

Maturity through unity, not uniformity

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[0 : 00] Well, next week we're going to dive in to studying Luke's Gospel. It's not a short book, so I imagine it's going to take us a while. We'll probably break it up into a few chunks of a number of weeks at a time and interleave it with other things.

So that's where we're going. But before we dive into that, I wanted to add in kind of one more element into the various things that were said to you and to me last week, the various charges and warnings and advice.

You guys heard Angus instruct you from Hebrews 13 to obey me and so on. You heard Finley and other people give me various advice on how to serve you faithfully.

You heard my dad try and bring my ego back down a little bit and Jeremy add his help to that as well this morning. And these are good and helpful things. But I think there was one element that, to my mind, it is helpful for us to think about that didn't get talked about.

And so this morning I thought we'd spend a few minutes looking at these verses from Corinthians where Paul talks to them about unity in the church, talks to them about being a team together, working towards a common purpose.

[1 : 12] There were a lot of times where you were addressed and a lot of times where I was addressed, and not many where we were addressed as a group together, as a team on the same mission.

Not that that wasn't there, but I think there is more to be said about it. We are in this together, guys. In every sense, fundamentally, we are one body.

We are a unity because we have the one spirit at work in us. We're one because we are united to the same Lord Jesus. And we are one because we're indwelt by the one and the same Holy Spirit. That's the point that Paul's making in verse 13. We are members of one body because we were baptised into one body, drinking of one spirit.

And therefore we are dependent on one another. We succeed or fail together. We need the gifts that each of us has. And so my first big point, if you like, this morning is we need you.

[2 : 18] Whatever situation you're finding yourself in this morning, however you're feeling, whether you feel like you're useful or not, whether you feel like you have a role here in this congregation or not, whether you feel important or not, whether you feel like other people value you or not, we need you.

That's the reality that Paul's presenting in these verses, isn't it? It is absolutely fundamental to the metaphor of the body that it is designed to function as a cohesive whole.

Every part plays a purpose. And so we need you. Firstly, we need you because the body should be united. This point is so fundamental, so deeply woven into this metaphor of the body, that Paul barely even makes it explicit.

Have a look again at verses 4 to 6. There are different kinds of gifts, but the same spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.

There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone, it is the same God at work. We are united because our different gifts come from the one spirit, because our various service serves the one Lord.

[3 : 29] And in the following verses, Paul is at pains to say again and again and again that it is the one spirit, the same spirit, who gives that variety of gifts.

We know, don't we, that there is something profoundly wrong with a body that is not united in purpose, whether that is the mental confusion that has it pulling in different directions or the kind of physical interruptions that mean that the leg is no longer obeying the hence commands, that there is a problem when the body is not united in purpose.

The same is true of the church. We are to be united. We need you to be working towards a common goal. Secondly, we need you because unity does not mean uniformity.

Unity does not mean uniformity. We need you because the body needs to have different members. Obadiah's role is not the same as my role.

If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

[4 : 44] If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts but one body. So we don't need to try and turn into one another. We don't need to all start dressing alike.

We don't need to all strive to be preachers. We don't need to all think we must learn to play an instrument, and so on and so on. We are united in the one spirit as the one body of Christ.

That does not mean we are identical. Paul doesn't let them, does he? Set one gift or one area of service as better than another. Indeed, his argument is that the less glamorous jobs are, if anything, the more important.

Have a look again at verse 22. On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. And the parts that we think are less honourable, we treat with special honour.

And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

[5 : 52] If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. When he talks about the parts of the body that seem to be weaker, it seems likely that he has in mind the internal organs that are protected inside your ribcage.

He's talking about the heart and the lungs and the stomach and these sorts of things, that are absolutely fundamental to how the body works. There is no value whatsoever in having a tongue if there are not lungs to provide the breath that makes the tongue make sounds.

There is no value at all to a tongue without the lungs. But the lungs do more than just make the tongue make sounds. The weaker parts are indispensable.

I think we can very easily overlook the people who don't play an obvious and upfront role.

And yet, if we were writing a list of who are the crucial members of Covenant Church, who is it vitally important that we don't let them go and decide to join a different church, or go and plant another church somewhere else, or if they show any hint of looking for a job somewhere else, we must immediately be looking for a replacement.

[7 : 18] Folks, if we were writing that list, Annabelle would not be at the top of that list, would she? And yet, do we not greatly miss her when she is not here?

Are we not grieved that Annabelle is in hospital and cannot be with us here today? Anyway, the weaker parts of the body are indispensable. If we grasp this metaphor of the body, if we see ourselves as vital parts of a connected whole, then it becomes ridiculous that somebody who has the gift of encouragement, or who has the gift of giving, or somebody who is steadfast in prayer, it becomes ridiculous for these people to be threatened by somebody with the more visible and more impressive-looking gifts.

We do not need to be threatened by one another. And let me say it as well to those of you who are listening to the recording at home, because you aren't well enough to be able to come and gather here with us regularly.

Let me say you are still a part of the body. You still have a part to play. If you can't be with us here regularly, then it is necessarily one of the less visible jobs, but that does not make it less valuable. You can be stuck in a chair or a bed at home, and you can still have a ministry of encouragement where you phone people up, or you send emails, or you write the postcards. You can be laid in a bed in hospital, and you can still play your part in the body in your faithfulness in prayer.

[8 : 41] This is odd. I don't know where I'm looking as I'm saying these things. Whatever your part is, wherever you are, you may not have spectacular gifts, but you are a part of the body, and you are needed by the body.

That was point number three, by the way, how we need everyone, so don't feel inferior. Sorry, for whatever reason, that heading got lost. Number four, we need everyone, so don't feel superior.

If you are ever, ever tempted to feel superior, don't. You might be visible, you might be impressive looking, but that does not mean that you are the most valuable.

It is an affront to Jesus Christ if a self-effacing or vulnerable Christian ends up feeling alienated or second class because you think you are important.

You cannot ever say in words or action or implication to another member of the church, I don't need you. The eye cannot say to the hand, I don't need you.

[9 : 54] The head cannot say to the feet, I don't need you. You may have special gifts, but do not think that you are the be-all and end-all of what this body needs.

Number five, we need you to get stuff done. If the whole church were doing the washing up, who would welcome the visitors?

If the whole church were playing the piano, who would count the money and who would pay to keep the lights on? If the whole church were preachers, who would turn the microphone on so that they can be heard? If the whole church were so on and so on and so on.

Folks, there are so many different things that need to happen for us to be able to gather together and to worship God. There are a variety of things that are needed for that to work.

And you have a part to play in that. And you have a part to play beyond what we do on a Sunday morning and a Sunday evening and a Friday, because that is not all that the church is and does.

[10 : 56] I think an implication of this passage is, if your gifts are not being utilised by this church, then this church is impoverished because of it.

This church is not all that it should be if it is not using your gifts. Now, this doesn't mean that absolutely everything that you could possibly do must be being utilised by the church.

But it does mean that if you are not, in some sense, playing an active part in this congregation, then by so doing, the congregation is deprived of one of the means that God has put in place for our encouragement and growth and development.

Your gifts are important to this church. So I think this means that for each of you, there is something which this church needs you to do. And if we don't need you for what we're doing at the moment, then that probably means we aren't doing enough things yet.

It probably means we aren't doing all the things that we should be doing because you have a gift and the church needs it. The body of the church doesn't have people without a purpose.

[12 : 10] So we need you to get stuff done. Number six, we need your spiritual input. My suggestion is that what Paul's talking about here in this metaphor of the body is not just about our corporate life together.

It's not just about the practical things that we need to have happen. It's not just about the visible things that we do together as a church, but also about how we grow together and grow to maturity as Christian individuals.

I suggest that a clear implication of this metaphor is that we each need the insights that the others have. Whether it's because of the different stage of life that you're at, whether it's because of the different experience that you have in the past, we will each come to God's word and we will see different things there.

Now we need to make sure that what we're seeing is actually there, but we have different situations and so we will naturally identify different emphases and elements.

And we all need one another to bring those together that we might together see a more cohesive whole. If my background means that I don't identify a particular implication of this passage and yours means that you do, then I need you to tell me about it, don't I?

[13 : 34] So that I will recognise the fullness of what God's word is saying. Remember a few months ago we looked at Colossians together, didn't we? And in Colossians chapter 3, we read, Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace, and be thankful.

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. And so on.

Paul Tripp, writing about these verses, says, Paul envisions a well-prepared body of Christ with the word of God dwelling in their hearts. A body of Christ that is now ready to do what God has designed it to do.

And what is that? Paul is very specific, isn't he? Teach and admonish one another. And if we're honest, in most contexts what Paul is describing is pretty radical, isn't it?

And I think it probably is for us here. And it's pretty unsettling. As he proposes that every believer is meant to have a teaching function in the life of every believer.

[14:43] All of God's people, all of the time. That is the paradigm that Paul sets out in Colossians and I think here in the body as well. You see, our Christianity in the UK and in America too, and as that spread around the world, has often been incredibly individualistic.

That it is all about me and my walk with God and my relationship with God. And that is not the picture that the Bible paints for us. Fundamentally, the picture the Bible paints is that our holiness, our sanctification, our growing in Christ-likeness is a community project, not an individual one. Part of what it means to be a body is that we look after one another. We build each other up. Yes, the hand goes and bandages the wounded foot. We do care for one another in time of need and we're generally fairly good at that.

But also, the hand lifts up the fork to bring the food into the whole body. The feet take you to the shops to buy the food in the first place. The eyes and the nose spot good food and reject what's going off.

The day-to-day nourishment of the body is the responsibility of the whole. The same is true of us. So yes, we care for one another in a crisis, but we also provide that day-to-day nourishment.

[16:03] And to go to somebody and say, as I was reading this week, I was struck by this verse and I thought it might encourage you, is a powerful thing, isn't it?

That is teaching and admonishing one another. It isn't particularly earth-shattering on one another. It's just, I thought this and thought of you. And yet, it is powerful and effective.

That is God using you to speak his truth to his people. Sorry.

This applies to all of us. It really does. If you have grown up in a situation that tells you that because you are not the minister and the elder, that means you don't have anything to do with the spiritual life of the church, your job is to sit there and listen, this verse says otherwise.

If you have been told you are a woman, you have no right telling any man ever anything that God's word might be saying, Paul says different. If you have been told you're not well enough educated, how could you possibly have something to offer?

[17:27] Paul says different. Paul says you have a responsibility to teach and admonish one another. There are, I think, two complementary ministries of the word, if you like.

There is the public proclamation, what I am doing now, what you are listening to now. And there are the private interactions whereby we take God's word and we apply it concretely and specifically to individual believers.

And the fixed content of those is the same. The content of both is God's word, but the specifics vary. And not all of us are meant to be involved in the large-scale public proclamation.

But we do all have a role to play in these private interactions. So, we need you. We are united as the body of Christ.

We are not uniform as the body of Christ. We must not feel inferior. We must not feel superior. We need you to get stuff done. We need your spiritual input.

[18:33] That's all point one. We need you. Point two, and this, I guess, is what prompted me to choose this passage to speak on this morning. Point two, I need you.

You were told last week to listen to me and you should. You were told to encourage me and I hope that you will. But I said a minute ago that holiness is a community project, not an individual one.

And that is just as much true for me as it is for you. I am dependent on you for spiritual input. So if you have those various responsibilities, here is one more for you.

You have a responsibility to tell me when I do it wrong. You have a responsibility to tell me if I say something that's wrong. You have a responsibility to tell me if I do something that is wrong.

If you look at how I act and think that is just not quite right. My holiness is a community project. We are in this together and so I need you to come and to tell me.

[19:42] Holiness is a community project. If we have these two levels of the ministry of the word if you like, this public proclamation and this private interaction, well again, I need both of those.

And so that's why we will have guest speakers coming and we will be exploring how we can use more people within the congregation and locally to come and be involved in that public proclamation.

And I need the individual too. And that is a responsibility for all of you. So here is my conclusion. you may not have spectacular gifts but you are part of the body and you are needed.

And secondly, you might have special gifts but do not think for a moment that that means that you are the be-all and end-all of what the body needs. That is not God's way.

[20 : 47] Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord God, thank you that you give us to one another.

Thank you that you have your purposes for how we will teach, admonish, correct, rebuke, train, develop one another. Thank you that that is a task that you give to all of us.

That because our understanding is all from your word, that means that we all have insights to bring because we can all read and understand and speak to one another.

Lord, would you give us the confidence to do that? Would you give us the confidence in your word, in you speaking, that will enable us to take what we have read and go and speak to one another?

Would you comfort us where we feel like we don't have a part to play, where we feel diminished or put down by others? Lord, would you give your comfort? And Lord, would you rebuke us where we are in danger of feeling like we have arrived, like we have an important role?

[21 : 58] Lord, would you correct us and train us to be more like you? In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.