

Lumpers and Splitters

By Bruce E Schundler

Charles Darwin was one of the first to use the terms “lumpers” and “splitters”. Lumpers are people who tend to put people--- and things ---together. They emphasize the similarities among groups, and reject or downplay the differences. They gather groups and people together, instead of splitting them apart. They create broad definitions that are more inclusive than discriminatory.

In contrast, splitters emphasize differences. They like to dwell on what differentiates one group from another. They focus on what separates people and on what makes them distinct from one another. They like to create new groups, form different classes, and generate new definitions.

In his own way, Jesus was an incorrigible and consistent lumper. When he addressed people, he treated them all the same. When he met people---he gave the beggars and outcast as much respect as the Pharisees and Sadducees. When others wanted to exclude people---he included them. When others tried to reject people, he welcomed them. And when others argued about who was better, he emphasized how--- in the eyes of God ---we are all the same.

Yes....Jesus was a lumper. And throughout his ministry, he lumped people into one category...because to him, everyone was---and is---a child of God. And I mean everyonethe normal and the abnormal, the pleasant and the unpleasant, the smart and the dull, the married and the single, the straight and the gay, the documented and the undocumented, the very light skinned and the very dark, Christians and Jews, Hindus and Muslims...and both Republicans and Democrats. To Jesus, everyone was a child of God—created by God --and loved by God. Everyone was part of a family that included his beloved disciples and the hated tax collectors, the very religious and the lonely whore, the very powerful and the very weak.

And so, when Jesus was askedWhat are the greatest commandments, he replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. There are no commandments greater than these.” (Mark 12:28-34)

Paul was another incurable Lumper. Again and again, he wrote things like: There is neither Greek nor Jew, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal: 3:28)

Unfortunately, many churches just didn’t get it. The Church in Corinth, for instance, was having all kinds of problems. They were having constant arguments about who was better.... the deacons or the elders, the faith healers or the administrators, the teachers or the apostles....and what we would call the laity or the clergy. And so, he wrote those famous and familiar words about how the body has many parts, and he described how each part is important....no matter how different or small, no matter what color it is, or how it works.

Simply stated, all those different parts work better when they work together...than alone. To be sure, what’s the point of having a great leg, if it’s separated from the body? What’s the point of having the smartest brain in the world, if it’s not connected to the rest of the body? And imagine what happens, when something even as small as the pancreas fails, or the thyroid fails, or if the lens in your eyes fail, or the tiny bones in your ears stop working?

Simply stated, there are many different parts of the body, and the body doesn’t work well...unless all the parts are working together. And what Jesus and Paul were saying....is that as humans, we also don’t work

well, if we all aren't working together. And by "we" ...I mean "all God's children" not just Presbyterians, or Americans, or Christians, or people with European roots.

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Unfortunately, throughout history people have been more adept at being splitters than lumpers. We often pay more attention to what separates us... than to what unites us. We focus more on the differences between us ... than on the similarities. We try to exclude, set apart, and isolate. We discriminate, and segregate. We draw lines of distinction between one group and another... between us and others. And in our insecurity, we're attracted to people who separate and divide, and who discriminate and segregate, and who draw lines of distinction between one group or color or nationality and another.

Like the members of the Church in Corinth, we live our lives trying to imagine that we are different.... we live our lives trying to see ourselves as better than others. And like his disciples we often argue about who is the best disciple or who will really sit at the right hand of Jesus.

Quite frankly, as the early church developed, there also were major arguments between the disciple Peter--- and Paul. between the Church in Jerusalem---and the churches established by Paul. And after Christianity became "legal" in 325 AD.... and after it became more organized, there continued to be divisions and battles and for centuries, wars were fought among Christians. And thousands were persecuted and imprisoned simply because some Christians felt they were better than others, or thought they understood the Word of God better than others.

And today, it continues....and the splitters are just as active as ever...trying to separate us, and split us apart.

In 1989, for instance, my wife, Sara, and I had opportunities to visit South Africa, India, and China. These were mostly business trips...and often we were in some of the most remote parts of those countries, and we literally saw how half the world's population lived. And.... it was amazing, and sad, and overwhelming.

We saw how people lived on \$1.00/a day or less. We saw women separating the wheat from the chaff the way it was in the time of Jesus. We saw people living without shelter or toilets or clothing or food. We saw people who spent hours a day just getting their water and firewood, and we saw people with scabs, and sores, and obvious signs of disease and poverty. And then we came home.

Unfortunately, the Presbyterian Church wasn't talking about world hunger, or dealing with hunger in Newark and/or New York. It wasn't talking about improving health care throughout the world, or among poor Americans. It wasn't creating new ways of reaching out and ministering to others. Instead, the only thing about which the Presbyterian Church seemed to be concerned...the only topic which consumed hours and hours of discussion and debate....in churches, and Presbyteries, and the General Assembly.... was whether

gays or lesbians should be ordained or not. And today, churches and Christians are still debating whether ministers can perform weddings for gay and lesbian couples, or whether bakers should bake a cake for them.

Instead of working primarily to minister to the poor and feeding the hungry---like Jesus did---or instead of talking primarily about how to combine our efforts so we can change the world for the better, we're often talking about how to exclude some people, or disenfranchise them, or push them away.

But.... really, aren't we simply supposed to be lumpers.... instead of splitters? Aren't we supposed to be trying to follow Jesus---the incurable Lumper? Aren't we supposed to just.... love God, and love our neighbors?

Quite frankly, I'm very concerned about the Church, about organized Christianity in generaland the Presbyterian Church in particular. During the last decade, for instance, the Presbyterian Church has lost more than 30% of its members. And I don't think it's simply because it's a "mainline" Protestant denomination.... or that its theology is too liberal, or too all inclusive. Instead, I think it's because the Church often seems more concerned with excluding people than in including them.

And I also think it's because the church and its leaders are not speaking out against those who do want to separate us, and divide us. And in many cases, some churches are even supporting those who would separate us.

Meanwhile, too many churches also are focused on maintaining self-imposed rules and regulations. Instead of opening their doors and welcoming friends, neighbors, and strangers. Many of the weddings I've performed, for instance, are weddings where the bride and groom had wanted to be married in their home church, or in any church, but were turned away for what I think were stupid reasons.

For example, not too long ago I performed a wedding for Natalie and Brian. She had grown up in the New Providence Presbyterian Church, she and her family had been active members throughout her childhood. And then she went to college and graduate school, and eventually worked for several years in California. But when Natalie approached the church where she had been baptized and confirmed, when she went to the church where she had been a member for years....and where she thought she was still a member....and where she wanted to be married, she was told she wasn't a member anymore; and because she wasn't a member, her wedding couldn't be conducted in the church.

Then.... since her reception was to be at the Country Club in Basking Ridge, she approached the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church...and to my horror, she was told the same thing. She was told that because she wasn't a member, she couldn't have her wedding in the Basking Ridge church. Finally, Natalie's asked me to do the wedding---and I did, but it was at the country club. Can you imagine how that young couple feels about the church today? Can you imagine what all their families and friends are thinking? Or, can you imagine what Jesus would have done? To be sure, were those churches being lumpers, or splitters?

All too often, churches also are being broken apart and damaged by arguments about who is a better Christian, or who is a real Christian. For instance, the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church was a big church, and a very active church? But after Cal Jackson the senior Minister for many years retired in 1993, a new senior minister was chosen and installed; and he was so conservative and rigid in his Christian beliefs, that he felt many---- if not most--- of the members of that church simply weren't Christians. In fact, he felt the other two

associate ministers of the church were not Christians---one of whom ---Dennis Jones--- now is the senior minister there. Needless to say, that church became very divided and the church suffered, and the splitters succeeded, and it has never recovered.

Or, another example.... two years ago, I preached several times at the Avenel Presbyterian Church. And after communion one Sunday, a new visitor came up and shared her story. She had been Roman Catholic—a good Roman Catholic---but after many years of a very abusive marriage she felt she just had to leave. And in the midst of leaving home with her son, and finding a new home and a new life....and getting a divorce, there was no time for her son to be confirmed. Two years later. . . when she finally got settled, she went back to her old church, and tried to take communion. But when she and her son got to the front of the line, the priest suddenly said—in a voice that everyone could hear---“You’ve gotten a divorce and you shouldn’t be here. And your son was never confirmed, and he can’t take communion, and so he also shouldn’t be here.” Technically according to the tenets of the Catholic faith, that priest was right.... but was he following the commandments of Christ? Or, was he just being a splitter? Was he following Christ, or... in trying to be a good priest, was he simply not being Christian?

I’m one of eight siblings....and most of them are a lot more conservative than I am. And one of them.... the most conservative and what might be called an evangelical Christian...married a Catholic woman. And several times when the issue of divorce came up, Jeff would say it really wasn’t an issue for him and Pam...because Catholics simply don’t believe in divorce. And at family gatherings.... like Thanksgiving...Jeff was quick to criticize any of the nephews and nieces who were living together with their boyfriends or girlfriends....and he’d mention how that technically.... that was living in sin. It was fornication.

Yes...During one of those few days when entire families get together, was Jeff being a lump or splitter?

What’s ironic...is that what Jesus often didn’t preach.... about divorce, or fornication. What Jesus talked about, was our need to help others, to be the Good Samaritan. He preached about how difficult it is for the well to do and the very wealthy.... to use their resources wisely, and to share their resources with those in need. He warned us about pretending to be better than others, and about not casting the first stone, or living inauthentic lives---or saying one thing but doing things that are very different, or about lying and being dishonest with ourselves and others.

By the way, guess who later got divorced? Yes Jeff. His wife met someone at work and fell in love, and Jeff and Pam got divorced. A little later, however, he connected with an old friend from college, and he and Sandy have been living happily together for over 10 years...without being married. Fortunately, none of the nephews and nieces have ever reminded Jeff of his previous comments and criticisms. In their own way, they’ve been lumpers.... glad to be able to accept Jeff and Sandy without finding fault, and more than willing to love them ... in spite of Jeff’s previous comments.

Hopefully this Thanksgiving, when you and your family gets together...you’ll work to be the lumpers....and not the splitters!!

I could go on....and give you other examples of how we’ve split people apart, but I won’t. To be sure, I probably have already been a little too honest. It’s kind of like that story of the older man.... who one day got out of the shower, and looking at himself in a large bathroom mirror said to his wife: “I’m really getting old, my skin is all wrinkly and flabby, I’m getting fat, my muscles are all sagging....and I look a mess and well...? I

well just look very old and not very sexy and attractive anymore!" In response his wife said, "Don't worry dear, at least your eye sight is still pretty good!!!"

Yes.... maybe I've been a little too honest. But that's because far too often and in far too many ways, the church ---the entire Christian Church, our church and others---at almost every level--- seem to be more interested in splitting people away from the church, than in bringing them in. It seems the Church does more splitting, than lumping. It's better at defining who should be with us than in welcoming people in. It's better at pushing people out.... than in inviting them in. Maybe we should be asking ourselves again and again.... if Jesus were here today, what would he be doing, and what would he say? And are we following the two basic commandments.... to love God and to Love our neighbor?

I'm sharing these stories because if the Church---if the organized body of Christ doesn't get the message and if it doesn't focus more on practicing the message of Christ, then who will? Or as our parents used to ask us again and again.... if brothers and sisters in the same family can't get along, how can we expect nations of the world to get along?

If we ---who say we are the disciples and followers of Christ---don't get the message, and act accordingly, then who will? And furthermore, if the Church---and we as members of the Church---if we don't speak out loudly and forcefully, if we don't speak out against those who want to exclude, and discriminate, and split people apart, then what will happen to the church? And who will join it, or be a member of it, or support it? If we don't work and act more like "Lumpers" ---as a church, as an institution, and as individuals, then how will we ever be successful in following a "Lumper" like Jesus? If we don't work harder to bring people together, instead of tearing them apart, if we don't work to bring community where there is division, or focus on human commonalities instead of differences, then we are we really followers of Christ.

If we don't support people who do try to bring us together, and break down the divisions which divide us, if we don't resist those who would separate us.... then are we still Christians? To be sure, we may be the organized Christian Church, but do we represent the religion of Christ? Or as I poster I say recently put it... Isn't it time we put Christ back into Christianity, and back into our Christian faith? Isn't it time we start practicing the religion of Christ...and following the teachings of Christ.... instead of the practicing the Christian religion and following time honored religious traditions?

Unfortunately, that brings us to the exact problem that Jesus faced.... because back then.... nobody understood what he was trying to say. Nobody was listening.... nobody was paying attention.

In his sermons and parables and teachings, he had said the same thing many times that the two great commandments were to Love God and Love your neighbor. But the Pharisees were getting hung up on their interpretations of the old Scriptures, and on the technical, legal meaning of the commandments. They were so intent on following their religious beliefs and traditions, that they had begun to ignore the teachings of the prophets. And the Sadducees were getting hung up on the literal words of the Old Testament, and not on the meaning of the words. And the Zealots were too focused on looking for a military solution to their problems. And too many others just wanted to be healed---or to feel good. They didn't want to be told how to love God or how to love their neighbors. And even the disciples---who lived with him and loved him and listened to him day after day, just kept arguing about who was the greatest, and who could sit at the right hand of Jesus?

Because people.... people just like us.... didn't understand, because they thought he was a dreamer, a troublemaker, and a problem, or they simply saw him as someone who could just be ignored and killed. he was crucified.

Three days later, what happened on Easter Sunday is still a mystery because we don't really know what happened. The Gospel writers are all very consistent in saying that Jesus didn't just rise up, or get up, or wake up. Instead, they all are very careful to say "he was raised by God." God did something very special that morning.

To be sure, Jesus didn't just come back to life.... like Lazarus or the daughter of the Chief Priest. He didn't just come back to life in a body that would eventually die again. He was resurrected in a new body---a body which could appear and disappear in locked rooms. He was resurrected in a body which made it so that his disciples on the road of Emmaus couldn't recognize him for hours...even though they walked with him, and talked with him, and heard his answers to their questions. But then....in the breaking of the bread.... the disciples not only recognized Jesus, they began to understand for the first time the teachings of Jesus.

Yes...The resurrection was different, it was special, and it's something we can 't really understands.

But what we do know, is that something happened. And in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup, in our communion rituals and traditions, we are reminded that Something happened after the resurrection. Something happened which helped those disciples finally understand what Jesus was saying. Something happened which encouraged them to sum up the teachings of Christ. Something happened ...and they were reminded that we simply are supposed to love God and love our neighbors.

Or as Paul reinforced that message:

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

Yes....in the end, in the final analysis, we aren't called upon to love traditions, or particular dogmas, or established understandings of what's right or wrong, or conventional morality. We are supposed to love God....and love our neighbors. It's what Jesus said whenever he could.

Yes.... we are supposed to be lumpers, not splitters.
So go out, and be lumpers, not splitters.

Let us pray.

O Lord God,
Help us to understand.
Help us to understand what Jesus would say and do today....

if faced with the world in which we live.

And then help us....

Help us be the ones who bring people together....

Not just on days like Thanksgiving...but all the time.

Help us be the ones known for downplaying differences

And creating lines of communication where there are none.

Help us be the lumpers...in whatever way we can and wherever we are.

And finally,

Give us the serenity to accept what we cannot change,

The courage and strength to change the things we can,

And the wisdom to know the difference between the one and other.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen.