my faith daily, but it isn't even because they're such amazing people that were in the right place at the right time. The reason the church, and

this is true, the reason the church still exists in Ukraine is because of the Spirit's work in it. All of what's happening - changing borders, changing passports, the economy in a freefall actually, and the risk of what might happen tomorrow - all those things point to the fact that the church shouldn't exist but somehow it does. Somehow it is, in fact, even reaching out in the midst of this. I'll talk more about what that looks like tonight. His promise to build His church is as strong and His promise to build our faith. In fact, they go hand in hand all over the world. We heard about Jackson State, we heard about Indonesia; I'm telling you about Ukraine. My interests, bordering on obsession, obviously is Ukraine right now - the situation, the prognosis, all of that. But we can say and we do know that there are churches all over the world and all over the United States and all over Mississippi that are being established and are growing not because of the circumstances around them, not because of the people who are in them, but because of the promise that's been given, the promise that we are united as one body together.

And without the Spirit, as I said, there would not be a church. But with the Spirit working we're seeing unexpected and impossible happen, witnessing to the fact that we are in fact baptized into one body. His promise to build the Church is as strong as His promise to build our faith. They go hand in hand all over the world. The Church is the vehicle God uses around the world to gather and perfect His saints. This truth, this Scripture, our experience in Ukraine has proven all of this - that what we bring to the world and our commitment to gathering, to furthering the body of Christ around the world, is vital to the work of mission. In the end, there isn't any gathering without a place to gather to. No evangelism without a body to be welcomed to and no missionaries without a church that is sending and without a church to which they will be received. John Piper wrote that "Missions exists because worship does not." The extension, obviously, of that quote is that missions exists because the Church does not and it's our business to establish that Church based, and only based, on the promises that are here. Most church planters, missionaries, pastors without the force of this would have nothing to provide.

And your role is vital in the establishment of His body around the world. A missionary's task is not to do good things to good people. It is in fact to be involved in the gathering and perfecting of the saints. His church is being built and needs to be continued to be built around the world. Your church supports hundreds of missionaries all over the world. Continue, please, to support them. Your church invests in the importance of church planting and writes and thinks about churches and church planting. Please continue to do that. And your church has prayed for missionaries and for churches for a very long time. You send us a Christmas ornament every year. We've been on the field since 1998; we have half our tree full of First Pres. missionary Christmas ornaments! It's a wonderful thing. And we appreciate it and we feel supported and prayed for. Please continue to support and pray for the missionaries around the world.

The advice that I was given in 1998 turned out not to be true, actually, amazingly. Amazingly, on one hand this gentleman who gave me this advice was right. Trust is an issue for many people coming out of the Soviet Union. It is difficult for people to subject themselves to spiritual oversight. It is difficult to understand what it means to be a body of Christ when you've never seen that done. And it is difficult to trust in a God you can't see. So he's right, in a sense, except for the promise that there is a body, that we've been baptized into it, and that we've been caused to drink of the Spirit that gives it to us. We know the hymn, "The Church Is One Foundation," and the third stanza I believe it is, second or third stanza, goes like this, "Mid toil and tribulation and tumult of her war" - I think that war is a spiritual war it's talking about but it certainly applies to Ukraine - "She waits the consummation of peace forever more, til with the vision glorious her longing eyes are blessed, and the great Church victorious shall be the Church at rest." We hope for that, we want that, and we have no other option especially in a place like Ukraine to believe that.

Would you join with me in prayer as I close?

Lord, we trust that You will build Your Church around the world - Indonesia, Jackson, Ukraine, Syria even and many other places where the struggles and difficulties we face are small in comparison to what missionaries there are facing. We pray that You would build Your Church around the world, that You would establish it, and we pray that based on the promise You have given us. We pray Your promise back to You that You would give us what You have promised and that You would empower us to be able to do that. Thank You for Your promise, and thank You for Your Church, and thank You for this church. I pray this in Your holy name, amen.

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