

Sunday 1st March 2026 - One Body, One Church: How To Be One

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 March 2026

Preacher: Helen Emery

[0:00] Good morning, everybody. So after the last three weeks, we have been on a series of talks entitled One Body, One Church.

! So a quick recap. Dave kicked off things by helping us explore the metaphor from 1 Corinthians 12 about the church being like a human body.

So just like our bodies have got parts, they all belong together and so it is with church. Laura then looked at how love is the key connector and encouraged us to think about our how and our who.

So who might we love more and how might we love more. Then last week, Ian considered what it is to stay together when things get a bit difficult and we have differences.

So this is the final installment, if you like, and it falls to me to explore how we actually do this in practice.

[1:01] I've got the job of exploring how we live it out, being one body, one church, in the reality of every day journeying together.

So I am a bit of a pragmatist. I do default to practical application. We might all love a bit of theory, but whenever I listen to a talk or read a book or listen to a podcast, I often find myself thinking, what does this actually mean for me this time tomorrow?

What difference will it make to my life? If you're like me, you want it all to make an impact to our lived experience and what we do about it.

But perhaps we pause there though, because if we start with the assumption that this is all about doing, we might very quickly feel exhausted with striving and never quite feeling like we do enough. Practical application is great, but it may not be the best place to start. Instead, I suggest it might be better to start with identity.

[2:21] You and me and every single person here is part of this church simply because you are you. So let's start with some verses from the Bible which refer to identity, our identity in the body of Christ.

Ephesians 2.10 says, For we are God's masterpiece. He's created us anew in Jesus Christ, so we can do the things he planned for us long ago.

If we think about that just for a moment, we, you and I, are not just God's workmanship, as some Bible translations put it, but God's masterpiece.

The original Greek word that was used, which we translate here as masterpiece, is associated with fabric. So if you like, we're God's tapestry or cross-stitch or embroidery.

And if we think about how intricate and focused and time-consuming that sort of needlework is, well, that's a picture of how lovingly and carefully each of us have been made by God.

[3:42] Colossians 3.12 tells us we are holy and dearly loved. So it's not just we've been made with love.

We are loved, dearly loved. And that love makes us holy, set apart by God to do the good things, the practical stuff, that the verse from Ephesians just now mentioned.

How do we do this? Well, we, you and I, have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. God is in us.

Romans 8.9 reminds us, the Spirit of God lives in you. The same Spirit who was there at creation, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, the same Spirit who came at Pentecost, that same Spirit, the Spirit of God is in us, with us.

So our primary identity as a member of the body of Christ is really clear. You do not need to be doing anything to earn that, to prove that, to find your place.

[5:02] Your identity in Christ is solely down to your connection with God. Now, I know Dave joked the other week about me being the lovely librarian lady, didn't he?

But, seriously, I don't work in a library anymore. And when I left that job, I had to accept that librarian is not my identity anymore.

We've just moved house, so my identity isn't where I live. Even the many and varied relationships that I have with other people don't define my worth or my value.

Rather, that comes from who God is, what Jesus did, and his Spirit who dwells in me. So, I think starting with identity in the body brings a freedom.

Freedom, it recognises that whatever we do as part of the body comes out of who we're made to be in Christ. It's not out of duty or for fear of consequences.

[6:10] So, with that freedom as our foundation, however, it does follow that living out the reality of being one body, one church, requires intentionality.

It needs conscious and deliberate attention, not in terms of striving or achieving, but more about a daily intentional recognition that God is with us, in us, and the practical difference that truth can hopefully make in our everyday lives.

So, to explore this, I'm going to do a little bit on the concept of virtues, but then the majority of what I'm going to talk about on spiritual practices.

So, they're the habits which can make living as a thriving, diverse community, sustainable. So, first, let's briefly look at virtues.

Now, virtues, not a word we tend to use very often these days, is it? But, apparently, there's a whole field of philosophy and ethics and theology around virtues.

[7:28] So, it's worth us considering that. Put simply, virtues are positive traits or qualities deemed to be morally good and desirable.

If we go back to scripture, virtues feature, in the same passage from Colossians that we looked at about being holy and dearly loved, they also tie in with that idea from Ephesians about God's masterpiece, the fabric lovingly woven or stitched together.

Colossians 3, 12, says, in full, therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

So, these aren't in-built characteristics that some people have got and some people don't. They're a bit like garments. They're external, chosen, deliberate.

We are to put them on even when we don't feel compassionate or kind or gentle or humble or patient. What's more, these virtues aren't individual achievements.

[8:58] They're community garments, a bit like a shared wardrobe, if you like, because they're inherently relational. So, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, they all require other people to make sense.

It's like us visiting a giant clothes store, maybe, where everything is on offer and it's all free. These virtues are available to all of us all the time and we can reach out for them and put them on, a bit like getting dressed in the morning.

In fact, we could each morning think that. So, what virtue does today require and if it's patience or kindness or gentleness then consciously put on that virtue?

Might sound a bit of a cheesy thing to do but there's huge value, I think, in that kind of approach. It's not like a performance but it's a practice, a bit like a musician maybe would practice scales not to perform them but to have them available when the music requires.

So, that brings us to the idea of spiritual practices. Sometimes they're called spiritual disciplines so either word practices or disciplines is valid but I like both.

[10:34] Practices is good I think because it suggests a work in progress. While disciplines is really helpful not in the way you might think of discipline as punishment but discipline as disciplining, learning what it means to follow Jesus day by day.

These are activities which have been identified as being common to pretty much any type of Christian community or church. There's a list of 12 of them there.

How they might be done could be wildly different from one church to the next but there aren't many groups of Jesus followers who don't do some of these.

they are what facilitates spiritual formation. So we've got scripture, bible teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, eating together which we're going to do soon, prayer which we've already done, service, generosity, giving, worship that we're in now, making disciples, witnessing, fasting, sabbath, care of creation, confession.

So I'm going to give you just a minute to consider those 12. Which one jumps out to you and why? Are any of them really established habits which you're really familiar with?

[12:14] Do they jump out because they exist in your rhythm of life and they help you in your everyday? Or maybe some jump out because they feel quite alien or confusing or way too difficult right now?

Which do you like the sound of? Which might you struggle with? So just a caution though about focusing back on the doing and mindful that it's also about how we practice these things.

So yeah we can pray but what might it mean to pray with sincerity, authenticity and honesty? Yeah we can read the Bible but what's it mean to read the Bible with inquisitiveness and openness?

Again we can all give but what does it mean to give with generosity and selflessness? Now some of these can be done on your own but just like us all being clothed as God's people these practices incorporated into our rhythms of life should connect us unite us and be a means of us experiencing flourishing as a community of disciples.

So although we've got 12 there we don't really have time to go through every single one of them. So if we look at Acts 2:42 and what the first century church focused on they can be summarised into four of those which Luke mentions.

[14:06] They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching to fellowship to the breaking of bread and to prayer. So teaching fellowship breaking bread prayer.

It's not necessarily helpful to see Luke's portrait of the early church as some prescriptive blueprint that we've got to follow exactly. Their culture and their context was really different to ours so it's not so much about how do we copy that but what would the sense of this generosity devotion gladness their mutual care their shared prayer and that attractiveness born of authenticity and so on look like for us here in Burntwood in 2026.

so let's start with teaching. We are all learners that word disciple can be translated as learner so we all need teaching and that comes in lots of different forms not just talks here from the front on a Sunday and so I wanted to share a model of learning that describes the way we learn as the 70-20-10 model so the 10 describes 10% of our learning and that comes from formal instruction so like classroom learning maybe sermons these make up 10% of how we tend to learn then the 20% comes from social learning so conversations over coffee or in a house group or a pub club or wherever we connect with other disciples so this social learning could come from people who recommend a podcast or loan you a book or share a story of what God did in their life this week we can all learn from each other so that's reckoned to make up 20% of the way that we learn however the 70 of learning the 70% is called experiential so we learn through active experiences so giving something a try reflecting on that and then giving it another go and this

I think is why spiritual practices are key we practice in order to improve to learn to grow and to ultimately become more like Jesus so next up is fellowship and I wonder what makes us feel part of this fellowship of believers not just for an hour or so on a Sunday but for the whole of the rest of the week what do you do to actively make people feel valued in our body so I'm going to share some of the ways that I personally feel like I'm part of one body one church here at St John's and hopefully that will help so when people remember my name I'm really bad at that so when people remember my name it seems a really simple thing but it comes back to the identity thing

I belong because of who I am not what I do when I've been asked how I am with sincerity that makes me feel part of it the person asking has waited for a real answer and then they've listened I feel part of things when someone's checked in to ask if there's anything I need so this links to that practice of generosity or giving when someone's remembered like a tiny detail of something that I've told them and they checked back with me so like oh you said you had that meeting at work that you've got to go to how did that go that makes me feel part of it when I've been able to share burdens concerns openly and honestly that helps me that doesn't happen by chance there are systems in place like small groups and prayer partnerships and pastoral team whatever feels right

for you but when

[19:01] I've created space to have that conversation it can make it normal for people to say I'm really struggling and I need some help and then we can make it normal in our response to say we're here let's carry this together Galatians 6.2 encourages us to carry each other's burdens and that's a hallmark really of what it means to be in fellowship with one another I think now if you're hugely introverted or socially anxious never forget that maybe simply a smile or a hello might make a huge difference to somebody you never know who God is going to bring you into contact with so in terms of how well we're doing in being fellowship together maybe a question to challenge us could be is our life together worth joining in with would I want to be part of this if I wasn't already now that challenge is helpful at any time but I think especially we're in the season of lent a time when we're encouraged to invite

God to examine us in order to lay down anything that hinders our journey of becoming more like Jesus so in the light of that I want to share a quote from Pope Leo the 14th that I just thought was brilliant he had this to say on what it truly means to be in fellowship as one body one church I would like to invite you to a very practical and frequently unappreciated form of abstinence that of refraining from words that offend and hurt our neighbour let us begin by disarming our language avoiding harsh words and rash judgement refraining from slander and speaking ill of those who are not present and cannot defend themselves instead let us strive to measure our words and cultivate kindness and respect in our families among our friends at work on social media in political debates in the media and in

Christian communities in this way words of hatred will give way to words of hope and peace so alongside fellowship another key practice of being one body one church is that of breaking of bread so in acts two it mentions eating together twice says the breaking of bread in verse 42 and breaking bread in their homes with glad and generous hearts in verse 46 meals are a central ideal of what shared life is to be about throughout the whole Bible and Jesus last supper which forms the basis of our communion brings all of these principles together in one meal so eating together with Jesus at the centre of our shared life as we remember and celebrate him is therefore all about generous hospitality shared fellowship bonds of friendship finding reconciliation!

Redemption renewal all of which points to the heavenly banquet that awaits us when we'll all eat once again with Jesus himself so I'd say yeah communion is a beautiful important and shared practice across every kind of Christian tradition but just as a Sunday or in a service thing every meal can become an act of communion why might this be well practically speaking when you eat with someone you are quite vulnerable you might be consuming what they've prepared for you you become equal everyone's got a mouth everyone eats your present hopefully like your phone's down your faces are up you create a space I think where truth telling becomes easier the table can be where strangers can become friends and friends become like family and all of these elements can point to and help us to remember

Jesus the one who is in our midst whenever we do this whenever we break bread in remembrance of him so what's more this bread breaking can happen anywhere it doesn't have to be in your home especially if you're not in a position to invite people in it could be a picnic in the park it could be the night out at curry club a pint in the pub even just a coffee at a cafe shared flask walking around chase water it could even just be offering to fetch a can from the fridge after the service there are ways that you could demonstrate the practical spiritual practice of hospitality and provide an opportunity to remember Jesus I think a lot of the gatherings that we do at St John's offer the opportunity to share food there's always lots of food at book club dropping is amazing cake little friends has food so there are many other communions of Jesus so then lastly prayer the last of our four practices that we follow the early church in prioritising and I've spoken on this before the how and the when we pray is different for everybody but unity in prayer as one body one church is really powerful and we'll be doing more of that when we pray together this morning but alongside corporate prayer in the service

[25:58] I'd encourage you to make use of the prayer chain or get prayer in the foyer after the service set up whatsapp prayer groups or voice clip your prayers there's lots of different ways of doing it whatever

works for you that isn't terrifying so through teaching through fellowship through breaking bread and through prayer these and the others of those 12 key disciplines or practices that I mentioned earlier I think are all ways in which we can practically learn to be one body one church I'll leave you with this it's a leading social learning theorist called Etienne Wenger defines a community of practice this really interested me he said that it's a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something and learn how to do it better as they interact together and I absolutely think that that is what church is it's a community of practice learning together to be more like

Jesus the most compelling witness to our faith is a community that actually lives differently so when people see a group that shares its resources forgives its members weeps with those who are wounded celebrates with the joyful eats together across social divides and does it all with glad and generous hearts they want to know why and our why is because of Jesus an invitation to come and be part of his body his church amen to some of some