

# Being the church in an individualistic culture

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[ 0 : 00 ] We're reading from 1 Corinthians 12, 12 to 27. And just to give an intro to this passage, we're at a point in Paul's ministry where the Corinthians are having a bit of a problem with their community.

There's individuals, lots of individuals in the community that are trying to big note themselves by talking about their spiritual gifts. And Paul's really trying to bring everyone together as a community and try to focus not on the individual but on the whole body of Christ.

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 are all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves 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.

If the ear should say, because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body, that would make it no less a part of the body. It would make it no less a part of the body.

[ 1 : 21 ] 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? But as it is, God arranged the members in 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.

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 those 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. That you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

[ 2 : 39 ] Well, good morning everyone. Why don't we pray as we come to God's word. Father, I pray that you would increase each one of our understanding of who we are.

And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, what's in it for me? What's in it for me? I've used this illustration before.

I can't find a better one, so I'm going to reuse it. But have you noticed what the recruitment messages on the Australian Defence Force website is like? Whatever advertising you see.

The first thing you see when you open the webpage is, find your ideal role in the Australian Defence Force. Find your ideal role.

Another spot in the website says, in the ADF, you will enjoy a rich and rewarding blend of career and lifestyle opportunities, plus fulfilling, well-paid work, job security, and numerous benefits.

[ 4 : 02 ] Now, I can't think of a job that should be more self-sacrificing than being in the Defence Force. But it's not saying, what can you do for your country?

It's not even saying, protect the ones you love. It's like, look at how it's going to help you. What's in it for me?

I just want to use that as an illustration that we live in an individualistic culture. And that is a big challenge to being the church God has created us to be.

Now, I want to clarify that if we lived in a different culture, if we lived in a more collective, group, family-minded culture, many cultures in Asia, for instance, we would need a different sermon.

Community built on hierarchy and social rank can create other problems. Sacrificing the individual for the sake of the group, or a person's value is based on where they're ranked in the group, or you're doing all things for the sake of honouring those who are at the top of the group, or the tribalism between families and groups.

[ 5 : 25 ] There's lots of things that would be a problem and would need a totally different sermon if we were in a different culture. I'm saying that in the hope that you don't hear me say in this sermon, we just need to be more community-minded.

Because the Bible gives us a totally different understanding. Please don't hear me say, you need to sacrifice self for the sake of more service in the community.

That's not the main thrust of this message. And I'm hoping that's a bit of a surprise to you. And hopefully I can demonstrate that in God's word.

So we would need a different sermon if we were in a different culture. But the threat for us today in our individualistic culture is that we're either going to succumb to this individualistic thinking, what's in it for me, as we engage in community based on that, or we have the opportunity to just be a compelling difference to a world that's absolutely, a society that's so starved of community.

It's a big threat or a big opportunity. I want to spend a few minutes just pointing to a few symptoms, touching hopefully on some sore spots of where I think we can see some symptoms of this mindset in the church, in our society.

[ 7 : 06 ] It may not be totally within our church, but there's probably bits and pieces of this. Let me try and, oh, let me start with church leaders.

I think this topic we can just aim at congregation. I want to start with leaders. How can leaders think what's in it for me? Well, if dominant motivation as a pastor and as a leader is what's in it for me, if my personal success as a pastor is all in measurable categories, measurable metrics like increasing in numbers in this church or the number of programs we're running and the number of staff we're putting on and the number of events reaching our community and the number of services and church plants we're doing and so on and so on, my identity and value as a leader could be bound up in all these things.

And there's problems with that because character issues in leaders can be dismissed because look at all the ministry fruit, look at all the success.

Individuals changing churches, there can be competition between churches. As if it's a marketplace for consumers, as if we're competing. Someone might come into the church and I go, excellent, we're building, rather than going, should you be here or should you be going back to the church you came from?

Is it spiritually good for you? Is there another church in this area that's better for you? Decisions on how to operate as a church can be based on what works rather than what God calls us to be?

[ 8 : 57 ] If it's all about what I'm getting out of it. I think we see it with leaders when the validation for ministry isn't coming and leaders give up and change congregation to go find somewhere where they feel more validated.

Leaving too soon. So I don't know what you think about all that, but I want to start with leaders that even those seeming to be sacrificing a lot for community, can it be driven by what's in it for me mentality?

What about symptoms for the congregation generally? Well, I think a what's in it for me mentality can be seen in the unspoken answer, well, not much.

There's not much in it for me. So I'll just turn up here and there when it fits in around the rest of my life that there's much more in those things.

I think we can engage in community based on things other than Christ. It's common needs. What's in it for me is friendship.

[ 10 : 13 ] I can find people like me. And when that's going well, church is great. When friendships, for whatever reason, dislocation, whatever, your interest in church drops off.

Maybe community based on this is a great place for my children. A moral environment to grow up in. Mutual support as parents.

It can be a consumer mindset that it's the clergy who give you the spiritual ministry and I'm the consumer. I think we can engage in ministry roles according to, is this volunteering convenient? Am I being appreciated or not? Am I feeling important by doing it? Or when I'm thinking of leaving a church, do I see it as my decision alone?

Or do I get the input of brothers and sisters and pastors to know, is it right to dislocate from this church family? So I've just sprayed a bunch of symptoms, both leaders and congregation, and I'll let you weigh those up.

[ 11 : 30 ] But I think this fundamental driving principle in our culture can be driving us as we engage in church. What's in it for me?

It can look okay for times on the surface, but it will erode the church family. I think we see it eroding biological family, don't we?

What's in it for me? So what's the antidote to viewing yourself and viewing the church individualistically?

What's the antidote to this sort of thinking? Well, we're going to look at 1 Corinthians, so if you can open to, and stay open to, 1 Corinthians 12.

We're going to look at the fundamental problem. And our fundamental problem is our understanding of our personal salvation.

[ 12 : 33 ] Here we see who we now are. So, just for some context, the original situation Paul is speaking to, the Corinthian church was characterised by division and envy and competition.

They had a very narrow definition of gifting, and they were prioritising the more showy and spectacular gifts, and they thought the capabilities that they had, they were using them to validate themselves.

It was a very individual approach to gifting. Now, in their case, they were prioritising the so-called spiritual gifts, the gifts of the spirit.

I don't think we're in danger at this present moment to do that, the speaking in tongues and the healings and such, but we might be tempted to equate belonging and importance in the church with a narrow definition of gifting.

We might prioritise teaching gifts over other gifts or ability to pray. We might prioritise having authority in positions and office.

[ 13 : 52 ] or we might be tempted to evaluate people's belonging and importance based on worldly criteria. If there's measures of respect out in the world, they're the measures we use in here.

So we still can have this mentality, even if it's not the particular problem they had. The foundation Paul lays is crucial for us to understand.

Yes, God saves us individual by individual. He saves us individually. But what it means to be saved is that I am now vitally connected to Jesus.

I'm not an individual. The essence of salvation, we might see it by asking this question, whose are you? Whose are you?

Are you your own? No. Are you the groups, the families? No. You are Christ. Who you are has fundamentally changed.

[ 15 : 04 ] You belong to Christ. Now, of course, he created us. We always belonged to him in that sense. But now we actually know it and love it and believe it and we are connected to him.

Paul loves the phrase that a believer is in Christ. Christ is in us by his spirit and that's what verses 12 to 13 are about.

That our baptism pictures this. The water baptism pictures the spiritual reality that occurred when we had faith. That we are now joined to him and he is in us by his spirit.

We are not individuals. We are individuals, aren't we? But we aren't alone. To be saved is to be joined to Jesus forever into eternity.

So then Paul goes on to use the metaphor of a body to help us understand what it means to be joined to Jesus. Now as we go through this passage, I want to first ask, are you coming at it thinking that the primary message is Christians act like a body?

[ 16 : 29 ] I don't think that's the primary emphasis. I think the primary emphasis is, Christian, you are a body. Do you hear the difference there? It's not saying you need to act like it, it's saying, look at what God has done.

He has created a body. That's the primary emphasis here. It's about what God has done. The basis of your belonging to Jesus, belonging to this church, if you're a believer, is what God has done.

God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, there's the individual, each one of them, as he chose.

He arranged. We come into this church for all different motivations, but sovereignly, God is the one who's chosen how we are arranged.

It may appear very random, not how you might put it together, put us together, but he has sovereignly put us together as we are.

[ 17 : 45 ] Again, verse 24, halfway through the verse, it's God who has composed the body. That word can mean blended, not to eradicate distinction, but there's just harmony, there's a composition of the body.

He harmonises the diversity. He's not after vanilla flavour, he's after unity with all our diversity. And it's the spirit filling this body.

Again, it's what God does primarily in this passage. It's the spirit who apportions gifts. We can look at verse 7. To each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good.

It's the spirit who apportions gifts and functions in this body to each member. If you're a believer, you are spirit filled.

spirit filled. You might doubt that because you have a narrow definition of what that looks like.

[ 19 : 02 ] We'll come to that later. But understand that we are all spirit filled. We are given a function to perform for the common good.

and we all have the same Lord. Verses 4 to 6, it's a bit of a Trinitarian comment. We all have the same Lord Jesus motivating us.

Ultimately, I'm to serve you because that's how I serve my Lord. I think Paul puts it in his letters in 2 Corinthians 4 verse 5.

What we proclaim is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

I'm serving for Jesus' sake. We have a common Lord. So this body, it's assembled by God. It's the Lord driving, motivating and directing all of us.

[ 20 : 05 ] It's the spirit filling and empowering us to function differently, to serve for the common good. It's what God has done. We are in Christ. We are to be one body.

So what's God's purpose in creating the church body like this? We see that in verse 25. Here's his purpose, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

That word care, it's also the same word used for anxiety, concern. God has so assembled his church that we're not equal.

There's huge differences, but he's so created us that there's no division, but equal concern for every single member in his body.

that's his goal, that's what he wants, that's what he's going to produce. And we see that especially, verse 26, when one member suffers or one member is honoured.

[ 21 : 23 ] Like how can my body be at peace if one part of me is hurting? You can't, can it? even if, like I had an infected finger recently and it's just like, it's just, it affected my whole mentality.

It's just, I have to deal with my little finger, I've got to deal with it. You can't be at peace. If one member is suffering, you feel that, you are concerned about it.

And when one is honoured, it doesn't say we're all honoured, it says we all rejoice. Imagine that.

Someone preaches better than me and I go, oh, that's not a threat.

The body is being built, fantastic. It's an incredible thing that God creates.

He wants a community that is like him and is unlike anything else in this world. Because that's what gives him glory, as we saw in Ephesians 3.

[ 22 : 35 ] So understanding with the body, we've got to understand his goal, this unity. And secondly, we've got to understand what is the main thing that keeps this body alive.

It's not, giftedness is important, but I ordered the sermon this way because I want to prioritise what Paul prioritises. what God prioritises through Paul, which is chapter 13.

His main point is for them to understand that love is all that matters, is the main thing. Verses 1 to 3 of chapter 13, if I speak in tongues of men and angels but have not love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith to remove mountains but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have and if I deliver up my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing.

It's pointless. Love is the essential thing here. I think even in the church we talk about playing to our strengths or we talk about being called to a very narrow, defined area of ministry and I just wonder how much of that is for our own self-validation when we're called here to share the love of Christ.

[ 24 : 16 ] Any strength I have, if there's any need, I will try and meet it, whether I feel strong or not. And if I can't meet that need, I'll push that person to someone who can meet that need.

It's not about playing the strengths, I don't think. Corinthians, Paul is saying, you want to be spiritual? Stop looking at your giftedness, although it is given by the Spirit and we'll come to that next.

But what's truly spiritual, what's truly great is having the love of God, having the love of Christ. an example of this might be, to contrast, someone could come up the front and pray confidently, eloquently, and as Jesus says in Matthew 7, it could all be just so that you look at them.

And God looks at that and goes, that's just, you're a hypocrite. But then in private conversation, you're talking to someone and they just don't understand God's word or they're struggling, really struggling, and you want to help them, you don't feel confident at all, you try and pray and you fumble through it and you're not sure if the prayer reaches the ceiling, let alone God.

And God looks at that because you're doing it in love and goes, that's great. Because it's motivated by love, for Christ's sake. love flowing through this body is what is going to keep us alive.

[ 26 : 01 ] So having established that, now let's look at giftedness. The Spirit empowers each individual for the good of the whole body. So verses 14 to 19 deal with people who feel like they've got nothing to offer, and then verses 21 to 24 deal with people who think they're pretty independent, that they don't need the others.

So first, what if you feel like you have nothing to offer? By the way, I don't think you're meant to identify what am I? Am I the little finger? I don't think that's the point of this metaphor.

but pretending that you're imagining yourself as the foot, perhaps you're more lowly, you're in the dust, you're less capable than the hand, and you look at the hand and you conclude, I'm not like that, so I don't belong.

I can't get up front and serve in public music, I can't play music, I'm not extroverted and able to speak to lots and lots of people, I'm not sure what else we narrowly define gifts as, but to have a narrow mindset, it can create this division and it can make us even start doubting whether we're spirit-filled or not.

And I think we can have two common errors, I think we can talk about gifting in terms of formal roles, and I think we can look at gifting as if it's fixed rather than dynamic and growing.

[ 27 : 56 ] Verse 17 to 20, verse 17 tells us one part can't do the part of another, like this church would be seriously unhealthy if all the behind-the-scenes ministries suddenly stopped, if all the little conversations, all the meals being sent, all the prayers being offered, like this church would wither.

We need each part functioning to be interdependent. Verse 18 encourages, God arrange the members in the body, each one of them.

Don't wait to feel confident, trust, he's put you here, he's got purpose for you. verse 19 to 20, to reinforce again, he wants diversity in the body.

He's not after uniformity, but unity. You are spirit-filled. If you trust Jesus as your Lord, that's your starting point, you are spirit-filled.

How do you know what God calls you to? I'm going to suggest whatever need you see for people to live for Jesus, to know him, to be encouraged, to be comforted, whatever need you see, that's a great starting point to go, okay, God wants you to meet that.

[ 29 : 31 ] I really love a quote by William Wilberforce who, he's probably such a common name, I don't need to say this, but who helped to bring down slavery in England, but he's got a really good quote that if you have the health and the ability, he says, no person has a right to be idle in such a world as this, such a broken world as this, that you may not find some ignorance to instruct, some wrong, to redress, some want to supply, some misery to alleviate.

I kind of like that, I'm trying to expand our idea of ministry. Yeah, anyway, I've probably said enough. Let's move on to those, verse 21 to 24, those who feel that they are gifted and don't need others.

as soon as the attitude of not seeing a person as needed in this church, maybe you see someone as a burden, that is difficult.

Any superior attitude means that whatever gifting you think you do have, however busy you are, it's unchristian.

if you're using your function to bolster your own self importance, rather than using it for the function for Christ's sake to build up others, it is unchristian because it's lacking, chapter 13, the love of

Christ.

[ 31 : 15 ] Our attitude to people who seem less important should be God's attitude. Here's verse 22. On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.

They've got a little bit to offer, just appreciate the little bit they've got to offer, they are indispensable. That's God's attitude. I think in verse 23 and 24, using the body metaphor again in clothing, he teaches us how to think of people who are different than us.

The unpresentable parts of our bodies, I assume that's talking about the sexual organs and the excretion, but I assume that's what it's talking about. Now how do we treat that in our own body? We give special attention to it. We clothe it especially. we treat it with more honour than we do our presentable parts like the hands and stuff.

I don't need to cover my hand, but that's the kind of attitude we should have. More concern, more special regard for. I don't think it's about covering up and hiding away from the world.

[ 32 : 37 ] your attitude towards it. The person who I don't think I need, I should be treating especially as someone who's loved by God and needed in this church.

I think people who like that, I think their very presence reminds us that we are a community created by grace and not by effort.

There's probably a million other ways all of us are indispensable. Hopefully the conversation will continue after this sermon. So if we preach church asking what's in it for me, at best we're going to be just this organisation built on transactional relating.

It's going to be a community that you can find anywhere in the world. But the solution is not about don't be less selfish.

That's not the solution. The solution is understand who me is. Who are you now? You're united to Christ. You're arranged in the body by God.

[ 33 : 58 ] You're spirit-filled to serve your Lord by serving his people. people. I am part of something so much bigger than me now and it's by being part of something so much bigger than me that I flourish as an individual.

It's a community that doesn't sacrifice the individual but we're the whole community sacrificing for the individual and one another. Equal concern and anxiety for one another.

No envy and human criteria for different value but all loved by grace. Now that's a community I want to be part of.

I'm glad I'm part of. I am part of. So the solution here is not we need to be more community minded. The solution is know who you are. We are in Christ.

We are his body. We are his body. We are his body. I want to pick up an example to help kind of test whether we've grasped this oneness with Jesus and oneness with one another.

[ 35 : 16 ] I could talk about seasons of sickness but for the sake of time I'm just going to talk about those times where we feel guilt and shame. I think that's another reason we disengage from the church is when we feel we've sinned again and we feel like we don't belong.

And I'm going to say that's independent thinking. That's individualistic thinking. Because Jesus united himself to you and you to him knowing full well of all your sin having died for it.

You are united to him even in those moments of feeling ashamed. And what do you need? You need the ministry of the body.

Don't wait at home until you feel spiritually good again to come back to the church. You need the body. And can I say I think you've got lots to offer.

I've got lots to offer when I'm feeling like that. Because it's when I confess my sin to someone I trust that it actually reinforces the grace of God.

[ 36 : 31 ] It actually encourages that person. If I'm wanting to be good with God and one another again. You're even serving by needing to be served.

Anyway, that's my attempt. Even when we're feeling ashamed like we don't belong, know you're part of the body and you're even an important part of the body by confessing that.

And I want to finish by four important areas that we need to know we are the body of Christ. The first is so that we are a taste of heaven to our community.

Why would people want to come in here? And why would we be motivated for people to want to come in if all they see in here is just a religious version of what they can get elsewhere?

Envy and pride and conflict and clicks. People just using as a platform for their own self-importance. That's not going to be a witness to the gospel.

[ 37 : 43 ] gospel. But if people come in here and see that there is incredible value of one another that doesn't make sense to the value system we have out in the world and there's just a sacrifice for one another without trying to get something in return.

Across young and old and rich and poor and all the different individual and collective culture mindsets that are here all the cultures between authority of leadership and those following up. We might well expect then people to come in and go God is really among you because there's nothing like this out in the world.

So God's honour is at stake. We need to know we are body so that we can be a taste of heaven for those separated from Christ and from one another.

The second reason we need to know we are the body is because it's going to hurt if you believe this. To relate vulnerably and deeply relationally it's going to hurt this side of heaven because our love for one another has not been perfected yet.

[ 39 : 17 ] Trust will be broken at times. Servant hardness will be exploited at times. Well what then? Is that reason to sit on the sidelines?

Well I think it's crucial to remember that it's Christ you're serving. It's for his sake that we lean into the brokenness and harm.

The third implication of knowing we are the body is I think at this season in our church life is that we're in a time of change.

As Dave Corderwood looks to serve in We War for the rest of this year that's a time of change. And for those who know David well that could be quite unsettling. There's going to be a proper sense of loss for his ministry among us and that's right like any part of the body there's a proper sense of loss but I think it would be wrong.

[ 40 : 28 ] For us to think that this church was dependent on David's ministry. He would hate for us to think that that it ever was. It's always been the body.

Every person ministry. And as we release Dave to go to We War do we have a sense of partnership in that? We're not trying to build our own kingdom.

We War doesn't have a pastor. Okay, let's release Dave to go serve there. Are we sharing in that? In that, the body of Christ being built up somewhere else?

And a huge part of what I think will help us transition with Dave not being here is if all of us know we are the body. all those, every joint and ligament doing its bit.

The final thing I want to say is maybe you've only known this church and you've been in this church maybe for years, maybe your whole life, I don't know, but you see it from that perspective of what's in it for me.

[ 41 : 43 ] I want to ask, who's the me you're referring to? Do you yet know the me of being united to Jesus?

Do you know the me of being part of that family Don was talking about in the kids talk? Do you know that me of being one with his body at the church?

Have you tasted that yet? If you haven't come to Jesus, it's a taste of heaven.

Why don't we pray? Let's pray. Oh Lord, one day when you return, we will see your body, the church, in all its glory, totally under your lordship and beautifully displaying that mutual concern and love for one another.

We look forward to that full experience of heaven. In the meantime, I thank you for those of us who know you. I thank you that you have called us into your body, the church.

[ 43 : 10 ] thank you for such a wonderful gift of knowing you, of being filled with your spirit and being part of your family.

Lord, I pray that you would enlarge our understanding of who we are now in Christ. I pray for anyone who hasn't yet tasted what it's like to belong to Jesus.

I pray that you would help them distinguish between belonging to Jesus and belonging to the institution. I pray that you would draw them to yourself, into your body, the church.

In Jesus' name, Amen.