

PM John 17:18-26 & 1 Corinthians 12 Unity in Diversity

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[0 : 00] First of all, in John's Gospel, chapter 17, and we'll read from verse 18 to the end of the chapter. John chapter 17, and from verse 18.

As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

I do not ask for those only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The glory that you have given me, I have given to them, that they may be one, even as we are one. I in them, and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me, and loved them, even as you loved me.

Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, that you have given me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

[1 : 23] O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me, may be in them, and I in them.

May God bless to us this reading. The second reading is found in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians chapter 12, and we're going to read the whole of this chapter.

That's on page 1155 in the Bible provided. 1 Corinthians chapter 12, on page 1155.

It's entitled Spiritual Gifts, and then halfway through, One Body with Many Members. So let's read this whole chapter. Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.

You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led.

Therefore, I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says, Jesus is accursed, and no one can say, Jesus is Lord, except in the Holy Spirit.

[2 : 47] Now, there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of service, but the same Lord. And there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit.

To another faith by the same Spirit. To another gifts of healing by one Spirit. To another the working of miracles. To another prophecy. To another the ability to distinguish between spirits.

To another various kinds of tongues. To another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit. Who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

For just as the body is one, and as many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

[3 : 54] For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. Jews or Greeks, slave or free. And all were made to drink of one Spirit.

For the body does not consist of one member, but of many. 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.

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. 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 as it is, God arranged the members of the body, each one of them, as he chose.

If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you.

[4 : 57] Nor, again, the head to the feet, I have no need of you. On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. And on these parts of the body, that we think less honourable, we bestow the greater honour.

And our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

If one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honoured, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.

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.

Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?

[6 : 09] But earnestly desire the higher gifts, and I will show you a still more excellent way. May God bless to us this reading too.

Let's look at a verse in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, verse 12. 1 Corinthians chapter 12, verse 12.

That's on page 1155.

For just as the body is one, and as many members, and all the members of that body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

Christ. I want to say something about what the church is. And there are various ways of going about this.

But the way that I want particularly to focus on is a picture that is given of the matter. We could talk about theology, and we could take passages that describe, in theory, what the church is.

[7 : 14] But here we've got a picture of it. The church is a body. Now, when we look at it like that, we think about the church as being the whole people of God, everywhere, in all times.

No limit in geography, in space, no limit in time. All God's people everywhere, they are the church, and they function as a body.

That, I think, is the New Testament way of looking at the thing. But the interesting thing to me is that that idea, Paul then applies to the situation that he's talking about amongst the Corinthians.

and he's applying it to the particular problems that they've got there. So it's not just a question of what is the church like in theory, but how does that relate to us in practice today?

And that's what I'd like to do then with this idea that the church is a body. The main idea, obviously, as you read this, is that there is unity and diversity in the body.

[8 : 27] So let's start out by looking at this in regard to the illustration. He's talking about the human body, and he's saying that if you look at the human body, you'll see things showing great diversity, and yet, they function together in complete harmony.

In the human body, there's diversity and unity. Now, it's not difficult to see that. If we think about different parts of our body, we realize that the different parts are different from each other.

The ear is different from the eye, different in form, different in function. The hand and the foot may have certain similarities, but they're different in shape, different in form, and different in function.

You can't walk in your hands, at least you can't normally walk in your hands. There are things that you do with your fingers that you couldn't do with your toes. So, although they look alike, in some ways, there is diversity there.

And so, we could go on looking at the different functions of the human body. And if we look inside ourselves, at what we are inside, there's the heart and the lungs and the liver and the kidneys and so on, and these show the same diversity.

[9 : 54] We're not made of one thing inside us, there's various things inside us. There's diversity at that level too. And if you look at each of these parts, you'll see the same diversity.

The eye apparently has got seven main parts to it. The ear apparently has got three main parts to it. And if you look at each of these parts, you see that they're made up of different bits as well that are diverse.

So that the whole body together is made up of hundreds and thousands of different parts, all with their same function, all with a different function, all with their different form.

There's diversity in the human body. And yet, the human body works together in unity in a healthy condition.

When I walk, I don't just use my feet, my arms go in time, and I'll probably sway my body as well, depending how fast I'm walking, and I'll look with my eyes to see where I'm going, and I'll listen with my ears to see if there's traffic around.

[11 : 03] So my whole body, all these different functions, are working together so that I can walk safely. And so it is with any other activity.

We don't do things simply with one part of our bodies. In preaching, we preach with our mouths. But our eyes are at work as well, looking at the folks that we're preaching to.

And obviously, some people, more than others, use their hands as well in their preaching. That's what we do in everything that we do. Different parts working together, and in the healthy body, working together in complete unity.

And that's the illustration that Paul is using here. That's what the church is like, he says. There is diversity in it, and there is unity at the same time.

Now that is quite a remarkable thing, because it's not what we find in most of society around us. Other clubs, associations, groups, they may be united in some ways to accomplish a particular purpose, but there is usually a lack, there is often a lack of diversity as well.

[12 : 22] You have a golf club, men only. No diversity there allowed. I once went, many years ago, went to once play golf in Edinburgh with my brother-in-law, and we wanted to find a municipal golf course, and we came to a clubhouse, and discovered we'd got the wrong place, because it said, jackets must be worn at all times at the clubhouse.

And I figured that that was for people that were a wee bit higher in society than we were. They had got to have a certain standard of living, and a certain outlook of life to belong to that golf club.

No diversity. And if you look at things in the world, that's the way it is. Diversity and unity are not usually found together, but in the church, they are, or they're meant to be.

So let's look at how this applies to us. That's what the illustration means. Diversity and unity are found together in the church. Let's look at the diversity of the church as described here, and we'll look at the unity of it as well more briefly, probably.

So, there is diversity in the church. He says here in verse 13, for in one spirit we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free.

[13 : 46] Here he's referring to racial and social diversity. Here is the racial diversity that they found in the church then. There were Jews and there were Greeks united together in the one church.

Now that was not the way that people saw things in those days. The Jews were the Jews were the Jews and they wouldn't associate with other people.

They saw themselves as completely different, a class apart, they had no dealings with the Samaritans. Even though the Samaritans had Jewish blood, they weren't pure Jews so you didn't have dealings with them.

They generally wouldn't sit down at the table with others because they were Jews with their own health laws, their own food laws and they wouldn't sit down with others. There was a big social divide, racial divide between Jew and Greek or Jew and Gentile as it sometimes is, Jews and non-Jews.

And Paul says but it's not that way in the church. In the church there is diversity. Diversity of Jew and Gentile but that contributes nonetheless to unity.

[15 : 01] There is racial diversity in the church. There is social diversity in the church also. Slaves, he says, are free. Another big division in those days.

The Roman Empire dominated its geography in the Middle East or the Mediterranean area in that time and slavery was a part of it.

Not perhaps the slavery that there was in the Western Hemisphere in more modern times. But there was slavery and it was a big social barrier.

You were either slave or you were free. And even though slaves were probably treated not too badly in most cases nonetheless we've got this idea that there was a sharp difference.

You did not mingle in social terms. Free and slave didn't mingle together. And the church embraces these two categories.

[16:05] There is diversity of social conditions in the church. And that's what Paul has in mind here. For ourselves we wouldn't speak about Jew and Gentile.

We wouldn't speak about slave and free. But what we're talking about is this. In the church the members of the church are drawn from different social and racial backgrounds.

They're found together in that one body. Whether they are Scots or Irish or English or Ukrainian or Iranian or Zimbabwean or Peruvian or Brazilian or whatever.

They're found together in the one body. There is diversity of racial background of social background cultural background.

That's what Paul is speaking about here. And that's the way that things were in those days. And Paul was keen to ensure that there was this.

[17:07] And once when some folks were not eating with the Gentiles he rebuked them. Because Jew and Gentile had to have the same status within the church. And once when a runaway slave came to Rome and was converted Paul sends them back to his owner.

Not now as a slave but as a brother. And you see he was saying in the church slave and free merge or operate on equal terms.

Diversity is the keynote there. But there's also diversity in gifts. And this is very much what he's been speaking about in this chapter. And we're not going to go into details.

But notice that he mentions in different places here the variety of gifts that there are in the church. To one is given through the spirit the utterance of wisdom.

to another the utterance of knowledge. To another faith by another gifts of healing. Working of miracles, prophecy, distinguishing between tongues and so on.

[18:12] And later on he speaks in terms of apostles and prophets and teachers, miracle workers and he talks about administrators and doing practical deeds of kindness, that sort of thing.

All these different range of gifts are there. And that's what he gives great place to hear. And that's very important to him. The church isn't dominated by one man that has one gift or one man that has all the gifts.

Each member in the church has got a gift or more than one gift. And it's a God-given gift and it's given as God ordained. This diversity of gifts is not our choice, it's God's choice.

It's the way he chose that things should be. And therefore each member of the church Paul argues has been given a particular gift. Some of these were public gifts like teaching and preaching and so on.

Some of these were private gifts like the gift of faith, the ability to pray for things in faith and have your prayer answered. And some of them are let us say what we normally think of low profile things, administration, practical matters of that nature.

[19:30] But they're all given the same status, that these are gifts of God, gifts of his Holy Spirit, that he has given according to his will and purpose. So there isn't just diversity in the church of social and cultural background, but there is diversity in regard to gifts.

And that's a big thing that is being spoken about here. So that's the way the church is. And if you think about the church as a body that embraces all believers in all times, you can obviously see that that is the case.

But he's applying this at the local situation. And this is what he's saying to people. The local church should be able to embrace within its bounds all sorts of people for whatever background, from whatever class of society, whatever level of education, from whatever experience of life.

People from all sorts of different backgrounds should be able to come together and be one in the body of Christ because diversity is a keynote of it.

People with different gifts should be able to operate within the church. Not one gift dominating over others, but all finding their due place in the work of the gospel.

[20:50] diversity of background and gifts. That's the diversity that he's speaking about here. Now when I came to think of applying this to this congregation I wondered how on earth I could possibly apply this idea of diversity of racial background.

There was 20 people, 20 adults here this morning and they were born in seven different countries and we've got diversity diversity at that level.

If you went into the different quality of life and position in life, we'd see the same diversity. And that's wonderful, you've got it.

Usually if I preach this sermon, which I must confess I do quite a lot because it's one I like especially, when I preached it in South Africa and preached it in Scotland, it was the same thing. You'd got to say gently, look, now, most of you have the same culture, the same background and there are people in your community that have come in, they're not the same background. Make sure that they're welcome in church. Isn't it a pity that you don't have diversity of background in your church? And that's usually what I have to say and here I have to say the very opposite. [22 : 06] Isn't it great, the diversity that you've got and that from these different backgrounds people come together as one despite the diversity of their backgrounds and status in life and so on.

You've got the diversity, it seems to me, that this is speaking of. And when it comes to diversity of gifts, what am I going to say? And really, I don't think of too much to say here. Everybody's got their gift. Everybody should be doing something in the church, in private or in public, according to your gift. Nobody should be concerned, oh he's got a better gift than I have, she's got a better gift than I have.

Because God gave the gifts. You can't complain about the giving of God, he does it in his own good will and his own purpose. And this is what we've to do, each one with his or her own particular place to perform within the church using the diverse gifts that have been granted.

Now some people say, well what is my gift? I'm not very sure what my gift is. And I recognise there is sometimes a problem there. And sometimes I would say, well what you've got to do is this, you've got to think about it and pray about it and see if there's something in the congregation that you can do expressing the gift that God has given to you.

[23 : 30] And I'm not saying that that is wrong. But nowadays I would tend to say more, well ask the elders of the church what your gift is. Ask them how you can fit in with the program of the church, how you can contribute your gift to them.

Because it seems to me that in general in spiritual matters the opinion of a group is better than a single opinion. I might misinterpret it and say I've got this gift and nobody else thinks I've got it and that doesn't work.

But if you ask the elders of the church especially men that are meant to be gifted for leadership and with discernment and who could run the program as it were they should be able to say well we think that your gift is this, we think that this is how you should fit into the program.

In this way we shall continue to be a church with diversity of background using our diverse gifts in a way that contributes to the unity of the church.

That's diversity. Now there is also here unity and that's what we're going to emphasize at this point because he tells us the basis of this unity is not because we're all from the same background, because we're all in the same culture, because we're all on the same social level, it's not that at all, nothing to do with that.

[24 : 53] It's the spiritual qualifications of the members of the church that makes them one. He mentions it in verse 13.

In one spirit we were all baptized into one body and all were made to drink of one spirit. So here he's talking in language that is a wee bit difficult about the spiritual experience that makes a person a member of the church and because of all that experience that is what makes them one.

one. So what is he speaking about here? In one spirit we were all baptized into one body and all were made to drink of one spirit.

I think he's not talking about two different things here but he's talking about one thing that can be described in two different ways.

And we're going to start with a second one here. All those that are members of the church have this in common that they were all made to drink of one spirit.

[26 : 08] Drinking. Well that is a picture that is frequently used in the scriptures. O everyone that thirsts us, come to the waters, says the Old Testament prophet.

What does he mean? He's meaning that as people are thirsty and require water to sustain and develop their lives so we need water in spiritual terms to have life itself and to sustain it.

Water, not outward water but as it were the spiritual equivalent. Now water is something of immense importance in the natural life.

Here's a plant that is drooping, a house plant that's drooping, put some water on it and it perks up. Here's a camel working for days, travelling around the desert.

It's worn out, its hump is sunk, put it to the water. It will put its head under the water for 15 minutes or more, drinking and drinking and drinking and his whole body revives and he's fit to go again.

[27 : 28] Water. And that's what we need. We are thirsty, is one picture that is used, and we need water to sustain us.

Not the natural water that we're talking about, but the spiritual equivalent. What Jesus said when he said to the Samaritan woman, if you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.

Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water, welling up to eternal life. It's the grace of God that is spoken about in this way.

That's the water that gives us and nourishes and develops spiritual life. To get that water we have to go as thirsty, needy creatures and we have to go to Christ and ask that he would satisfy our needs, that he would quench our thirst, that he would give us this living water that gives us life indeed.

In other words, we go to Christ and we rest upon his grace and we ask that he would give us forgiveness and that he would give us strength and that he would give us wisdom and we draw from him, we drink from him that water that we need.

[28 : 55] And so that's the way that Paul speaks here. All were made to drink of one spirit. These gifts that come to us through the grace of Christ are things that become real to us through the work of the spirit.

spirit. When we come to Jesus and say, I'm thirsting after you, I'm thirsting for something that you alone can give, I'm needing peace and forgiveness and happiness and purpose, I'm looking to you for these things.

When we come to Jesus to drink of the water of life, it's the spirit that leads us to do so. We wouldn't have a natural inclination to do so, but the spirit operates in us and gives us that thirst.

And it's in that way that Paul can say we were all made to drink of one spirit. By the working of one spirit, we were all brought to Christ to draw from his grace the water of life and to experience that spiritual life that he alone can give.

And you see, therefore, it's nothing to do with our level in society or our background or our culture or our language or our nationality or anything like that.

[30 : 05] It's all got to do with a genuine experience of Christ as our Saviour, whereby we come away from our sins and rest everything upon him and draw everything that we need from him.

As we would draw water to nourish and sustain our bodies, so we draw everything that we need from him to nourish and sustain spiritual life. That's what he's speaking about, a basic spiritual experience of knowing Christ and his grace to the gospel.

But this also is described as in one spirit we will all baptised into one body. And that is a difficult concept too.

But I'm saying what we have described in those terms of coming and drinking of the water of life can also be described in these terms also of a baptism into one body by the one spirit.

And the verse that I like to recur to when I'm trying to explain this which is a wee bit difficult to put it mildly is this. A verse from Titus I think it is.

[31 : 15] He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit whom he poured out abundantly on us in Christ Jesus.

Something like that it goes. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit comes to us and leads us to Christ draws us to Christ to partake of the water of life.

That's involved in that is the renewal by the Holy Spirit. He comes to people that are dead in their sins and he gives them life and that is what enables them to go to Christ and draw the water of life for themselves.

And so he speaks about the renewal by the Holy Spirit. And this is the washing of rebirth. That experience is also bound up with the experience of cleansing.

When the Holy Spirit comes to us to make us new and we come to Christ we experience this washing away of our sins, this cleansing. And it's like a rebirth, the whole process is like a rebirth.

[32 : 24] And that's what he's speaking about here. He's speaking about the experience of the Holy Spirit. by which we come to know Christ, we're cleansed from our sins, we're renewed by him, we receive the water of life and that can be described as a baptism by the Holy Spirit.

Because he says in Titus, by the renewal of the Holy Spirit whom he poured out on us abundantly. That's the language of baptism. Pouring out water abundantly.

Well, not everybody pours it out abundantly but I tend to give a good bit of water when I baptise children. But the point is here, this is a way that is in agreement with the concept of baptism as they understood it.

The washings of the Old Testament, the pouring out of water, the sprinkling of water in the Old Testament, rites and ceremonies, that's the sort of thing that he's got in mind here.

And he says there's a spiritual equivalent of that. The Holy Spirit is poured on us. He comes down upon us as water does in baptism, he comes down to us in this act of renewal.

[33 : 34] And thus we are baptised by one Spirit. We are given an abundant experience of the Spirit bringing us to Christ. And it's that that makes us members of one body.

That incorporates us into this fellowship. It makes us members of it. And therefore, that is what he is speaking about here. And that is what gives us unity.

The experience of the Spirit bringing us to Christ, renewing us, a baptism of the Spirit that leads to a complete change of our experience, a renewal of our very beings.

That's at the heart of the Christian gospel and it's what makes people one in Christ. Now there are other ways of describing that as well, but we'll not go into them.

Because here we've got the teaching that is most evident. This is what gives us unity. And that's something, again, we've got to reflect on.

[34 : 33] There are congregations where everybody comes from the same background. And the unity that they enjoy is the fact that they're all from the same background. And they talk day by day, or whenever they meet, about their acquaintances in the village and so on.

And the fact that they're one in Christ is not to a parent. I was in a congregation where after the church service, the Lewis people got together in one group and the Sky folks got together in another group and the rest of us got together in our own little groups.

And it did seem to me that the unity that they were expressing was one of cultural background. And that's not it at all. Nothing like that is what we're thinking about here.

We're united by a spiritual experience of Christ who brings to us the water of life. And that's what we've got to put before you here. This is what counts.

This is what matters. Not our upbringing, not our upbringing, nothing like that. Have we had this experience? Then if so, we are united in Christ. We are part of the body and we belong together and that's what constitutes our unity.

[35 : 46] And if you're looking for unity in the other way, you won't find it. And if you're outside of Christ, you won't find the unity. You've got to come to this experience, receive Christ through the influence of the Spirit, draw from him the water of life that you need, live by that water of life, and you belong to the body.

And that's the unity that consists, that is a reality in the experience of God's people. So, that's the message.

The church is a body because in the body, there is diversity and unity. In the church, there is diversity of background and social condition and all sorts of things.

Diversity of gifts as well. And what constitutes us one is the work of the Spirit bringing us to Christ.

So, what are we going to make of this? Well, again, in my way of application, I do find this a wee bit difficult because I'm sure you all understand and appreciate that.

And really, I think what I want to say is that overall, make sure you keep going with this great picture. You're a diverse congregation. Make much of it.

[36 : 57] Rejoice in it. Thank God for it. Confront the difficulties of it with a positive attitude because that's what God designed his people to be. Make sure you use your gifts cooperating together, recognizing that the gifts were given by God according to his own purpose and will.

Not complaining, not criticizing, not being jealous, using the gifts that God has given in the unity of this congregation here. And in a way, I'm saying, keep on as you're doing.

But I do think we should remember other situations too where this is not yet a reality. As I say, generally speaking, I can't speak with such confidence as I can here. There are congregations that find it difficult to welcome strangers.

There are congregations that find it difficult to take people from abroad, from very different circumstances, and they don't know how to cope, and they can't cope. And we've got to pray for

them that they would understand this and appreciate this.

And there's work going on in our congregations, especially in the cities, amongst people that come in amongst us of different backgrounds, and sometimes the congregations are not as appreciative as they might be.

[38 : 15] And we've got to pray for them that they would understand and appreciate this. And that the congregations, increasingly in our nation, would be welcoming to all, of all sorts of backgrounds, so that diversity and unity may be truly expressed in their lives.

May God bless to us his word. Amen.