

God's Gifts to a Church Reborn
Hebrews 13:20-21

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April 25, 2021

Now may the God of peace . . . make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will
Heb. 13:20, 21

Let's turn to the New Testament Book of Hebrews for this morning's theme.

Hebrews is called a letter, but we do not know who wrote it or to whom it was written. It is not signed or addressed. Internal evidence inside the letter suggests it was written to a church that had experienced some trouble (Heb. 10:32-33) and whose leadership was changing or had changed (Heb. 13:7). There is talk of the church having gone through hard struggle, suffering, abuse, and persecution. Whatever the trouble was, it seems to have been over by the time the book was written. But the leadership issue was alive. The former leaders, all admired, were gone; their course of service had come to an end and the new leaders maybe hadn't quite yet earned the respect of the people (Heb. 13:17). So that is the situation of the Book of Hebrews. It is a church emerging from trouble and now finding and learning to trust new leadership.

There is something comparable to our situation in that description isn't there? We are a church emerging from trouble. The pandemic certainly isn't over – it is too premature to say that. But it is lifting. It is receding. And the church is beginning to emerge from its former state of relative closure to one of a kind of hybrid opening. We are being reborn, as it were. And the church's leadership is changing right at this critical time. There will be a different person in the pastoral office here at Salem in just a little over three months. That is the situation of our church. We, like the people of the Book of Hebrews, are emerging from trouble and tasked with finding and trusting new leadership.

Whoever it was who wrote the Book of Hebrews gives a benediction near the end. A benediction – formed from two Latin words: *bene* (= well) and *dictus* (= speak) – so *bene dictus* is to speak well – a benediction is a good word. In the liturgy of the church a benediction is a blessing – a good word – spoken to the people on God's behalf. It is God's good word to the people. It is not a wish. It is a declaration. It is a promise that is sure and trustworthy.¹

The benediction pronounced at the end of the Book of Hebrews, the promise spoken to that emerging church in search of new leadership at a critical time, is that the highly capable God will make them highly capable for their new day. The capability of God is so great that God was able to bring Jesus back from the dead; that is how capable God is. And Hebrews understands that this capable God is a giving God who will continue to make the church complete in everything good – the *New International Version* says equip the church in everything good – so that the church in its new day will be able to do God's will and be pleasing in God's sight.

¹ Andrew W. Blackwood, *Leading in Public Prayer* (New York: Abingdon, 1958), p. 77ff.

We can bring the promise of that benediction right into our own situation. We have been through the trouble of the pandemic and are emerging into a new day of life and ministry. What will happen to us now? This! God the most capable will make you complete – will equip you – with everything good – with all you need – in order to do God’s will and be pleasing in God’s sight.

Now a faith like that prompts a question. What are the gifts God will give? With what will God equip the congregation that is emerging into a new day?

It is possible to compile a list anticipating what God will give to make the church strong and effective in its new day. But compiling the list calls for us to leave the Book of Hebrews and leaf through some other parts of the Bible. As I turn the sacred pages, here are some of the gifts I see God giving the church now to make it complete in everything good for the doing of God’s will.

Scripture

The first gift I see God giving the church is scripture.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon was a British preacher in the nineteenth century and quite popular on both sides of the Atlantic. He was criticized one day for not being more forthright in defending the Bible against those who were challenging it. “Defend the Bible?” Spurgeon retorted; “Defend the Bible? I would as soon think of defending a lion! Unchain it, and it will defend itself!”²

There is a contemporary Bible teacher who has the same attitude. Put the text of scripture out there, he says, and let the text do its work; let the text make the point it wants to make. It will inevitably reveal Jesus, who is the Living Center of the Bible. This Bible teacher is practical enough to see that the revelation is not automatic. Sometimes the text wins in making its point and sometimes it loses. “But,” he says, “over time the text comes out ahead, and the Christ of the text wins respect.”³

A psalmist said the word of God is a “lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105). It is a sure and reliable guide to help us find our way through new territory in a new day. Use scripture as a tool, use it wisely, and it will show the way ahead, all in the light of Jesus Christ. Scripture is the first gift God gives a church reborn; a church with a Bible is never bereft.

The Bread and the Cup

The second gift I see God giving the church is the bread and the cup.

² James S. Stewart, “Exposition and Encounter: Preaching in the Context of Worship,” *Encounter*, Vol. 19, no. 2, Spring 1958), p. 168.

³ Earl Palmer, “Evangelism Takes Time,” *Christianity Today*, May 17, 1985. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1985/may-17/special-section-evangelism-takes-time.html>. Accessed April 19, 2021.

We know from the Upper Room that this is what Jesus wanted to leave with his disciples and with us. “This do,” he said, “this do in remembrance of me.” (cf. 1 Cor. 11:24) Break this bread. Drink this cup. It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

We know from the Emmaus Road the good the bread and cup can do. Jesus was made known to those two Emmaus disciples right there at their table in the breaking of the bread. And the experience energized them. They had been spiritual and mentally and emotionally depleted, but that moment with Christ at table energized them and they had the vigor to race back to Jerusalem and tell their story (Lk. 24:31-35).

We know from history that there is a hunger for the bread and cup God gives the church to offer. I have not seen the musical but I have read the book about Alexander Hamilton on which the musical is based. When Hamilton was dying from his gunshot wound, he begged for someone to give him Communion.⁴ Just a little bit before that in time, one of the first churches in this country in Salem’s ancestral denomination got its start when “People ‘with tears in their eyes’ begged [John Philip Boehm] to baptize their children and administer the Lord’s Supper.”⁵ I can still see the reverence on the face of Minnie Bucklin, one of my Belvidere parishioners, when I arrived at her house to administer home Communion. She had a table ready with a candle and a white cloth. She was eager to see, not the young, inexperienced pastor who was coming, but the Christ of the bread and the cup. And hasn’t there been hunger for Communion here whilst the pandemic lasted, keeping us apart?

The bread and the cup together are a gift God gives the church to equip it - making it complete – for its work. A church with the Bible and Holy Communion is never bereft.

The basin and the towel

The third gift I see God giving the church is the basin and towel.

This image comes, of course, from John’s account of what happened in the Upper Room (cf. Jn 13:1-20). The Lord Jesus, on that terrible night on which he was betrayed, began the evening by washing the feet of his disciples, including the feet of Judas. With that action of humble service, he set for his disciples the example of serving others and called them to serve with the same humility.

Never for a moment suppose that the church – this church or any church – exists simply for its own sake and the benefit of its own members alone. We are meant to serve God by serving others, just as Jesus took a basin and girded himself with a towel. That is who we are meant to be.

The way we serve will depend upon the abilities we have and the opportunities before us. We will not all serve in the same way but we should all serve in some way. That is the Christian ideal. A living congregation should always be asking itself these questions – what are the gifts we have, what are the needs around us, and how can we use our gifts to meet those needs?

⁴ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 706-708.

⁵ David Dunn, *et. al.*, *A History of the Evangelical and Reformed Church*, ed. and with an introduction by Lowell H. Zuck (New York: Pilgrim, 1990), p. 33.

God hands the church that is emerging from the pandemic a basin and a towel. A church with the Bible, Holy Communion, and the willing faithfulness to serve others is never bereft.

When Sherrol and I were in England in 2009 representing the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ we were attached to our partner denomination, the United Reformed Church of England and Wales. Our first stop was in a town of Devon, in the Babbacombe district of the city of Torquay. It so happened that a new priest was being installed in the Babbacombe parish of the Church of England. We were invited to attend the installation and I was allowed to participate along with the guest ministers from the United Reformed Church. Near the end of the installation ceremony people, I think they were primarily lay people who did this, brought the newly installed priest a series of gifts he would need to conduct his ministry in the parish. I don't remember what all the gifts were, but they at least gave him a Bible, the membership list of the church, a map of the town, keys to the church, and other gifts as well.

I have had that experience in the back of my mind as I prepared this sermon for you today. The pandemic is not over by any means, but Salem is emerging from it. As it emerges, it is tasked with determining what its ministry will entail and finding new leadership for the next stage of its journey. God is in the midst of this with you, speaking the good word of benediction. This capable God will equip you, making you complete, in everything good so that you can do God's will and be pleasing in God's sight. Among the gifts God gives you to do the work are ones that fully equip and never fail: scripture, the bread and the cup, and the basin and the towel. With these in hand your work is set and your vitality in God's name is assured.