

Modern American people are attracted to the picture of harmonious community, but ultimately they don't actually want it if it comes at the expense of their independence.

They might want community, but the thing that they are not willing to give up to get community is autonomy.

The gospel turns things upside down for us.

We need each other. Our church is such a community that is so tightly knit together that we are interdependent.

Unity has been a theme in this letter, but now Paul is going deeper. Not just unity, but interdependence.

In the church, God takes a lot of different people, and forms them into one body. Unity.

The church of Jesus Christ, in which the Spirit dwells, is unified.

There is one new aspect brought by our study passage tonight.

That new aspect is that we need each other.

Put it all together, and here is the main theme: **Christ is our head, and we are His body, which means that all believers need each other.**

1. The beauty of needing each other. (v. 12-13)

Many modern American Christians are trying to have both community and independence. It does not work. They end up choosing independence. We see this when they end up considering the church as nothing more than a voluntary assembly which we can join or un-join at our own whim. But what is the church?

The core reality of the definition of the church is at stake here.

Remember that the original question Paul was asked had to do with speaking in tongues. But Paul, in order to answer that, puts down a theological groundwork for how we should understand the church, our dependence on each other, and the use of gifts of the Spirit.

First, in verses 1-3, Paul had us all confess that Jesus is Lord.

Second, in verses 4-11, all gifts are given for the benefit of everyone.

Now starting in verse 12, Paul addresses a concern that could arise. The Corinthian believers were making a mistaken assumption that the greater the spiritual gift, the more important is the person who possessed that gift. Wrong.

That is thinking like celebrities across Corinth.

Instead, Paul insists that in the church, we think like Christians.

How? The person with the greatest spiritual gifts is still an equal member of the body of Christ, and the person with the least spiritual gifts is still an equal member of the body of Christ.

Paul shows us how in verse 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. 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.”

Christ’s spiritual body the church is indwelt by the Holy Spirit! We assemble to hear Christ’s word, we participate together in the sacrament that Christ instituted, and we each put into use the gifts that Christ’s Spirit gave to each of us, and we participate in the life of the church, so that everyone benefits.

Paul has no room at all for the widespread tendency in modern American Christians – to confess Jesus is Lord, but then to fail to participate in the church, including joining a local church.

The Westminster Confession of Faith in chapter 25, paragraph 2, says, “the visible church consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children, and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”

Tonight’s passage is one of the places that teaches this important truth.

The church is not a democracy. Christ Himself adds members. Christ Himself gives gifts. Christ Himself calls people to serve as pastors, elders, deacons, and chairpersons of committees, and every other activity, or work or service.

Unity is critically important. How do we protect unity? First, by seeing the beauty of how we need each other.

In verse 13, Paul gives the means by which we are incorporated into Christ’s body. Baptism.

We learned in chapter 1, that baptism had become a source of division in the church in Corinth. I was baptized by so and so, and I am a follower of so and so...”

Paul reminded the Corinthians that baptism is what incorporates individuals into the visible body of Christ.

Baptism is a sacrament of inclusion. It is a sacrament showing unity. It shows the addition of a person into a body. It did not matter what the person was BEFORE coming. They could be Jews or Greeks. They could be slaves or free people. It does not matter. Because AFTER coming to Christ, they are in Christ’s spiritual body. Different individual persons from various backgrounds and places, all come together and Christ makes them one – baptism symbolizes that. It is the Spirit of Christ who actually joins them to the body. Baptism is the sign.

Verse 13 it is said twice, “...in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”

What did the Spirit do? The Spirit melded us into one body.

The sign of baptism is tied to the thing that it signifies – dead people being made alive and being added to the church family.

The water of baptism does not incorporate us into Christ, the Holy Spirit does. We cannot see it visibly. We can see the water. God gave us the sign of the water of baptism because God is gracious. Let's not get confused. Baptism does nothing.

If you don't believe me, then for the rest of this worship service, go sit at the sign outside that says Falls Church. Nothing is happening out there. The sign points to the reality of the church people inside here, where the action is.

Baptism is not where the action is. The Spirit giving life to people and adding them to our church family, that is where the action is.

DO YOU SEE THE BEAUTY OF THIS?

Christ calls people from every race, tribe, people and nation. Christ calls everyone from prisoners to nursing mothers to the oppressed, to the powerful governmental leaders, to the afflicted, to the muscle-bound sailor, to the businessman, to the grieving. All respond to the call of Christ, and we are bonded together as one.

2. Our ridiculous, damaging illusions that we do not each other. (v. 14-26)

A believer cannot be severed from Christ.

However, the unity of the church can be broken.

The church in Corinth had divisions. They were misusing the gifts of the Spirit, and the holy sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Paul starts to address this in verse 14, "*For the body does not consist of one member, but of many [members].*"

Baptism unites us, but it does not fuse us. You maintain your individuality and freedom, but you cannot exist apart from the church.

Unity and diversity in the church. We are together, but we remain different. Every member is equally important.

If you cut off your leg, your leg dies. And your whole body is crippled by the loss.

Paul starts to make this point in verses 15-16, regarding the foot getting an inferiority complex because the foot is not as important as the hand. Or the ear doing the same when comparing itself to the eye. Silliness. We have people leave hats and boots at church sometimes, but all of you will leave here tonight with your foot and with your ear. Your foot and your ear are part of your body.

What is Paul saying? That regarding spiritual gifts, the church in Corinth was glorifying some gifts over other gifts, and making people feel inferior.

Paul says the reason this is ridiculous is because they were looking at it from the world's evaluation. The world says if you have a preacher and a piano player, you can have a church. Paul says no way. That is a preaching point, not a church.

Where would the church be without those seemingly insignificant gifts that those quiet servants have?

There are people who pray without ceasing, who call and visit others. They bring food to share, make the coffee, set up the chairs, run the sound system, organize the nursery, and so on.

Imagine the church as just one of those things. In verse 17, Paul shows that would be as silly as replacing your body with one big eyeball or one big ear, that is five feet tall. Verse 18, Paul shows that our place is a matter of God's sovereignty. We are right where God wants us to be. If God wanted the nose to be upside down, then whenever it rains, you would get rain in your nose. You are in exactly the church where God wants you.

Verses 19-20, no matter how important one person is to the church, the church does not consist of that one person. Nor can that important person exist on his own.

In verses 21-26, Paul changed focus. Now instead of encouraging the little people, Paul turns to address the people with the more visible roles.

Verse 21 – the eye is important. But if the eye gets prideful, the eye cannot say to the hand I don't need you. Who would wipe the tears from the eye?

This shows that the preacher is important part of the church, but the preacher cannot get prideful and say to the member, "I don't need you." Gifts are about service, not status! Those with strong gifts must not look down on those thought of as having lesser gifts. We need each other.

Verse 22 – those weaker parts are needed just as much as the stronger parts.

The society in Corinth struggled with classes of society and social status.

They were used to having the big name elite people in the culture wield all the influence, and they brought that sort of thinking into the church.

Paul does not say that the weaker people are welcome. Paul says that they are indispensable. We cannot continue without them!

This is demonstrated in our treatment of our bodies in verses 23-24. Unpresentable parts treated with greater modesty. We cover our ugly feet with nice shoes, and we do nothing to our hands.

Paul moves to the issue of suffering in verses 25-26. In order not to divide, the body experiences things together. If the hands and feet go outside in the cold to shovel, then the eyes must go outside also. We suffer together as a church. We offer kind words, a thoughtful note, a meal, babysitting, yardwork, or transportation to that medical appointment. When one part of our church suffers, we all join in.

The church is an organism, not an organization. It is like saying the church is a tomato plant, not a tomato delivery company.

We care about each individual person.

It troubles us all when one person is doubting or facing an illness or a job loss. We grieve when one of our members dies. We hurt when someone moves away, and maybe hurt more when someone just leaves the church. We care.

The flip side is the same. When one person is baptized or makes profession of faith, we all rejoice. When one person gets ordained or recognized in some way, we all rejoice. When one person buys a house or gets a promotion, graduates from school, or gets engaged, we are as glad as if it were happening to one of our close siblings.

3. How to recover the truth and beauty that we need each other. (v. 27-31)

What if the church gets split into little groups, like it did in Corinth?

How can we restore the church and the unity?

Back to the basic truths. The points that Paul makes in this chapter are so important to the life and health of the church.

Basic truths of the gospel such as that Christ the strongest member was made weak and dispensable, so that we weakest members might be considered indispensable.

The role of the spiritual gifts is to bring together a diverse group of people and teach them to love one another, because Christ has loved us first.

No superstars in the church. Paul was not the answer. Christ is the answer.

Verse 17 – we are the body.

Verse 28 – God appointed leaders and giftedness, but no elite leaders.

Verses 29-30 – Not everyone gets to be the visible leader, but variety is celebrated.

The spiritual gifts in the church are connected to the officers in the church. God gives officers, God gifts spiritual gifts. These ought to be found together.

People who claim to have gifts, always seem to want to start their own ministry. Interesting how it is often a ministry that is apart from the oversight of the local church in which God has placed them.

Why is there so much of an entrepreneurial spirit in the church? Lone rangers. It comes from separating God's spiritual gifts from God's appointed leaders in God's church. Gifts from God are not to be used to start a side ministry. Gifts from God are to be used to benefit the church of Christ Jesus. Gifts are not given to make one person famous. Gifts are given to build up the body of Christ.

What about the last verse? Verse 31, "...earnestly desire the higher gifts." Paul was repairing the church in Corinth by getting them off of their preoccupation with the gift of tongues, and onto something far more important. Love. Paul will spend the whole next chapter talking about the beauty of loving each other in the church.

So, why desire the higher gifts? The higher gifts are stated at the end of chapter 13. Faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love.

Desire to have the spiritual giftedness of true love for the church.

Once you have love for the church, then any giftedness you receive, you will use to serve the church.

The more gifts we have, the more we can serve the church.

When you love the church, you will never hurt the church. You will never pull away and do something for your own fame.

All of the gifts that the Spirit gives, are gifts that build up the church of Christ.

Concluding Application: My application is three words. Love the church.

Mutual love is often the cure for unhealthy competition and stratification.

The stronger our love for each other in our church, the stronger our church. The stronger our church, the greater our ability to identify remaining pagan ways of thinking.

The more we love each other in our church, the greater our resistance to church splits and false teachings.

The stronger our church, the greater our ability to understand that all we need is the death of Christ for our sins. We focus and re-focus on the centrality of Christ and Him crucified in our church family.

The more we love the church, the more we prevent false teaching by loving the truth.

The apostles did not ordain a next generation of apostles. Instead, the apostles ordained ministers, elders and deacons in their churches. Also, the apostles did not start the international ministry of Paul the Apostle or the international ministry of Peter the Apostle. They put all of their efforts into the church.

Who else put all their efforts into the church? all the ministers, elders and deacons. Same for all the men, women and children of God.

When Paul tells us to earnestly desire the higher gifts, he is asking us to respond to the call of God to love the church by serving the church.

How do you know if you love the church? You watch for things that need to be done, and you want to do them. You talk with your elder and your deacon, and ask what is needed. You are all in. You know that you love the church if you see it in your actions and your attitude.

If our church becomes known for anything in our community it should become known for these two things:

1) God loves us in Christ enough to have Jesus die for us and rise again.

2) that we love each other in this church.

That is why we earnestly desire the greater gifts, in order to love each other.

Ephesians 5:25, "...*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*"