

## **The Unity, Diversity, and Vitality of the Body of Christ**

*1 Corinthians 12:12-31, ESV*

*12 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. 13 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.*

*14 For the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 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. 16 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. 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? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.*

*21 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.” 22 On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, 24 which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, 25 that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.*

*27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But earnestly desire the higher gifts.*

*And I will show you a still more excellent way.*

- 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, ESV

Paul has already told us that we are each given spiritual gifts which we are to use for the common good (“*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*” – v. 7). Now, he unpacks this idea further using the very vivid and sometimes ridiculous image of the body.

### **I. One Body, One Spirit: The Unity of the Body of Christ, vv. 12-13**

Paul emphasizes first in this passage the strength of our unity as the ONE body of Christ:

*“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 all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”*

We are one body, the body of Christ. We are made one body when we are joined to Christ by the Holy Spirit, and we are sustained as one body by the Holy Spirit.

In emphasizing our unity as the one body of Christ, Paul uses sacramental language, language of baptism and the Lord's Supper, as he has done throughout this letter. But in using language of baptism and drinking, he isn't really pointing us to the physical sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper themselves. Rather, he is pointing us beyond them, to the spiritual realities to which they themselves point.

The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs and seals – pictures and promises – of our union with Christ and our ongoing sustenance in Christ. It is the work of the Holy Spirit that actually unites us to Christ and enables us to truly be sustained and refreshed by Christ.

### **A. Baptized into One Body**

*“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body”* – Water baptism is a sign and a seal of our union with Christ. Being united with Christ spiritually is what imparts all the benefits of Christ's redemption to us and what makes us truly members of the one body of Christ. And it is the Holy Spirit who actually unites us to Christ.

So, water baptism points to and promises the reality, or fulfillment, of Holy Spirit baptism, and it is baptism *“in the one Spirit”* that Paul has in view here. There are two very different and contradictory understandings of the believer's relationship to Jesus:

1. Some people see Jesus as the perfect example, and the believer's relationship to Jesus as primarily consisting of following His example, walking in His footsteps. So, Jesus lived a sinless life of perfect obedience, embodying for us an example of a life that pleases God. We follow after Him, doing what He did – What Would Jesus Do? – and trying to please the Father, even as He pleased the Father. Yes, when we mess us big time, we pray for forgiveness and His blood cleanses us from our sin, but still the obedience that counts before God for our acceptance must be OUR obedience. This is not the Gospel; this is a salvation by self-righteousness, by our own obedience in imitation of Christ's.
2. What Paul presents to us here, and what is presented as the true Gospel throughout the New Testament, is that we are made pleasing to God through Jesus Christ, as we are joined to Him by faith by the working of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives us faith in Jesus Christ – which is a receiving and resting on Christ alone for salvation – and this faith unites us to Christ by the Holy Spirit. This is Holy Spirit baptism, by which we are joined to Christ and made into one body, the body of Christ. Thus, we are pleasing to God because we are IN Christ, not because we follow AFTER Christ. Now, we do still follow His example and strive to obey the Father, but our acceptance before God is fulfilled and settled by His perfect righteousness, not our faltering steps of half-hearted obedience.

So, how do you know if you belong to the body of Christ or not? It's not whether or not you're doing a good job following Jesus, but whether or not you trust in Jesus and have been united to Him – made His forever – by the Holy Spirit.

## **B. Made to Drink of One Spirit**

Once we are made members of the body of Christ, we need to be sustained, refreshed, renewed, and encouraged in our union with Christ and our life as a disciple of Christ. How? Once again, this is the work of the Holy Spirit, and it is the same refreshment for all believers – *“all were made to drink of one Spirit”*

Jesus said, in John 7:37-38 – *“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as<sup>[a]</sup> the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”* - Then, John explains in v. 39, *“Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”*

Earlier in John 4, Jesus had told the woman at the well, *“‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”*

*The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.<sup>[b]</sup> The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” – John 4:10-14, ESV*

The Living Water is the Holy Spirit, and the refreshment the Holy Spirit gives comes through our union with Christ, as His righteousness, peace, joy, and all the benefits of His redemption flow to us through the Holy Spirit.

We picture this in the Lord's Supper when we eat and drink the body of Christ spiritually – that is, by the power of the Holy Spirit, our union with Christ is confirmed and strengthened and the blessings and benefits of that redemption are applied to our souls by the Spirit.

## **C. Jews or Greeks, Slave or Free**

Paul emphasizes that ALL members of the body of Christ – all true Christians – share in these blessings of the Spirit, and he emphasizes that this is true even across the dividing lines the Corinthians had set up in their church in imitation of the world. The work of the Holy Spirit does not distinguish between *“Jews or Greeks, slaves or free.”*

Now, we don't make these same kinds of distinctions, but sometimes we are guilty of dividing up based on preferences and prejudices and judging those in the church who are different than we

are.

Four years ago, *The Guardian* wrote an editorial on the state of American evangelicalism, which insightfully observed the weakness of a market-driven faith:

*A religion that is responsive to the pressures of the market will end up profoundly fractured, with each denomination finding most hateful to God the sins that least tempt its members, while those sins that are most popular become redefined and even sanctified. In the end, a market-driven religion gives rise to a market-driven approach to truth, and this development ultimately eviscerated conservative Christianity in the US and left it the possession of hypocrites and hucksters.*

One of the hallmarks of this market-responsive nature of American Christianity is a quick and easy judgmentalism, which affirms our relative self-righteousness by declaring that others who have different views of social, cultural, political, or economic issues cannot be true Christians. Sometimes, studying church history can help us gain perspective on these prejudices we have. For example, around 50 years ago or so, any woman who did not wear a dress and a head covering to church was considered questionable as to her true Christian faith, and interracial marriages were considered scandalous and probably an indication that someone was not a true believer.

We need to make sure we draw the lines where Jesus does, and not where our own preferences and prejudices would draw them.

## **II. One Body, Diverse Members: The Diversity of the Body of Christ, vv. 14-26**

Now, within the one true body of Christ, formed by the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ by faith, God has given His people a diversity of gifts and roles. Here, Paul gets rather ridiculous in his illustration, imagining different parts of the body either thinking they don't really belong in the body or else that they are so important that they don't need the other parts of the body.

### **A. Members Who Feel They Don't Belong: "I do not belong to the body"**

In verses 14-20, Paul focuses on those who, because they have what seem to be lesser gifts, feel like they don't really belong to the body:

*<sup>14</sup> For the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup> If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.*

Notice the repeated expression: “Because I am not \_\_\_\_\_, I do not belong to the body.”

In every church, some people feel sidelined, marginalized, unimportant. But we need every part of our bodies. Sometimes, as you get older, you begin to appreciate this more, as parts of your body you didn’t even know you had start to hurt or not work properly, and you realize how important the cartilage in your knee or the disks between your vertebrae are.

Some people in the church might say, “Well, all I do is pray every day for the elders and the church,” so I’m not that important. That ministry of prayer is SO important! Others might only write notes of encouragement and not realize how powerful that ministry is in the life of the church. And Covid has made us all realize the importance of the food table workers, the coffee ministry, the nursery workers, and the Junior Church teachers. Every part of the body, functioning for the good of the whole, is of vital importance.

### **B. Members Who Look Down on Other Members: “I have no need of you”**

On the other end of the spectrum are those parts of the body that are so prominent that they might be tempted to think they don’t need anyone else. This is what Paul focuses on in verses 21-26:

*21 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.” 22 On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, 24 which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, 25 that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. – vv. 21-26, ESV*

Just as no one should feel unimportant, so also no one should feel so important that they begin to think they don’t need anyone else. We all need each other. None of us can stand alone. Here, Paul illustrates this by pointing out how our “unpresentable parts” are treated with greater modesty and thus given greater honor.

Charles Spurgeon was famous for “the boiler room” in his church. He would take people on a tour of the church and in the basement would show them “the boiler room,” which was empty. He would explain that this is where the ladies of the church would gather to pray for the service and the preaching, so he would say, “This is where the fire is generated.”

Churches often think they need better preaching or programs, but better prayer is more vital, as the Spirit is what empowers everything fruitful in the life of the church.

### III. One Spirit, Many Gifts: The Vitality of the Body of Christ, vv. 27-31

Paul wraps up this chapter by reminding us of the purpose for the gifted people within the church and by calling us to a better way of valuing life in the church, which he will unfold in chapter 13, the way of love . . .

*“27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But earnestly desire the higher gifts.*

*And I will show you a still more excellent way.”*

#### A. God Blessed the Body with Gifted Members for Mutual Benefit

Paul reminds us again that we are all together the body of Christ, and that each one of us is individually a member of it. This clear and concise statement in verse 27 guards the church against the errors of collectivism, which would see everyone as the same and part of an undifferentiated mass, and individualism, which would see each individual as independent in his or her relationship to God.

Collectivism sometimes emphasizes belonging to the church so much that personal faith and a personal spiritual life is not necessary. As long as you are baptized and part of the whole, you’re good to go. But we are, individually, members of the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit unites each one of us, individually, to Christ by faith, and gifts each one of us individually for serving in the body of Christ.

Individualism, on the other hand, so emphasizes my personal faith in Jesus and my personal relationship with Him that it seems like we don’t even really need the church. Especially in today’s world, where we have so many rich spiritual resources available to us, we can fool ourselves into thinking that we don’t need the church. But when the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ, He makes us part of His body and gifts us for service in His body. As we belong to Christ, so we also belong to His people, and we love Him in large part by loving one another.

This truth also helps us to put some of the more prominent and spectacular gifts in perspective. What about these wonderfully gifted Apostles, Prophets, and Teachers that those who loved wisdom valued so highly within the church? What about the miracles and gifts of healing that those who loved power so highly valued? Well, they’re really no different that gifts of helping or administrating, are they? ALL of these are given to the members of the church for the service of the church. It’s not about us, and the focus should not be on us. It’s all about the Lord, and the focus should be on Him and on building up His body for His glory.

## **B. What Are the Higher Gifts and What is the More Excellent Way?**

Then, Paul ends this chapter with verse 31: *“But earnestly desire the higher gifts.*

*And I will show you a still more excellent way.”*

*What does He mean by “the higher gifts” and what is “a still more excellent way”?*

Some commentators have taken *“Earnestly desire the better gifts”* as a call to seek the gift of prophecy or maybe of tongues or the interpretation of tongues, since these gifts give revelation from God to His people. But this understanding of “the higher gifts” would seem to go against everything Paul has been teaching in this whole chapter. Why would he suddenly change his mind about the gifts right at the end of the chapter?

Others have said that “the higher gifts” are those which God can best use to edify His church – in other words, the ones which best build up the body. This could be true, if what Paul means is this: Stop seeking spectacular gifts that will draw all attention to you; instead seek the gifts that you can best use to serve the body. This is a better understanding, but it’s still a bit problematic, because nowhere in this chapter does Paul teach that we can choose what gift the Spirit gives us. Instead, it seems clear that the spiritual gifts discussed in this chapter are given by the Spirit as He chooses.

I think a better interpretation is to see “higher gifts” and “a more excellent way” as pointing us in the same direction – toward chapter 13, which will conclude, “Now these three remain, faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love.” I think the higher gifts of the Spirit are faith, hope, and love, and the more excellent way is the way love. So, what matters is not what gift we’re given, but whether exercise these gifts in the Spirit, according to His gifts of faith, hope, and love. These are higher, we can seek them, and they make our gifts, no matter what they are, most serviceable to the church.