

# “One Body, Many Members”

## The Twenty-Third in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

*Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:12-26; Isaiah 49:8-26*

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Almost all peoples and cultures have some sort of utopian dream—a world of universal peace and harmony. John Lennon’s *Imagine* anyone? The problem is that ours is a fallen race. Because we are a fallen race we are divided along racial, socio-economic, political and theological lines. Much like the ancient Corinthians, we struggle to find true unity in a world of diversity. Because of human sin, the only way unity can be obtained is through force (“agree or else”), through coercion or deception (like that of a false religion or a political ideology), or through “kumbaya” unity (a superficial “herd” mentality). The bad news is there will be no earthly utopia this side of Christ’s second advent. The good news is that God does provide us with a true unity based upon our common faith in Jesus Christ realized in the church through the person and work of the Holy Spirit. And while this unity is imperfectly realized in this life, nevertheless, in Christ’s church, God takes a whole host of diverse and different people and forms them into one body, the church of Jesus Christ in which his Holy Spirit dwells.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 12, Paul is addressing a question the Corinthians had asked him in a letter. Based on Paul’s answer—which runs all the way from 1 Corinthians 12:1-14:40—the original question certainly had something to do with the role and practice of speaking in tongues (a subject addressed in chapter 14). In chapter 12, Paul begins to answer this question by laying the groundwork for how we should understand the gifts of the Spirit in general (the *charismata*). The Apostle begins by making the case that unless we confess that Jesus is Lord—that is, we confess that Jesus is Lord of all things, that he is the very Son of God, that he died for our sins and that he was raised from the dead for our justification—we cannot understand “spiritual things” (the *pneumatikon*).

But, says Paul, we cannot confess that Jesus is Lord except by the power of the Holy Spirit. And it is the Holy Spirit whose gifts are given to those who are members of Christ’s church, which is his body. In the previous section of this chapter (verses 4-11), Paul has made the point that God gives these gifts of the Spirit—which are supernatural endowments of the Spirit—as he wills for the common good of the church. Although the Corinthians were struggling with the mistaken assumption that the greater the gift the more important the person who possessed that gift, Paul emphasizes that these gifts were not given so that people could boast about their spiritual prowess, or so that they could call attention to themselves, or even use these gifts as a pretense for dividing the church into factions. No, these gifts were given for the common good, the building-up of the body of Christ.

When it comes to the subject of spiritual things (the *pneumatikon*), Paul challenges those in the Corinthian church to think like Christians—not like pagans. As Paul deals with the Corinthian preoccupation with pagan spirituality, Paul also challenges those among us who think of the church as nothing more than a voluntary assembly which we can join or un-join at our whim. Christ’s spiritual body (the church) is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Peter even calls us living stones of a spiritual temple in which the Spirit dwells (cf. 1 Peter 2:5). The church is not just a list of names on the membership roll, because the members of the church are to assemble each Lord’s Day to hear Christ’s word, participate in the sacraments as Christ instituted them, exercise the gifts of the Spirit given to his church by Christ, and participate in the life of the local church, all for the common good and for the glory of Christ.

The point is simple. If you are a Christian (and confess that Jesus is *your* Lord), you are part of Christ's body (the church). That body of Christ of which you are part is visibly manifest in a local church. You have been given gifts of the Spirit to be exercised in that local church for the common good, not for your own enjoyment or benefit. This means that there is no biblical justification whatsoever for the widespread tendency among evangelicals to confess that Jesus is their Lord, but then not participate in the life of the church by joining a particular congregation. When we confess that Jesus is Lord, we do so in the context of the church, which is Christ's body. This is why the New Testament spends so much time on the marks of the church, the nature of the church, the mission of the church, and the way the church is to be governed. To put it another way, an unchurched Christian is truly an oxymoron.

Following right ahead, we turn to our text, 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, and Paul's discussion of the church as the body of Christ. As has been clear throughout this entire letter, Paul does not conceive of the church as a democracy, nor will he tolerate anarchy.<sup>1</sup> This is because the church is the body of Christ. It is the Lord himself who adds diverse members to his one body. This explains why unity is so important to the health of the church, and why dividing the body of Christ is such a great sin. Paul's use of the body analogy also explains why there is so much diversity in the church in terms of its members and why such diversity is so important to the overall health of the body—different people are given different gifts of the Spirit so as to benefit the whole. Although in the Greco-Roman world analogies drawn from the human body were rather common, Paul advances the analogy a bit by demonstrating that Christ adds diverse members to his own body so as to increase the strength of the whole, and so as to demonstrate that all individual members should strive for the common good.<sup>2</sup>

In verse 12, Paul begins his discussion of Christ's spiritual body (the church) which is made up of many members. *"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."* A body is composed of many different members, each with vastly different functions. Although though the members are different and have different purposes, there is a fundamental unity which transcends all the differences. Paul simply states, *"so it is with Christ."*

In Ephesians 5:23 and Colossians 1:18, Paul speaks of Christ as the head of the body. In the Corinthian letter Paul's focus seems to fall upon our union with Christ—1 Corinthians 1:30: *"And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption."* Because all believers are "in Christ" and are currently united to Jesus even though Jesus has ascended into heaven, all believers are members of Christ's body through the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> This means that there is both unity (one body) and diversity (many different members).

At this point, Paul addresses the means by which we are incorporated into Christ's visible body—baptism. In verse 13, Paul speaks of baptism in terms of the relationship of the sacrament to the unity of the body of Christ and to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. *"For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit."* Given the sad fact that baptism has been a source of division in the Corinthian congregation (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:13 ff.—"I was baptized by so and so, therefore, I am a follower of so and so"), Paul reminds the Corinthians that

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Green, cited in Morris, 1 Corinthians, 179.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 179.

<sup>3</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 170.

baptism is what incorporates individuals into the visible body of Christ. Baptism is a sacrament of incorporation and unity. Lest we forget, the connection between baptism and union with Christ is prominent one in Paul's writings. In Galatians 3:27, Paul writes, "*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*" In Romans 6:3, he writes, "*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?*"

This means that each one of the Corinthian Christians, regardless of what they were before coming to faith (Jew or Greek, slave or free) are baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ's spiritual body. It is God the Holy Spirit who takes many individuals and makes them one through the sacrament of baptism. Since it is the Spirit who performs this work of uniting the many, the Reformed reject baptismal regeneration (that the act of applying water regenerates), while at the same time the Reformed affirm the importance of connecting the sign (baptism) with the thing signified (the work of the Spirit). Where the sign is present (water), we believe that the thing signified is present (incorporation into the body of Christ). The water does not incorporate us into Christ, the Holy Spirit does. But we cannot see the work of the Spirit, so in our weakness, God gives to us a visible sign (water—the so-called visible word) of the reality which we cannot see (the baptism of the Holy Spirit). This is what Paul is getting at when he says baptism is the means by which we are incorporated into Christ's body, which is the church.

This supports the point I made earlier about someone professing faith in Christ, but not being a member of a local church. Biblically speaking, this makes no sense. Likewise, the New Testament has no category for someone who is a professing believer, but who is not baptized. The same thing holds true for children of believers. While baptism does not regenerate, it is the sign and seal of everything God promises in the covenant of grace. If we profess to be in that covenant, how then can we reject the sign and seal of the covenant? And if our children are likewise in the covenant of grace, how can we deny to them the sign and seal of that covenant which is baptism? This is, after all, what Jesus commanded his people to do in the great commission—"*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"

There are several echoes in Paul's discussion of unity and diversity drawn from messianic prophecies such as Isaiah 49 (our Old Testament lesson) in which the prophet speaks of the way in which the Messiah will draw people from all nations (not just Israel) to participate in the blessings of God's covenant. The Messiah will call everyone from prisoners, to nursing mothers, to the oppressed, afflicted and the grieving. Kings will become servants, and God's blessing will extend to all those who confess that YHWH is the covenant Lord. This is what has happened in Corinth as well as in every Christian church where Jesus is confessed as Lord. God calls people from every race, tribe and nation, and makes them one body, who together profess that "Jesus is Lord" because the day of salvation has come.

All of these individuals with their different social standing are said to "drink of one Spirit." It is the Spirit who forms the body of Christ—creating faith, and creating the bond of our union with Christ who, although in heaven, is still present with us. If anyone is "in Christ," they are also "in the Spirit" and vice-versa. This bond cannot be broken—a true believer cannot be severed from Christ. However, the unity of the body can be broken. This is the sad reality of the Corinthian church which was plagued with division and factions, improperly celebrating the Lord's Supper (the sacrament of Christ's body) and selfishly misusing the gifts of the Holy Spirit—because the Corinthians were still thinking and acting like pagans.

Understanding the meaning and importance of baptism counteracts the kind of sinful thinking which

creates divisions. Paul states in verse 14, “*for the body does not consist of one member but of many.*” There is one body which we enter through baptism, but that body has many diverse members. Each member of Christ’s body needs all of the other members of Christ’s body, and since baptism unites us together, Paul is making the point that no single member of that body can exist on their own. No single member of the body is “the body.” Just as no individual Christian is “the church.”

At this point, Paul makes a number of points of application based upon the metaphor of the human body. As we mentioned earlier, the use of such analogies was a common practice in the ancient world, especially in public speeches dealing with the peace and harmony of society. While this was often done by men of power to keep subordinates in place—“those of you who are feet, get to walking and realize that you are not the head”—Paul takes the analogy in a different direction, discussing the relationship between unity and diversity in the church.<sup>4</sup> Every member of the body is equally important and essential to the well-being of the whole. The individual members of the body cannot simply opt out of the body, nor can they exist on their own, independent from the body. A severed limb is a dead limb. A body missing a limb is limited in a number of ways.

Paul continues to make this point in verses 15-16. “*If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body.*” Apparently, the disputes among the Corinthians over spiritual gifts left a number of those with less-sensational and more mundane spiritual gifts feeling vastly inferior to those with more sensational and visible gifts. This is what happens when spiritual gifts are applied using pagan categories of evaluation. Not only do Paul’s words provide an important corrective to the false understanding of spiritual things so prevalent among the Corinthians (namely that spiritual gifts are not a matter of individual status, but are given for service and to equip us to love one another), but these words from Paul seem to be aimed at encouraging those who felt like they didn’t measure up to those with more visible gifts.<sup>5</sup> Your pinkie-toe may not seem like much, but cut it off and see what happens. This is also the case in the church. Where would we be without those with seemingly insignificant gifts?

As Paul says in verse 17, “*If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell?*” Again, our place in the body of Christ is not a matter of personal status, nor personal attainment, but of God’s sovereignty—a point which Paul emphasizes in verse 18. “*But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.*” The fact of the matter is that God has sovereignly called and equipped each one of the members of Christ’s body with these various gifts as he sees fit.

Paul’s emphasis upon the phrase “*God arranged the members*” is important. God is concerned with the health of the entire body, since he created this body and called its various members to faith in Jesus Christ. It is God who determines who are the feet, the hands, the eyes and the ears. God did this, Paul says, just as he wills and according to his purposes. Thus every member and every gift are important to the whole. We have been called by God and given specific gifts for the well-being of the entire body.

This brings Paul back to a discussion of the unity and diversity of the body in verses 19-20. “*If all were*

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<sup>4</sup> Hay, First Corinthians, 213.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 171.

*a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.*” Obviously, a body is made up of many diverse parts with different functions. No matter how important any individual part of that body is, by itself, it does not compose the entire body. Nor can such parts exist independently on their own. The individual parts (people called with their gifts determined by God) compose the one body of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the unity and diversity present in the body of Christ are necessary aspects of the church. We are all different, although brought together under one head, who is Christ.

Paul now changes focus from those with less-spectacular gifts to those who are given more public and noticeable gifts. Paul goes from offering words of encouragement to those who may feel inferior, to offering words of caution (perhaps rebuke) to those who may feel superior because of their more visible gifts. Notice that in verse 21, the focus shifts slightly to an emphasis upon the interconnectedness of the body’s parts.<sup>6</sup> *“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’* Since God distributes spiritual gifts as he wishes for the well-being of the body, and since spiritual gifts are a matter of service not status, those with more spectacular gifts must not look down upon those with what they think are lesser gifts. An eye cannot look down upon the hand, nor can the head say to the feet, “get lost.” Those with spectacular gifts need those with less spectacular gifts because they are all part of the same body.

In fact, the members of the Corinthian church cannot get along without these members, hence the assertion Paul makes in verses 22. *“On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.”* Switching from the negative to the positive, Paul now asserts that the weaker members (feet and ears) are every bit as indispensable to the body as “heads” and “eyes.” This would have special significance in the culture struggling with issues of class and social status.<sup>7</sup> The word Paul uses here (weaker) comes from a word meaning “sick.” Paul does not speak of these folk with weaker gifts as merely an addition to the body, or even as a “welcome” addition to the body. Rather, Paul says, these members are indispensable to the body and the body cannot do without them.<sup>8</sup>

This becomes clear when we consider how we treat the parts of our own bodies. *“And on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more representable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it.”* We dress up our feet with fancy shoes, and we cover our unrepresentable parts so as to be modest. But our representable parts get no special treatment—although in our culture its hard to imagine any part of our body which is exposed to public view which doesn’t get some special treatment in private before we go out in public! This, by the way, is biblical justification for my proposed law that all men over 40 must wear a shirt in public.

God has taken all of these various parts (those with different spiritual gifts) and combined them into one body. The parts co-exist as one body so that all the parts are honored. The reasons for this are spelled out in verses 25-26. *“That there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”* The goal of Paul’s discussion is to point out how serious division in the body really is. All

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<sup>6</sup> Hays, First Corinthians, 215.

<sup>7</sup> Hays, First Corinthians, 215-216.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, p. 173.

parts are to have equal concern for the others. If one part of the body suffers, all other parts of the body will likewise suffer. If one part of the body is honored, the whole body is honored. All body parts share a common source of life and they cannot, ultimately, be isolated from the other parts, for good or for ill.

In light of this understanding of the church as organic whole, there is no justification whatsoever for causing division or striving to create factions. There is no justification for using the gifts of the Spirit for anything other than the building-up of the body of Christ for the common good and for the glory of God.

**W**hat then do we take with us from this text?

Paul's discussion of the church as the body of Christ allows him to do several things. First off, Paul stresses the organic nature of the church—in a profound sense Christ's church is an organism, not merely an organization. We are each a part of a living whole—the body of Christ. In this making this point, Paul stresses the importance of the unity of the whole without at the same time sacrificing that diversity found in the fact that each of us are unique individuals. This is a huge consideration for a church which was ethnically and culturally diverse as the church in Corinth (or even as we see in our own congregation). Christian is not a culture to which we conform—like Islam. Though we come from different cultures, races and socio-economic backgrounds, we confess our faith in the same Christ, and together are members of his body. We are not identified as God's people by our dress, our appearance, or our social standing. We identify ourselves as God's people through our common confession that "Jesus is Lord," and we become one body because we have all been baptized into our Lord's death and resurrection.

Paul's point also drives home the fact that in Christ there is true unity which anticipates that great day after our Lord returns when all hints and traces of sin are gone, and together we become the glorious bride of Christ. This is not a forced unity, not a superficial or temporary unity, nor a campfire-kumbaya sort of unity. This a true unity formed when we are baptized into Christ's body as the outward sign and seal of the invisible work of God's Spirit. Each one of us have been purchased by the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Each one of us is clothed with the perfect righteousness of Christ received through the means of faith alone. Each one of us are given gifts of the Holy Spirit which enable us to work together to build-up the body of Christ for the common-good.

Called by Christ to membership in his church (his spiritual body), each one of us is indispensable to the whole. This is why it grieves us when someone leaves our church, or when they move away, or when folk struggle during the trials of life, or when one of us experiences doubt or lacks assurance of salvation, or when we suffer illness or a loss of a job, or even when one of our own dies in Christ. Christ has made us one body with many members. When one of us suffers we all suffer.

But we also rejoice as one body when one of us rejoices. There is good news as well: the birth of covenant children, new people joining our church and professing their faith in Christ. People get new and better jobs, some get married, some graduate from school . . . You get the point. Yes, there is suffering and sadness. But there are many reasons to rejoice because there is one body with many members.

So, as the body of Christ, let us rejoice in the fact that Jesus has called us to faith, forgiven us of our sins, covered us with his perfect righteousness, given us gifts of the Spirit for the common good, and made us one body with many members.