

# The Church and Its Body Life

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, if you would take your Bibles and turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 12, please, on page 959. That was read to us by a breathless Ian Hall, who I think was manning the Artizo booth and suddenly realized it was time to read the Bible and so ran up.

I think he did a great job. 1 Corinthians chapter 12, page 959. And it's hard to think of many other passages in the New Testament that had suffered more at the hands of preachers and commentators than 1 Corinthians 12.

And I include myself, who's inflicted a fair bit of suffering on this passage, I think. However, at the heart of the passage is the richest New Testament picture of the church, of Jesus Christ, as the body, the body of Christ.

And we've been looking at God's view of the church, this term, and it's been difficult. It's difficult for us, percolating in West Coast individualism, to appreciate the beauty and wonder of the church that Jesus is building.

But here, the idea of the church as the body of Christ is fiercely communal, fiercely mutual, as we'll see.

[ 1 : 24 ] So just drop your eyes down to verse 27, as the Apostle Paul writes these words. Now you, he says, are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

And you know, sometimes the body of Christ is used in the New Testament of the whole church throughout the world, throughout history. As Dan called it last week, the church militant on earth and the church triumphant in heaven.

But here, the apostle is writing to one specific, wild, and very messy congregation at Corinth. The body of Christ that he's writing to is not the worldwide church, but to one single congregation. We've seen, haven't we, over the last weeks, how what can be said about the whole worldwide church can also be said about every local church.

And what can be said about every local church is also true of the entire church throughout the world. However, this is very important. It's not that every church is a local body or part of the body of Christ.

[ 2 : 33 ] We are the body of Christ. That's why Paul says it there to this crazy church in Corinth. And the idea of the body of Christ takes us deeper, I think, in our understanding of who we are and how we should live.

The metaphor of the church, the assembly or gathering of God's people, people being built by Jesus Christ, takes us a certain way. But to call ourselves the body of Christ takes us even deeper. We're more than a gathering of a spirit-filled people. We're more than a group bound together by common interests or birth or anything else. The body of Christ speaks about an organic unity that we have with each other where we just, we cannot choose to be independent or self-sufficient. It's a stunning picture. It is my growth, my good, depends on you and what you do and vice versa. And of course, we may prefer to join a group with lots of people who are much more like us, but that's just not the way God does it.

To be the body of Christ means we're bound to each other in a particular way and we're bound to Jesus Christ forever. Our lives are caught up with him in a particular way as his body.

[ 3 : 52 ] And I just need to throw this out. It doesn't mean we're little gods and we're divine like Jesus. It doesn't mean the church is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. I do hope we avoid using that kind of mistaken language because the physical risen body of Jesus is in heaven now.

He is the head. We are the members. We mustn't get that confused. What it means, though, is that all our life and our growth and our love and our future, it all depends upon him as our head.

So that we, as his body, we don't dispense grace. We don't bless the world. He does through us. We don't bless the world. And when he says you are the body of Christ and individually are members of it, I think members is probably not the best word for us to use today.

I mean, members, we use members to join a club or an association. You know, you join because, you know, you pay a fee and you get certain benefits of belonging to that club. This is a body. And I think we probably could use phrases like we are limbs and organs of one another. And it's just, it's great.

[ 5 : 03 ] I mean, it's so simple. You know, my hand is not separate from me. It's part of me. My feet, my legs, my head, we're all, they're members in that sense, indispensable to who I am.

So what I'd like to do is just give us a brief orientation to the passage and then make two points, the body gifts and the body life.

Is that all right? I don't want to vote, but that's okay. That's what I'm going to do. Now, although Paul uses the word body in this passage about 18 times, it's easy to get a hold of the wrong end of the stick in 1 Corinthians 12.

Because the apostle is answering a very specific question that has come to him from the church at Corinth. They've asked him the question, what is spirituality?

What is truly spiritual? And Corinth was a very tricky church to write to. Every church has problems. Corinth had most of them all at once.

[ 6 : 10 ] They were a very dangerous combination. On the one hand, they were incredibly gifted and knowledgeable and educated. On the other hand, they were immature, worldly and arrogant.

And you put those two together, you get a deadly combination. They boasted of their spiritual prowess and experiences. They were wealthy and looked down on some of the members who didn't have their wealth.

They had no care for the weak in the congregation. They were sexually all over the place and proud of it. They loved what was outwardly impressive, especially ecstatic experiences.

And they had chosen one particular gift, speaking in tongues, as the sign of being truly spiritual. Their communion services were drunk and disorderly. And they were divided and very happy to brawl and quarrel at the drop of a hat.

Corinth was a mess. It's kind of encouraging in a way, isn't it? Those people who say, let's get back to the New Testament church. Well, maybe not. Maybe not.

[ 7 : 13 ] What do you say to a church that's full of itself, thinking it's got nothing to learn? Well, from chapter 7 onwards, Paul answers a number of specific questions. And in 12.1, now concerning means he's turning to their question.

And he says, now concerning spiritual gifts. And as you look at it, I want you to look at that word. The word gifts is not there in the Greek. In fact, if you look at the bottom, there's a footnote, which is very small, which I can't read.

But it says spiritual things or persons. Literally, it's spirituals. Now concerning spirituals. What's truly spiritual?

In other words, they had written him a letter asking, what is true spirituality? How can you tell something that is genuinely from God and spiritual? And I think they were expecting Paul to say that they were a very model of a modern church of spirituals.

But he doesn't. His answer is sharp. And we miss this, I think, if we take it out of context. He says, concerning spirituals, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be...

[ 8 : 25 ] That's a gentle English translation. The word is actually ignorant. I don't want you to be ignorant. This is a congregation that thought they were very knowledgeable.

But like all immature believers, they thought they had very little to learn. And he said, brothers and sisters, despite your vast theological acumen and experience, I don't want you to continue to wallow in your ignorance.

Because true spirituality always is hungry for the word of God. Verse 2, get sharper. You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to mute idols.

However, you were led. This is very incisive, you see. The Corinthians had put a huge store on the ecstatic, emotional experiences they had when they gathered.

The apostle simply points out, that's what happened when you were pagans. And pagan spirituality is marked by high emotion and ecstatic experiences and being carried away.

[ 9 : 39 ] It's pretty devastating to a church, don't you think, to hear that sort of thing from the apostle. He's saying, all your fabulous emotional meetings that you've had, if they haven't made you more loving or more obedient to Christ or more serving or more the worshipping of Christ, they've been worth absolutely nothing.

That's a mark of pagan religion. Sharp, isn't it? So what is the test of true spirituality? Verse 3, he says, Therefore, I want you to understand, here it is, that no one speaking in or by the Spirit of God ever says, Jesus is cursed.

And no one can say, Jesus is the Lord, except in the Holy Spirit. Now, what do you think of that? I think it's a huge anticlimax, don't you? If we went downstairs to the grade 3 class and we said to them, boys and girls, is it ever the Holy Spirit that helps us say, Jesus is cursed?

They would say, no. Is it the Holy Spirit by which we say, Jesus is Lord? They would say, of course. See, very simple. ABC stuff.

And when he says, confessing Jesus is Lord, it's not just saying those three words, but confessing him with all your heart and living in a way to show he is Lord.

[ 10 : 54 ] I think this is very helpful for us as a church living in Vancouver in 2013. We get so sentimental about spirituality, don't we?

One of the churches I worked at in the past, there was a proud woman in the congregation whose children just wouldn't come. And another woman in the congregation said to her, don't worry, your children are, quote, very spiritual.

The children had no interest in Christ and they still don't. And I think saying that kind of thing is so unhelpful.

True spirituality is confessing and living that Jesus Christ is Lord. Not just talking about God in vague terms, not just talking about my faith or church in vague terms, but very specifically, Jesus Christ is Lord.

And I think that's a great help to us. Because we live in a culture that's fascinated with spirituality, but spirituality often without any content, a kind of sentiment of spirituality. And the Lord Jesus has placed us here in this place to know that true spirituality brings us to the place of confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and living for him.

[ 12 : 14 ] So that's our orientation to the passage. I wanted to give you the flavor, because it's a bit of a rebuke to the church at Corinth. And here's my question. How does Paul now deploy this image of the body of Christ to help the church?

And he does it in two ways, by showing body gifts and then body life. And so firstly, body gifts, this is how we come to a discussion of spiritual gifts.

Paul's not sitting in a library writing an academic treatise. He's dealing with a very messy church that's about to fall off the edge. A church that's fallen in love with their own spiritual abilities, particularly the speaking in tongues.

But listen, it could be any kind of gift. And he's trying to get them back on course. In fact, as we go through the chapter, I want us to see the focus is not on the gifts themselves, but on who gives them and why.

How they're to be used. And you probably know, there are five lists of gifts in the New Testament. There are two here in chapter 12. There's one in Romans 12. There's one last week, as we looked at in Ephesians 4 and one in 1 Peter 4.

[ 13 : 26 ] And none of them are meant to be comprehensive and exhaustive, but they're examples of how God gives gifts to his church. For example, if you comb through the New Testament, the gift of hospitality is never mentioned, nor the gift of music.

The word here that Paul uses for gift, the word charisma, is literally grace thing, but it's much wider than my personal abilities and skills.

Charisma is used for eternal life, the gift of eternal life. It's used for the gift of being rescued from danger. Here in this book of Corinthians, it's used for celibacy, not a gift that often I hear people pray for.

And it's used for marriage. The Corinthians, they love the more spectacular and flashy gifts, which immature believers usually do.

But if you look at the different gifts, even here in chapter 12, they cover the whole gamut. They go from healing to administration. They go from tongue speaking to physically helping one another, moving chairs, packing tables, that kind of thing.

[14:38] And I think it's fair to say that the apostle would not recognize the charismatic, non-charismatic distinction between gifts. There's no one gift that's any more a demonstration of the Holy Spirit than another.

There's no gift which is intrinsically more spiritual than another. We use this word unhelpfully. As verses 4 and 7 say, if you just cast your eyes down there, gifts are any ability given to us by God, and they're given to each of us, not for our selfish consumption, not for our self-fulfillment, not for our self-actualization, but to serve His body.

So let me just pause. This is very practical. If you're not sure about your spiritual gift, don't wait for something weird to come over you. Just do what you can to serve others.

Just promote the Lordship of Jesus Christ. You'll find your gift very easily. I have a confession to make. In my last church, in a country far away, I used to conduct spiritual gift weekends.

This was the rage in the 80s, so I don't take full responsibility for it. And what we would do is we would go through all the gifts, we'd try and identify what they were, and what ours were, and I'm sure the Lord graciously used them.

[16:01] But as I studied the passage this week, I've realized the focus of this chapter is never on the gifts individualistically, but is on the giver and on the body.

So just look at verse 7. I'll read a couple of verses here. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit. Why? For the common good.

To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom. To another, the utterance of knowledge of the same Spirit. To another, faith by the same Spirit. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

The point is, each and every member of Christ's body has a spiritual gift given to them. Gifts are not something we earn, or we create, or we construct.

They're not received as a reward for service paid. We can't sit there and say, I think I would like to have that one. It just doesn't work that way. They are the sovereign, generous gift of God.

[16:58] One Spirit, one Lord, one God to use for the benefit of the church. In fact, the emphasis is not just on the givenness of the gifts, it's on the arrangement and distribution of the gifts in the body of Christ.

In verses 4, 5, and 6 as it was read, three times we come across this word, varieties, varieties, varieties. That's not quite what it means. It means apportionings, allotments, distributions, if you can see the difference.

It's not just that there's a variety, it's that there are distributions and apportionings of gifts but the same Spirit. There are distributions of service but the same Lord and distributions of power but the same God.

In other words, in His love, God doesn't just give particular gifts and abilities to us, He places us and assigns us and allots us to build up the body of Jesus Christ in a unique way.

You can build up the body of Jesus Christ in a way I can't or nobody else here can do. And this is how God is active in every church. It's as we seek to serve Jesus and build up the body by serving each other, it's God, the Father who is working and Jesus Christ, the Son who is working and the Holy Spirit who is working in us and through us.

[18:21] It's not just the effect, it's not just the cause and effect that's God's, it's Him working through our gifts right now. That's why Paul deploys this image of the body of Christ.

Because it doesn't matter your achievements or lack of them or whether you think you're very gifted or not. God has given you gifts by His Holy Spirit. You may not want Him to have.

God has placed you in this body. He has given you as a gift to this body and given you to the body to serve Him. There's this profound equality here, I think.

Verse 12. Just as one body, so just as the body is one, as many members and all members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all, all, all, baptized into one body, Jew, Greek, slave free, and all were made to drink.

Not so helpful. All were submerged in one Spirit. Drenched, saturated, plunged. In other words, there are not two kinds of Christians.

[19:33] Those who have the Holy Spirit and those who don't. Or those who have more of the Holy Spirit and those who don't. No. You cannot confess Jesus Christ as Lord apart from the Spirit.

You can't be a member of the body unless you are drenched in the Holy Spirit. There are not one group of Christians who are born again Christians and those who are not. It doesn't work that way. We've all been united by the Spirit in the same body and spiritual gifts have been given to each of

us to serve and help the building of the body.

That's why I'm calling them body gifts. Secondly then, body life. How does this work? This is the second and last point. Well, it has very practical effects and I want you to see please how compelling this picture of the body is.

The Apostle Paul takes the image and applies it, the body of Christ, he applies it to two groups in the congregation. To those who attempted to feel inferior and to those who attempted to feel superior.

I wonder what your temptation is. Or is your temptation to be exactly in the middle? I don't think so. If you cast your eyes down to verses 14 to 20, the Apostle in a loving way addresses those who feel themselves inferior.

[ 20 : 57 ] He says, just think of your own body as we talk about this and its different parts. I mean, in your own body, your feet, your feet don't wake up in the morning and get really jealous of the knees or your ears or your elbows.

Do they? I mean, your ears don't say to you constantly, if only we were the hair or if only we were a nose, if only we were the tummy, then we could do something really important for this body.

The ears don't suddenly say to each other, here we are sitting on the outside of our head, we're just catching all the sound. Any other part of the body could do that. I think it would just be great to be a different part of the body.

Then I feel I'd really belong. I'd like to be closer to the ground where things are really happening. I don't feel accepted up here. I don't feel as part of the body up here. Perhaps if every other part of the body could be ears, then we would know we're truly accepted.

I mean, it's just funny, I think. This is for you if you think you are someone who doesn't have much to offer. And you look around and you compare yourselves to others in the body and you think, you look at St. John's and you think, oh, all the women are strong, all the men are good looking and all the children are above average.

[ 22 : 13 ] What on earth have I got to offer? I don't really feel like I'm part of this. Perhaps I have less of the Holy Spirit than the others in this church do. You ever thought that?

Or God, see, really doesn't seem to work through me as much as he works through others. Or somehow I'm less a member because my activity is so limited. I'm not musical.

I can't lead a Bible study. I can't do coffee. If only I could do music. If only I could do hospitality like the magazines do. If only, if only. It's just not how a body works, is it?

I mean, just think about it. If all of me was a thumb, I could hitch a ride. I couldn't hold on to anything. It's great.

It's a great picture. I mean, if all of me was an eyeball, I could roll around and I could see things, although I'd probably just lie still. I could never tell you what I was seeing.

[ 23 : 13 ] Verse 18. As it is, God arranged the members of the body, each one of them, as he chose. This is God's doing.

We've got to stop anxiously comparing ourselves to others with each other. God knows exactly why he gave you your gifts and why he gave them to you and not to others and he knows why he has placed you here.

And if a body is going to work, all parts of the body need to be operating. Have you ever thought about it this way? That God has made a decision about you to give you specific gifts to place you in a certain body.

Not to hang back until you're fully recognized or you feel more valued. Not to criticize others because you feel that they've got more than you do or complain about the fact that you wish you had much more.

If you do that, that's the way to lose your joy and in the end, the person you need to go back to is God himself. That's how Paul speaks to those who feel this way. Or to those who are superior, secondly, he applies it.

[ 24 : 21 ] And of course, there's nobody at St. John's who feels this way. So Paul helps us a little bit by exposing it. In verses 21 to 26, he says, think of your own body.

Again, just think of your body. The ribs don't say to the neck, we really don't need the neck. We've got the lungs. We've got the heart.

What do we need the neck for? My ribs never say that to each other. The heart doesn't say to the lungs, hey, hey, we're keeping you going. We don't really need you.

It's stupid, isn't it? And it's utterly devastating in the body of Christ. It's very hard for us in a culture where we constantly hear the message, you're special, you're special. You're not special. I'm not special. Not in that sense. We keep thinking, I am self-sufficient. This is for you if you think you're self-sufficient.

[ 25 : 20 ] You know, I have my own life, my own money, my own family, my own houses. I really don't need you. This is for you if your lifestyle does not include others in the body.

You sit on the edge of the church but you're never really involved because you think you're self-sufficient. God has made you a part of the body, a hand or whatever but you don't really want to help the rest of the body.

You hold back your own time for yourself. You hold back your finances until you're asked. It's just another way of saying to others in the body, I don't need you.

I have no need of you. And this kind of independence, brothers and sisters, is sin. God apportions, God distributes, God even composes the body as it is for a reason.

And if you call Jesus Christ Lord and you've been drenched in the Holy Spirit, he has bought you for himself and brought you into his body and given you gifts to serve others. And if you're not serving others in the body, you need to repent and find a way to do it.

[ 26 : 26 ] And there are lots of ways. Verse 24, verse 26, verse those two verses. It's very interesting.

If you look down halfway through verse 24, God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it. Why? Why has God done it this way? How has he composed the body this way?

Verse 25, 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. So although you're not special in the cultural sense, you are precious, each one of us.

And if we're tempted to undervalue ourselves or to overvalue ourselves, the apostle says, you know, we suffer together. We rejoice together. And it doesn't matter how unimpressive or impressive we feel.

[ 27 : 23 ] It doesn't matter what you think your contribution is really. Every gift, everything you do is from the same spirit for the same God. And I want to finish by saying this.

I think that's why chapter 13 comes where it does in this letter. Chapter 13, the great chapter on love. It's not a hallmark moment where Paul says, oh, all those couples who are going to get married over the years, I think they need a wedding sermon.

You see where it is? Proud church, immature priorities. He's calling them to love the body of Jesus to which they belong. He says, if you undervalue yourself, it's a lack of love.

If you overvalue yourself, it's a lack of love. If you're someone who gives generously financially or comes to worship and leads but you don't do it with love, in the end, that's not achieving what God wants to achieve.

But it's only when we love that the Spirit works through us because this is the first fruit of the Spirit, love. And in all our thinking and in all our doing and in all our acting and praying and serving, this in the end is what God desires.

[ 28 : 44 ] If I speak in the tongues of men and angels but don't have love, I'm a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. If I've got prophetic powers and understand all mysteries, all knowledge, if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but I don't have love, I am nothing.

If I give away all I have, I deliver my body to be burnt but have not love, I gain nothing. Last verse. Now faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.

May God give us love for one another. May God give us love