

Article # 4

Hummingbirds & Christians

There is something about hummingbirds that has always fascinated me – even though few have inhabited the same locales that I have. For many years, hummingbird sightings were very rare for me. I remember, as a young boy, seeing my first one hovering motionlessly for a few moments extracting sweet nectar from the potted flowers on the porch of my parents' home. The humming of its wings was quite loud – making more of a buzzing noise than a humming one. Its mobility was phenomenal – and the brilliant, iridescent color of its plumage was like nothing I had seen before. I felt as if I had seen a secret of creation hovering there – until, to my disappointment, that tiny creature darted out of my site as suddenly as it had arrived. Years later, as an adult, I moved into their habitat – not knowing how territorial some of them could be. I purchased a hummingbird feeder and hung it from the awning over the patio – and filled it with the red sugar water that the store clerk said they loved to drink. Stem-like tubes projecting from the base of the feeder transported the manmade nectar to little plastic flowers from which the birds could drink. I hoped that they would soon discover the feeder – but wondered if they would ignore it because of the nearby bed of blooming geraniums stretching back to a vine-draped fence of multi-colored flowers. There was enough nectar for hundreds of hummingbirds. Within a few days, those annoying little birds discovered the feeder.

I was sitting quietly on the patio – not wanting any motion to dissuade them from coming to the feeder. Suddenly one arrived as a buzzing dive-bomber executing a fly-by within a few inches of my head. I dove for cover. Thinking it had been unintentional, I sat back up to watch for one to come to the feeder. No sooner had I sat back up, than a tandem hummingbird fly-by ensued – one hummingbird chasing a second one away. A third nose-dived in for a close encounter with my left ear. I swatted at them as if they were insects swarming about my head. I relocated to the inside of the house. The view from an overstuffed chair behind the screen door was more relaxing. A beautiful green one flew in at top speed – instantaneously paused in mid-air to hover at one little red plastic flower – and dipped its beak into the red nectar. My boyhood fascination with hummingbirds rushed back in. I was enthralled. However, that fascination departed quickly and disappointedly. A red one attacked the green one – driving it away. It was so territorial that it wouldn't tolerate another on what it considered its turf. Repeatedly, I saw the same behavior in many of the hummingbirds. Each of those territorial pests tried to drive all others away. They wouldn't even tolerate me, their provider, being there. Their jealous behavior overshadowed their beauty. Soon, I saw them as ugly little nuisances.

Sometimes we, as Christians, act like those hummingbirds. Often we are jealously territorial about our churches and ministries. Jesus said, "*The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.*" Luke 10:2. We may wholeheartedly support that concept at our churches' missionary conferences – applauding it with our words and funding it with our finances. Maybe that is because most missionaries missionary on foreign soil rather than on our own. Let's think for a moment about our own attitudes. How would we feel if someone started a Bible study in our neighborhood competing with our study? We should not be resentful or jealous. We should thank God for other laborers in His harvest. We should never consider other laborers to be competition. How would we feel if a new church sprang up, one with more money and appeal, down the street from our small church? Would we be thankful or jealously territorial?

Territorialism is widespread in the Body. I have seen and experienced it for decades. I spent several weeks preparing to lead an evangelistic effort in a large church. For the next several months, most of my full-time ministry was scheduled to be with that one large congregation – training and leading them in an evangelistic effort – at no cost to the church. The assistant pastor and his leadership team were very enthusiastic about it. However, a few days after the senior pastor returned from a writing sabbatical, an ultimatum was presented to me. The church was very interested in my working with them – but only if I resigned from my ministry and became their employee. The assistant pastor candidly explained that the senior pastor would let me work with the church only if my ministry had his flag raised above it. Another pastor from a church in a different state, concerned about the people that might come to Christ while I worked with his congregation, asked, *"You're nothing but a surrogate – when are these new believers going to be mine?"* Another, in a neighboring state explained that my presence in his town would be counter-productive to the Gospel because he had it covered. I wondered how that small church of but a few hundred people could meet all the Gospel needs of a town of 20,000 and those of its bordering city of 100,000.

I remember one of the first men that I witnessed to on a regular basis. I had almost nothing in common with Jim ... but spent a lot of time with him for the sake of the Gospel. Jude 1:22-23 often came to mind, *"And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh."* It took a significant effort over several months before he was ready to put his faith in Jesus. His time came during an evangelistic meeting in my home. It was so satisfying to know that Jim was finally ready. I moved through the maze of people toward him – but someone distracted me – and Tom got to him first. They found a quiet corner of the living room – and with minimal effort, Tom led him to the Savior. Later Tom told me what happened – explaining how easy it was to witness. It was a wonderful evening. Jim had been born-again. Tom had born fruit for the first time. Moreover, as recorded in Luke 15:10, there was *"joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."* Everyone was rejoicing – every one except me. Jim was supposed to be mine, not Tom's. After all my effort and prayer, Tom had breezed in to lead him to the Savior. I was angry and resentful – and jealously territorial like one of those ugly little hummingbirds. My attitude was pathetic. I have repented.

Territorialism is neither new nor limited to church leaders. Jesus chose regular men to be his disciples. They weren't seminary-trained leaders. They were just like many of us. And do you know what? They had a streak of jealous territorialism. *"Then a dispute arose among them as to which of them would be greatest."* Luke 9:46. Can you imagine that? There they were in the presence of Jesus – and they began arguing about which of them was the greatest. *"And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, and said to them, 'Whoever receives this little child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me. For he who is least among you all will be great.'*" Luke 9:47-48. So many of us, just like the disciples, competitively want to possess that top spot where we see ourselves as better than other believers, individually or as a church. A dentist once told me, with his theological nose in the air and a drill in his hand, that he went to the *one church* in town that believed the whole Bible. He was a medical professional – but sounded so childish. Jesus, knowing what the disciples were thinking, said that the one who is *"least among you all will be great."* Shouldn't the disciples have been hesitant to say anything more at that moment – especially something territorial? Yes, but again, they demonstrated what lurks in all of our hearts. *"John answered and said, 'Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us.'*" Luke 9:49. Jesus had just chastised them for individual territorialism. Then John told Jesus about their group territorialism in trying to prevent someone from ministering in His name because he wasn't in their group. How pathetic! Jesus said to him, *"Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is on our side."* Luke 9:50. Hear those words of Jesus – remember them whenever jealous territorialism rears its ugly head. Remember those words whenever you are tempted to nose-dive in for a buzzing fly-by to scare off competition from your corner of the God's harvest field.

Think about your own participation in the Body. Have you ever reacted territorially? What would happen if the Apostle Paul were going to speak on a Sunday morning in that big church on the other side of your town? Would you be irritated that he was going to preach in their church instead of yours? What would you do if your church didn't close its doors that morning and bus everyone across town to hear Paul? In going to hear him, would you think that you were sneaking away to the other team's meeting – somehow feeling guilty that you did? It is good to

be connected and committed to one group of believers. However, you are also part of His body – a body that is not disjointed. Take stock of your own life in the Body. Who are your Christian friends? Are they exclusively from your group? Are they friends of convenience that you only see at your church's meetings and functions? Have friends from your church ever relocated to a different church in town? Did that annoy you? Or did they just drop off your radar screen – never to be seen again? I've been that friend – dropped by those I thought were friends. What advice would you offer to that gifted leader in your church, the one that you depend on, if he asked your opinion about his leaving to help a church down the street? What if he were considering going to that big popular church downtown? Would territorialism color your advice? When someone asks about your faith, what do you say? Do you tell them about the Savior? Or do you tell them about which church you attend – identifying it by its name or by the pastor's name? Such territorialism is as wrong today as it was in Corinth when the Apostle Paul ministered there. He wrote to them about it, "*Now I say this, that each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"*" 1 Corinthians 1:12-13.

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all." Ephesians 4:4-6

Hummingbirds are beautiful. They come in a variety of sizes and in many different colors. God has gifted them with unique and phenomenal capabilities. It is fascinating to watch them use their God-given talents. However, for some of them, their jealous territorialism makes them ugly. Why can't they get along feeding side-by-side? Why would one wish to drive another away from the feeder hanging from my patio awning? There were six little plastic flowers dispensing nectar – why did one think he had all six covered by himself? I saw them do the same thing in that massive garden of wild geraniums just beyond my patio – and among the flowers vine-draped over the back fence. There were many more flowers than hummingbirds. Why couldn't those beautiful birds get along with each other? Why did some of them let jealous territorialism turn their God-given beauty into ugliness?

Christians are beautiful. The members of His Body come in a variety of sizes and colors. God has gifted them with unique and phenomenal capabilities. It is fascinating to watch them use their God-given talents. However, for some of them, their jealous territorialism makes them ugly. Why can't they get along ministering side-by-side? Why would one church, Bible study, or ministry wish to be the only one, or only popular one in town? There is so much need for Christ in any community – why would one think that it was enough to reach the lost? I've seen them do the same thing in parachurch movements and in many ministries – and it is found among the missionaries in many foreign lands. There is much more need than there are laborers. Why can't we get along with our co-laborers in the harvest? Why do some of us let jealous territorialism turn our God-given beauty into ugliness?

Jesus prayed, *"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me."* John 17:20-21. Read those verses again – very carefully. He was praying for you and for me in that prayer – praying that we would be *one* so that the lost world would believe that the Father sent the Son to them. When lost people see our territorial disunity, they are disappointed. Our disunity overshadows the beauty of the Gospel – driving people away from the light rather than drawing them to it. When will we stop acting like those little birds?