

An Often Overlooked Point of Baptism and Communion – The Body of Christ

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on August 29, 2010

www.goldcountrybaptist.org

Ephesians 4:4-5 ⁴ *There is **one body** and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, **one baptism** ...*

This text is one of several that links baptism to the body of Christ, the church. The emphasis in this context is oneness, unity. I'm not going to walk through and unpack all the phrases in Eph. 4, we will do that sometime next year Lord-willing, but I want to bring our study of baptism to a close with a study of the body of Christ. Paul mentions baptism in v. 5, but his main point is to highlight the body of Christ that he begins this whole section with in v. 4 and he talks about what the body is, why it's important, how it's built up (including spiritual gifts in v. 7-8).

The end of v. 11 says God gave pastors/teachers to the church ...

¹² *for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of **the body of Christ***

We all have a part in church ministry, or at least we should, not the people only on stage Sunday at 8:15 (or 11), all of you are to be:

¹⁵ ... ***speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, ¹⁶ from whom **the whole body**, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to **the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.*****

In the local church, God has intentionally placed not only gifted up-front people, but equally important gifted behind-the-scenes servants. Every body part, ligament, joint, is essential to the body. Ephesians 4 has much to say about church, and the last several decades have seen several different approaches to church ministry:

- Pastor-driven (he runs ministry, instead of reproducing it)
- Politics-driven
- Purpose-driven
- Program-driven
- Pragmatic-driven (like v. 14b, tossed by wind and wave)
- Pop-culture-driven
- Postmodern-driven (emergent church, which doesn't make clear if there is absolute truth to speak in love like v. 15)
- ... are you ready for the latest? *Personal-Computer-driven*

A few months back an article appeared in *USA Today* that talked about an Oklahoma megachurch that in 2006 launched "Church Online" boasting over 60,000 "attendees":

'... It's all happening online ... The sites are fully interactive, with a dedicated Internet pastor, live chat in an online "lobby," ... one-on-one prayer through IM and communion [via Internet!]. (Viewers use their own bread and wine or water from home.) On one site, viewers can click on a tab during worship to accept Christ as their savior. Flamingo Road Church ... Fla., twice conducted long-distance baptisms through the Internet. [!]

... developers of Internet church sites disagree over how far they should go. Many, for example, will only conduct baptisms in person ... "We live in a day and age and a culture where people go to school online, bank online, date online and do other things online," said Kurt Ervin, who oversees the Internet campus for [his church]. "Why not create a platform for them to go to church online?" ... [another] started a new church service this fall on Facebook ... Volunteers on live chat emphasize that day's Bible teaching and block inappropriate posts. (During one recent service, a man who said he was logged on from India wrote that he was looking for a Christian wife.) ...

At Seacoast Church ... S.C., online viewers can repent by posting a private record of their sins on a cross [not an old rugged cross, a new computer-generated one]. Thumbnails of viewers' Facebook profiles appear during worship on Central Christian's Facebook Church so people can click on each others' pages to quickly connect. On [another], visitors will be able to choose "seats" in an auditorium, then click on surrounding seats to exchange Facebook and Twitter addresses. In this environment, evangelizing is nearly effortless [?!]. Regular viewers and volunteers post messages to their entire online network inviting them to the Web service in progress ... LifeChurch.tv has even found a way to attract people surfing for experiences that are far from pious. The congregation buys Google ad words so that a person searching for "sex" ... sees an ad inviting them to a live worship service instead.'¹

I suppose it was only a matter of time for American pastor/teachers who re-create church for every possible demographic to give the people they want, that this would occur, but it's sad to read of *churches*

- encouraging computer "worship" over real community (not for people who just can't make it to church, but who don't like church can now "do church" as a homebody and avoid the inconveniences of being around other human bodies in a real body of Christ)
- where laptops log onto "worship services" instead of living personal contact with believers who can encourage you, hold accountable, and leaders who watch over your soul that you submit yourself to
- true biblical fellowship is now being replaced by Facebook
- the Internet is substituted for interaction face-to-face in church
- the truth proclaimed from a pulpit in a corporate worship context is seen as an outdated form of communication before texting and tweeting (which I think is Twitter-dee and Twitter-dumb!)

I can understand why our sinfully individualistic consumeristic culture would like the idea: "Hey, I can do church by myself at home instead of being around annoying people or being challenged in ways that make me uncomfortable, people may notice when I'm not there or ask me to serve in some way or I may have to get over my selfishness and work to love people not as loveable as me" – but I can't understand how a pastor can reconcile that with Ephesians 4.

If the point is like v. 12 says for the believers *in the church* to be serving others *in their church* and building up others in the body of Christ, how can that be accomplished on a personal computer (emphasis on the word "personal")? How can v. 16 take place? I'm thankful for technology, and not against it, and it's wonderful that people can listen to sermons when not at church, but that's not church. The Bible defines what a church is, not some blog post. We need to get back to what God's Word teaches about the church.

Christianitytoday.com (Leadership Journal) earlier this year:

‘virtual church ... [can be in] every living room, dorm room, or coffeehouse with wi-fi ... online worshippers can light a candle [presumably not too close to their keyboard so the wax doesn’t drip on it], write a note of confession or prayer [on a computer screen] and nail it to a virtual cross [but make sure you don’t use actual nails or you’ll crack your screen], pray with Brad [he’s the “pastor”] in a private chat room, tithe [not letting left hand know what right mouse click is doing], and even take Communion. He admits that last one is a bit difficult.

"No, we don't have digital juice. We just point out that Communion is a meaningful way to respond in worship and encourage people to find a way to take the elements... "

Some churches conduct online baptisms even!] says Vasil. "I say the words via the web as the believer baptizes the person ... It's very meaningful and we take it seriously." [I don't know if the words he says over Internet are from Ephesians 4 “one body ... one baptism” but if so, that’s a different “one” that Paul meant!]

[One pastor points out that already-existing media-driven ministries and massive churches have problems, too] "but virtual church takes those problems to the absurd extreme. They create distance between leaders and the led, the teachers and the taught, and the serving and the served. While having real community can be difficult in a megachurch, it's impossible in a virtual church. Not only does virtual church fail to form us in necessary ways, I believe it has a malforming effect because it's just communal enough to provide some of the easiest and most instantly satisfying pieces of community without the harder, more demanding parts."

[Like letting us be served, while not serving, the opposite of what Jesus taught and modeled. Hebrews 10:24-25 commands us not to forsake assembling, gathering ourselves together with the church, assuming we’re physically able. We need encouragement. The Reformers when they rescued the doctrine of the church from the middle ages defined the marks of a true church as 1) public preaching of Scripture and the true gospel, 2) proper administration of ordinances (baptism and communion), 3) church discipline. The Grk root def. of *ekklesia* is “called out ones” or “public assembly”]

... the formation of disciples requires more than content [or computers] it also requires community (knowing and being known by other believers observing your life) ... Lots of people each eating bread and sipping juice in his or her own home ... is not what Bonhoeffer had in mind when he titled his classic book about the church, *Life Together*.

The biblical image, "the body of Christ," means more than people doing Christian stuff at the same time ... [inter-connected members] noticing and loving each other in real community

... we must not forget that the medium does matter to God. John declared that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and his letters have harsh words for anyone who says Jesus did not come in the flesh because the flesh (the physical) is real and it is important. God could have simply sent a text or a vision. But he didn't. No husband would want a virtual bride; no mother would want a virtual child. Yet our union with fellow church members—other interdependent parts of Christ's body in Paul's language—is of greater importance than union with family [it’s a deeper family]. Our churches have to go beyond words and reclaim the importance of physical acts of obedience, service, and worship ...

Rather than adding to the hyper-choices consumers face ... we need to send the message that being part of a church involves choosing to give up choices in favor of commitment. As another church leader has noted, there is something forming about being a part of a community that meets at a place, at a time, and with a people not of one's choosing.²

We don't want to gear our services to the fancies of the world, we want to be faithful to the Word. We aren't here to re-invent church or come up with a better way to do church than God gave us in His sufficient Word, we need to re-discover His church in His book and see where *we also* in our attitudes or actions need challenging.

The last 4 messages we've been studying the ordinances our Lord gave to His church, baptism and communion. And there's an often overlooked point of them that really impacted me this week. We celebrate baptisms today and will celebrate communion next week, and I pray that we will be able to do both with greater appreciation for those gifts of grace to Christ's church, pictures of grace, visible portraits of gospel truth, that communicate grace to the church. We are commanded to observe baptism and communion together, not optional for followers of Christ. There is blessing in obedience in general, and also special blessing God intends in these ordinances.

The Reformation tradition refers to them in that sense as "means of grace" for the church, just as prayer and preaching are means of grace for the church (not saving grace, grace for the saved). When you hear testimonies this afternoon from the waters of baptism, there is grace that God intends in a special way for all of you:

- as you are there in person to hear a testimony of grace
- then as you see a living visual picture of grace in the water
- as they go under the water signifying the spiritual cleansing and washing of the Holy Spirit that they've received
- symbolizing being buried with Christ, and being raised with Him to then walk in newness of life
- they emerge from the baptism waters to walk a cleansed life consistent with what they have just professed before the church, with the help of the church who has witnessed it
- It communicates the end of the old life, death to self and sin, which has been washed away already by Christ
- there is a public profession that "Jesus is Lord and I love Him and am not ashamed to obey Him in this manner, and I am committing to follow Him all my life with His people"
- In a similar way that marriage publically declares the love that already exists before others in a ceremony before witnesses who are to hold accountable to such vows, and is a great day of rejoicing, baptism publically declares the love we already have for the Lord and want all to know
- Immersion symbolizes identification with Christ in every way, being "in Christ," united inseparably with Him for life

There is a special and spiritual blessing and benefit in Communion as well for the church, not just reminders of past grace, but renewed experiences of grace together in the body, as we do what the NT calls "breaking of bread," or Communion. The church as the body of Christ is really the spiritual reality that both ordinances represent physically. Communion by definition requires a community of believers that are in union with Christ and each other, and baptism also signifies being identified with Christ as well as being immersed in His body, the very context where we serve and invest our lives in fellowship. In history, baptism usually marked membership in a local church.

We focused on Acts 2:38 (“*repent and be baptized*”) last time, but that’s not the end of the story. Let’s keep reading the story in v. 41: ⁴¹ *So then, those who had received his word **were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.***

To the original 120 were added 3,000 (not just bodies, souls), and as you keep reading, they were committed in body and soul:

⁴² *They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the **breaking of bread** [another name for Communion as we see in 1 Corinthians] and to prayer.*

This is the beginning of the fulfillment of the Great Commission: “*make disciples ... baptizing them ... teaching them to observe all that I commanded you*” (and those commands included prayer, communion, fellowship). The order is first you’re made a disciple (by grace through faith / repentance) and then Jesus commanded the Apostles to baptize disciples. Then teach them to observe everything He commanded, including communion/breaking bread.

This follows the order of Matthew 28, and has been the normal order in church history as we’ve seen in past weeks (baptism, then communion and community body life, in most traditions and cases, joining a church and getting plugged in and involved, serving). We emphasize baptism first and foremost because Jesus did (Mt 28:19) and conversion in the NT wasn’t just about commitment to Christ; it was commitment to His body, too; fellowship *with the church*, to communion *with the church* and to prayer *with and for the church*.

When the first disciples were “added to their number” in the book of Acts, this was no casual relationship with the church like many have today: uncommitted, unattached, uninvolved, and not putting themselves under leaders, desiring either to be unaccountable or unbothered (or both). It’s not just the virtual church people who think that way. Many may not be *church-haters*, they’re just *church-daters*, happy to have some perks of relationship, to spend some time together for an hour or two one day a week, but the guy never settles down to a real commitment. He enjoys having the appearance of being with her (the beautiful church) but he doesn’t want the responsibility and hard work of self-denying self-dying love to others in the body. In his privatized individualized life he resents any pressure from her to spend more time or to commit to the church in any formal or public way (“hey, I love you, baby, isn’t that enough? I already see you 2-3 Sundays a month for an hour, I don’t need to declare to others my commitment to you ...”)

As we saw last week, Peter in v. 38 (“*repent and be baptized*”) did not let his hearers have an easy way to have private faith with no public expression. He called them to publically profess Jesus as Lord before all, a commitment that would cost them much (former religion, friends, family, life?) as Jesus taught, but the reward is new friends, a new family of faith in the church, and joy and every spiritual blessing in Christ, and in the age to come, eternal life!

Steve Camp’s song *Consider the Cost* sums up the call of Christ:

“to love Him more than father or mother - to love Him more than even your own flesh - to give all that you are, for all that He is - this is the gospel according to Jesus ...

"oh foolish man, how you built on the sand - trusting in your goodness to save! - for when the rain falls, and the flood - breaks the walls you will be swept away! - but blessed is he who builds on the Rock - who takes Jesus as Lord to save! - for when the rain falls, he will endure it all - standing firm in His grace! ... there's a way that seems right to you - but in the end it leads only to death - but come unto Him all ye weary - come and find your rest"

There is rest and blessing and grace and peace and joy for all who turn from sin and self to Christ, and once you've done that you're not to keep Christ to self. Be baptized, be a part of a church, be in fellowship with those in the church, be devoting yourself to it. In v. 42, it says "*they were continually devoting themselves*" – that's a strong Grk word for commitment, not a casual or loose association.

NKJV "continued steadfastly" – original language and verb tense in this passage stresses a continuous pattern in these verses, and the word translated "devoting" or "continued steadfastly" speaks of:

- remaining constantly, steadfast, single-minded faithfulness
- adhering or sticking together with strength
- doing something persistently even in the face of opposition
- to desire something intensely, pursuing a desired object
- this is how the NT Christians viewed preaching, teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer. Do you relate at all?

Keep reading: ⁴⁴ *And **all** those who had believed were **together** and had **all** things in common* [Grk root for fellowship or communion]; ⁴⁵ *and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with **all**, as anyone might have need.*

Not all they had was sold, they still had homes to meet in, v. 46, but what was "radical" is they not only gave to the church from their income, they sold property and possessions to meet needs of others who were less fortunate – I know of some people who God has moved in their hearts in similar sacrificial giving ways as well.

⁴⁶ *Day by day continuing **with one mind** in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house* [worship not only in large corporate gatherings / temple, but in homes] *they were taking their meals **together** with gladness and sincerity of heart* [not content for a little of Christ Sunday mornings, they wanted to be with the body of Christ during the week, they pursued fellowship], ⁴⁷ *praising God and having favor **with all the people**. And the Lord was **adding to their number** day by day those who were being saved.*

This was kind of the newlywed stage of their relationship and commitment to the church, soon even the first church had growing pains and problems (Acts 5 - Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 6 - widows of one ethnic group feeling neglected in the benevolence).

Sin and selfishness do make Acts 2 body life hard to sustain, but can we be more like what we read in the NT? If we have the same Lord and same Spirit within us, I believe He can work in us, if we also devote ourselves to what they devoted themselves to in v. 42:

TEACHING – devote yourself to her preaching/teaching and increase your appetite beyond Sunday morning

FELLOWSHIP – *you* pursue this, seek it out, invite people over or to get together to discuss spiritual things

BREAKING BREAD – communion in church community

PRAYER – are you devoted to prayer, esp. for the church?

I want to challenge you young people to prize the public teaching of God's Word, even if you don't understand all of it, take notes if it helps you, and ask questions of dad later on what you don't understand. Be engaged in the sermon, be hungry for the Word of God as it's proclaimed, be expecting God Himself to give you at least one thought or truth to meditate on further every time you hear the Word or read the Word. High-schoolers, be thankful that you get to hear the Word preached again if you're in the Sunday evening program – believers your age in Greece aren't allowed to go to an evangelical church at all in many cases till they're age 18! And many youth in American churches rarely hear God's Word truly opened and explained, they just get spiritual cotton candy.

Junior-highers who come Thursday night, be devoted to public preaching time by Glen Cain, be thankful that he preaches/teaches the Bible and not just bits and bytes of fluffy stuff. Be devoted to learning your verses and be thankful for the fellowship you have in small group time with older believers (fellowship = speaking about and sharing spiritual things in smaller settings). Do this with your friends as well. When I was a teenager I used to think I was cool if I didn't talk to friends about Bible stuff or if I acted like I didn't care or didn't listen to preaching or sing the songs adults sang. I was a fool! Proverbs says it is the fool who has a deaf ear to God's law. Don't be a fool! Don't harden yourself to preaching now! Don't waste your life! Don't be a fool! Be on fire for the Lord now and be an example for older believers in your passion for Christ.

All who come today will see both young and old in baptism water, and I want to challenge you as you hear the words of those taking a stand for Christ publically, be challenged to take a stand for Christ and to be unashamed as you speak of Christ before others as well, in ways perhaps you haven't before but where God convicts you. If you've never been baptized, if you've never joined a church, if you've never served in a ministry of the church, if you've never invited people over from church, let me encourage you as well.

If you want to apply the end of Acts 2 further, let me recommend you go on our website under "Read Sermons" or "Listen to Sermons" and in 2008 (get 3/30 and 1/13/08 sermons on Acts 2). I spent a lot of time going through the phrases and details of this text and gave many applications I won't take the time to repeat today.

For today, I want you to turn to 1 Corinthians 1 to further tie in our past study on baptism/communion with our next study on body life. We looked at this text briefly last week, where Paul explains that baptism, although essential for obedience, is not the gospel. But what we didn't spend as much time on is the unity of the body of Christ that baptism is closely related to. Let's read earlier context:

1 Corinthians 1:10 *Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and **that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.*** ¹¹ *For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by **Chloe's people**, that there are **quarrels among you** [or "contentions" NKJV].* ¹² *Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ."* ¹³ **Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?** [no, baptism=in the name of Jesus] ¹⁴ *I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,* ¹⁵ *so that no one would say you were **baptized in my name.***

Paul is not downplaying baptism. He did baptize (v. 14, 16) but he is thankful that few Corinthians can claim Paul baptized them and use that for further dissension or division of different party lines they had drawn with personality followings and pitting one teacher against another and petty factions and quarrels that were so inconsistent with the very unity of the body that baptism represents.

Baptism signified attachment, commitment, but it wasn't to be to one segment or sub-group of the church in opposition to the others, it was to be to Christ, in the name of Christ, uniting with His body. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul develops this analogy for OT Israel:

¹ *For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were **all under the cloud and all passed through the sea;*** ² *and **all were baptized into Moses** [spiritually identified with Moses as leader just as NT believers are baptized into Christ, all identifying Him as their leader] **in the cloud and in the sea;*** ³ *and **all ate the same spiritual food;*** ⁴ *and **all drank the same spiritual drink ...***

This follows the analogy of baptism spiritually also coming before communion, symbolized by spiritual eating and drinking in the text

¹⁶ *Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing [communion in NKJV] **in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?*** ¹⁷ *Since there is **one bread**, we who are many are **one body**; for **we all partake of the one bread.***

God's Word very clearly ties the ordinances to the body of Christ, and especially the unity of God's people who fellowship together. As we celebrate Christ's death in communion next week, keep in mind that it's *the LORD'S Table*, and personal vendettas or issues you have with others in the body, problems you have with a leader or layperson, petty disputes, etc., are not to be brought to this table which is all about the unity of the body that Christ shed blood for.

Verse 10 says don't grumble or murmur in a bitter spirit like Israel did against their leaders and against fellow people of God in the OT (God hates that and destroyed them for it). Love God's people in the same way the Lord selflessly loved us selfish sinners on the very cross that we celebrate at communion with bread and cup.

... ²⁴ **Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor ...**

³¹ *Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, **do all to the glory of God.*** ³² *Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks **or to the church of God;*** ³³ *just as I also please all men in all things, **not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many ...***

11:16 *But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.* ¹⁷ *But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse.* ¹⁸ *For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you ...* [I taught on this last month, but remember before next week]

... ²⁷ *Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord.* ²⁸ *But a man must examine himself* [we should always examine ourselves and confess sin in general, 1 John 1:9, but especially sinful actions and attitudes toward others in the body of Christ are unworthy of what communion is all about], *and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup.* ²⁹ *For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly.* [in our study we saw body = the church]

... ³³ *So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.* [how we think of and treat others in the body is vital]

12:13 *For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit* [again the order of the spiritual analogy is baptism first and then drinking together, as communion signifies – notice also how baptism and the body are spiritually linked in v. 13a – guess how many times “body” is used in ch. 12? 18x!]

Both Communion and Baptism are closely related to the body of Christ. Baptism in the NT signifies not only a union with Christ but our union with His body, the church. Believer’s Baptism signifies being initiated or immersed into the body, while Communion signifies our ongoing participation in Christ’s body.

Baptism marks the beginning of the Christian life and is a one-time act, while Communion is a continual act throughout Christian life, and that’s why most in history have observed them in that order. Until recently, I never appreciated the NT’s body of Christ connection, but right after Paul speaks spiritually of baptism in v. 13, he goes into an extended discussion of the spiritual body of Christ:

¹⁴ *For the body is not one member, but many* [and he goes on to talk about eyes, ears, mouth, nose, head, shoulders, knees, and toes ... but all are equally connected important parts of the body] ... ²⁵ *so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.* ²⁶ *And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.* ²⁷ *Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it.* [and then he lists several gifts given to the NT church, apostles, etc.]

... ³¹ *But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.*

13:1 *If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.* ² *If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.* ³ *And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.*

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, ⁵ does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, ⁶ does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part; ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. [earlier Paul told them to put away childishness in their quarrels and conflicts in the body] ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. ¹³ But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

That passage is often read in the context of a marriage ceremony, and it certainly can be applied to husbands and wives, but I want you to see it in its original context that it has to do with the body of Christ and how we love or fail to love each other in a local church. Chapter 14 goes on with the discussion of spiritual gifts being given for edification of the body, and how they had failed to love because in self-focus it had become “all about me” (and 1st century Corinthians are not that different from Californians in the 21st).

And coming on the heels of Paul’s teaching about baptism and communion, comes Paul’s teaching about the body that they so closely and clearly symbolize, and the gifts that God’s Spirit has given, not for the gifted individual’s benefit primarily, but for the benefit and blessing of others when lovingly ministered to the body. Right in the heart of chapter 12 & 14’s teaching on the gifts, is the very heart of the entire Bible’s teaching on true agape love. And someday when we study Ephesians 4, you’ll see the same flow and focus after Paul mentions baptism and the body and unity and gifts given to build up others so the whole body grows.

Next time you read 1 Corinthians 13, read its context and realize that Paul is especially and primarily calling believers in the church to this highest level of selfless human love toward others in the body of Christ. Let this sink in, beloved ... this simple observation by keeping context in mind has the potential to change your life!

Right after the Bible’s most concentrated teaching on the body is the Bible’s most concentrated teaching on love, and its context has to do with how we treat, think of, and minister gifts to the body. I can’t read 1 Corinthians 13 anymore and not think of responsibility to the body of Christ ... and I hope you won’t be able to, either!

I’m so thankful I spent the time to study the rest of the context of the familiar communion and baptism passages we’ve studied the past several weeks, because we can read those passages hundreds of times and miss the big picture. I don’t know if this hits you as much as it hits me, but this has huge implications for the church. We’ll be studying those in the weeks ahead.

¹ http://www.usatoday.com/tech/hotsites/2009-11-02-online-churches_N.htm?csp=outbrain&csp=obnetwork

² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/communitylife/evangelism/churchvirtually.html>