

Practical implications of our being part of the body of Christ

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church,
3rd February 2019

“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” (Romans 12.4 – 5)

Introduction

Last week we were considering these very important verses in Romans chapter 12 which speak of how we who are believers are all different, and all have different gifts, but we are all part of the body of Christ, and we all belong to each other. We saw last time that there are four things that these verses tell us about the way that true believers are linked to each other:

1. We are all different, with different characteristics and gifts, yet all of us have a vital role to play. The apostle says, “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function....” Just as the human body has different organs, and these different organs each fulfil a different function, so each of us who is a true believer has a different role to fulfil in the body of Christ.
2. True believers are “in” Christ, and joined to him. “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so **in Christ...**” We are united with Christ, and if we are united with him, so we are united with one another.
3. True believers form a single body. “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the

same function, so in Christ **we who are many form one body.**" We are all part of the body of Christ, the church. The body of Christ consists of all true believers in all places and in all time who believe in Christ. This is sometimes known as the "universal church" or the "invisible church". The body of Christ finds its expression in local assemblies, local churches, of the Lord's people, where we work out what it means to love each other and grow together.

4. True believers belong to each other. "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." We belong to each other. This is true of the universal church, and it is also true of the local church.

I did not have time last week to spell out fully the practical implications of these verses, so I think it would be good to come back to these verses today, and for us to think about how they should affect the way that we relate with each other here in this congregation.

We need to understand that the words of the apostle were written to a particular church, the church in Rome, with a view to being applied in that congregation. So, I think it would be quite appropriate to take his words and apply them directly to this local church that meets here in Poplar.

1. We should meet together

We are members of one body, the body of Christ, the church. That body of Christ finds expression in the local church, the local assembly of the people of God. Therefore it is vitally important we should gather together in order that the local body of which we are part should be identifiable, and in order for us to grow together and become mature.

It is when we gather that we are able to worship God. It is as we gather that we are able to hear the teaching of the Word of God, to prepare us to serve God. It is as when we gather that we can observe the ordinances of the Lord's Supper and baptism, and so be strengthened in our love for God and each other. It is as we gather that we can encourage and strengthen each other in our faith. It is primarily in our gatherings that spiritual gifts are exercised, for the strengthening of the whole body.

The early church understood this clearly. The Holy Spirit was poured upon the believers on the day of Pentecost, Peter preached a great sermon, and 3,000 people were converted. Following from this they constantly met together. We read in Acts chapter 2 verses 42 to 47,

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

In Ephesians chapter 4 and verses 11 to 13, the apostle Paul tells us how we grow to maturity.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

God has given Word gifts to the church. Two of the gifts that are mentioned, of apostles and prophets, I believe have ceased with the completion of Scripture, but the other three, evangelists, pastors and teachers continue. What is their role? It is to prepare God's people, literally the "saints", for works of service. When those with teaching gifts proclaim the Word of God, the saints are prepared for works of service, with the result that the body of Christ may be built up until we all come to unity in the faith, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. How and where do those with Word gifts exercise their ministry? It is primarily when the Lord's people gather in local churches, and those with gifts of teaching teach them. Therefore, if you absent yourself from times when that teaching happens, you will miss out on the vital preparation that you need in order to serve your brothers and sisters, which will mean that the church will not grow so quickly to maturity.

The apostle continues, in verse 14 to 16,

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

The result of the saints having been prepared by the teaching of the Word of God in order to serve God is that they will no longer be immature, like infants, tossed back and forth by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, as all the members of the body of Christ speak the truth in love to each other, the body will grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ. The whole body will grow and build itself up in love as each part does its work. Again, I ask, where is the primary place that this growing together will happen? It will happen as we meet together as the Lord's people, and as we share together.

It is hard to over-emphasise the great importance of meeting together. It is vital for our corporate growth to maturity. If you are an occasional visitor, coming on and off to Sunday morning meetings, let me say to you that we are delighted to have you here, and we hope that you will be blessed by your visits. But could you, and should you, become regular every week? If you are someone who generally only attends services on Sunday mornings, I would ask you, and urge you to consider before the Lord, are you attending as many meetings a week as the Lord would have you to? Could you come back on Sunday afternoons? Could you come out to the prayer meeting, and / or to the Bible study? Do you need to reorganise your priorities and your weekly schedule to enable this to happen? Spiritual food has been prepared for you, sometimes with considerable effort, by your teachers. If you do not come and receive this food when you could, you will hurt not just yourself, but others who could be helped by your having been prepared for works of service.

2. We need to fellowship with each other

We have seen that the local church is a local expression of the body of Christ. For any body to work properly there needs to be a proper communication between the different members of the body. God has provided for that in our natural bodies with our nervous system, which

provides a way for the different organs of our body to work together and co-ordinate with each other.

Just as there needs to be communication within the human body, there needs also to be communication with one another within the church for the body of the church to function properly. We have just read in Ephesians chapter 4 verses 13 and 14 that Paul tells us that as we “speak the truth in love” we will “in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” He says later on in verse 25 of the same chapter, “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully with his neighbour, for we are all members of one body”. There needs to be honest communication with each other if we are to function properly as a body.

For this to happen, we need to not just be present at meetings, but we need to relate with others, before during and after those meetings. The Scriptures say, “Greet one another with a holy kiss”. How can we properly greet each other if we dash in to meetings at the last minute, or worse, late?

Also, during the meetings we should be ready to share things that the Lord has been helping us with, things that we have learned, concerns and answers to prayer. This is why in this church we seek in most meetings to have an opportunity for sharing. Come ready to share with your brothers and sisters. Sometimes we have midweek meetings that are specifically for sharing. Come to such meetings, and be willing to share what is happening in your life.

This is why also after meetings it is good to stay for a while and to share fellowship together. Do not rush off afterwards but stay behind and talk informally with your brothers and sisters. Find out what is going on in the lives of others, so that you can pray, and if necessary take practical action to help. Share with others what is happening in your own life. Find out about each other’s concerns and joys, temptations and victories. How can this exhortation for us to fellowship with each other be fulfilled if we have hardly any real contact with each other? If when you come to meetings of the church you leave immediately at the end without hardly saying more than “hello” to a couple of people, is that really fulfilling the teaching of Scripture that we should “speak the truth in love” to your fellow believers?

Fellowship should not be confined to our meetings together. We can and should get together with our brothers and sisters informally as well.

Arrange to meet up with others during the week. If you are able to, have others round to your house, or you could meet up at a coffee shop or at a park. Share what is really going on in your life with others, and listen to what is happening in their lives. Paul says in Galatians chapter 6 and verse 2, “Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.” How can we fulfil this command if we do not tell each other what our burdens are?

Part of fellowship is also that, if necessary, you confront another believer over a sin in his life that you have become aware of. We need to not shy away from this. Paul says in Colossians 3 verse 16, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”

3. We should commit ourselves to our local assembly of God's people

The apostle says, “in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” What he says is true for the universal body of Christ, but it is also true for local assembly of the Lord's people. We are one body, and we all belong to each other.

God has organised his people into local assemblies – churches – in order to enable us to work out in practice his commandments to love each other and to build each other up. Therefore we need to find, and commit ourselves to, a local body of believers where the Word of God is faithfully taught and practiced. It is no good simply saying “I am member of the universal body of Christ”. That statement is meaningless if we do not commit ourselves to a particular local expression of the body of Christ. It is only in the local assembly that we can properly fulfil the many Scriptural exhortations to learn to love one another, teach and admonish one another, exercise our gifts, pray together, help one another practically.

In particular it is only as we are committed to one body of believers that we can learn how to fulfil the commandment to bear with each other in love. If you meet with one fellowship one week, and then the next week you meet with another, and then the following week another, you will never be tempted to fall out with other believers, nor will they be tempted to fall out with you, because you will not know them, and they will not know you, well enough to have any difficulties in relationships. But it is when we join with a particular body of people, and over a long

period of time work out those relationships, that the difficulties of relationships come to the surface. These difficulties of relationships can themselves be an important source of our growth. If there is something about me that particularly annoys you, this may well be a sign of lack of holiness in me. At the same time, your reaction to me may indicate a lack of holiness in you. As we learn to relate with each other, you can point out my failings and help me to grow as a Christian, and I can help you to see your failings and overcome them. That way you and I both grow in holiness.

I would encourage you to be fully committed to one particular assembly. Of course we will occasionally visit another church, when we are on holiday, or for some special occasion to which we are invited. But I would not encourage you to “straddle” churches. Some will go to services of one church on Sunday mornings, and services of another church on Sunday afternoons, and perhaps the meetings of yet another church or fellowship group during the week. The problem with this is if you do this you will not really be properly involved with any particular fellowship. I would encourage you, if this has been your practice, to commit fully to one or other church, so that you can fully engage in the life of that church.

4. We should be not move around from church to church

The apostle says that “we are all part of the body of Christ”. We are part of the universal body of Christ. But that universal body of Christ finds expression in the local body of believers to which God has assigned us. There is much to be gained from having a long term involvement with one particular body of believers. As we persist in a local church over a long period of time, we fully get to know the other members, and they get to know us. We can find our role, and become most effective in our service of the Lord.

With advances of modern science it has become possible to transplant an organ from one person to another, but it is a difficult and risky procedure, and it takes a long time for someone who has received a transplanted organ to regain full strength, and for the organ to fully bed down in the receptor. So moving church is a risky business. It can take a very long time to find another church where one is comfortable, and to get to the point where one is fully involved in the new church. Some

believers never effectively transition from one church to another, and land up dropping out of church life altogether.

I am sure many of us will have met spiritual nomads. They meet with the church for a while. At first they are full of enthusiasm, and make many favourable comparisons with the church they have come from. But before long something is said to them that causes offence, and they up and go as suddenly as they arrived. What is wrong with being a spiritual nomad? The spiritual nomad never has a chance to grow up properly as a Christian. People are just getting to know him well enough to point out his faults and he is off on his travels. The spiritual nomad also never has an opportunity to get really involved in the ministry of a church.

Obviously, life does change. We do sometimes need to move location. Sometimes we may very sadly come to the conclusion that there is some other reason why we cannot continue in a particular church. But we must make sure that if we move church it is for good reasons, not just because we do not like our brothers and sisters or because we fancy a change.

5. We should not form petty factions

Paul says, "in Christ we who are many form one body." The local assembly of which we are part is an expression of the body of Christ. Therefore we should not divide from each other into factions. A body where one part of the body is fighting against another part of the body is sick. That is effectively what cancer is. It should be unthinkable for a local church to be divided into different quarrelling factions.

Paul very strongly criticised the church in Corinth for such divisions, in his first letter to the church, chapter 1 verses 10 to 13:

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised into the name of Paul?

He goes on in chapter 3 and verses 3 to 7 to say how foolish such divisions along the lines of personality are:

You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe — as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

We must be very careful not to allow silly arguments to grow up. Of course there will be differences of opinion about various matters. But we need to learn to handle these differences in a mature and loving way.

6. We need to be workers, not just spectators

Let us remind ourselves of the verses: "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." What is the point of the different organs of the human body? They are there to fulfil a function. They all work.

We will obviously need to consider this more fully on a future occasion as we go on to look at the different gifts that are mentioned in the following verses. But the key thing is this: gifts are given not as trophies to boast about, but to be used for the good of others. God wants all of us to be serving.

Some professing believers, it has to be said, are more like "consumers" of church than "providers". They come along to services, receive the messages, and go away again, without doing very much else. God does not want things to be that way. He has given us all gifts, with the purpose that they should be used.

I want to speak more about this next week, but for now, let me ask you: have you come to the point where you are not just coming to meetings of the church, but involved in the work of the church? Are you a church consumer or a church contributor? When you speak of the church, do you use the pronoun "they" or "we" when you talk of what the church is doing?

This booklet contains the edited notes of a sermon which was preached by Henry Dixon. A recording of the actual sermon that was preached may be found at <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=2319106504107>

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