

Unity in Diversity

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[0 : 01] Let's turn back for a few moments this evening and just give some thought to some of the words that we read already in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 and verse 12 and that whole passage or most of the passage anyway beginning at verse 12.

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 were 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 many if the foot should say because I'm 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'm not an eye I do not belong to the body that would not make it any less less 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 be the sense of smell but as it is God has arranged the members in the body each of them as he chose and so on that whole passage should be treated as one we'll try and sort of just give some attention to that. Typically on a Sunday evening the theme is towards those who perhaps haven't yet come to faith in Jesus and this morning our attention was upon what it meant to turn to Jesus and I take the view that in some respects there's always something for the unbeliever whatever you're talking about in the Bible there's always something for the unbeliever and so if we don't if I don't this evening specifically direct what I have to say to you if you're on if you haven't taken that step of faith that does not mean that God has nothing to say to you from this passage and sometimes I've lived long enough I've lived long enough in this world and talked to many people in this world many people in this world who have become Christians and sometimes sometimes it's the most obscure passage in scripture and the most obscure sermon that speaks to them God has a way of arresting you at the at the last moment the very moment you don't expect him to open your heart that's the time that God chooses to do so so as I have no hesitation coming to a passage like this which talks about the church neither do I have no hesitation coming to a church neither do I have no hesitation coming to a passage in speaking about this passage somebody might say tonight what right do you have to turn to a passage about the church and what the church should be given everything that has happened in the church over all the centuries and the years and even in the recent past the church is so full of division and argument and so full of denomination one that appears one that appears one that appears not to agree with the other and even within the church you seem to so often get disagreement how in the world can you stand there and you can focus on a passage like this that tells us what the church should be I make no apology for doing that not because I don't recognize the problems in the church there are huge problems in the church there always have been and there probably will be for many years to come and yet nevertheless I am excited about the church well how can you be excited well three reasons why I feel tonight so passionately about the church and remember the church is not simple it's not a building the building just happens to be the building that we worship in the church is the people of God gathered together to worship and to witness for him three reasons first of all because my Bible tells me that Christ specifically died for the church that's what the Bible tells me we live in such an individualistic world we always think in terms of individual people there's nothing wrong with that but don't think of individuals at the expense of the church God thinks of his people as being together that's why he prayed for the disciples in John chapter

17 and that's why Paul specifically goes on to tell us that it was for the gathered collective body of God's people that Jesus died Ephesians chapter 4 husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church that's the great example that's set before us I'm on to weddings again I was on it this morning here we go again because God very often brings brings the subject of a wedding as an example as an image of an image of how we relate to Jesus as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it so that he might present her spotless one day before him Jesus loved the church and he died for the church so the next time you're tempted to criticize the church even if your criticism is valid maybe talk about these criticisms in a few moments time even if you just be very careful just be very careful because no matter how defective the body of God's people is in this world no matter how many faults and failures and sinfulness there is in the church no matter how much you're able to point the finger and you can say I know this and I know that and look at what the church is doing and more and more importantly sometimes what the church isn't doing I hold my hands up I agree just be careful though because the Bible gives a very high place to the collective body of God's people Jesus died for them and Jesus loves them and Jesus will perfect them and he will complete that work of perfection so that one day they will be one you know that great verse in John chapter 17 where Jesus prays for his disciples that they may be one it's the one verse in the scriptures that has evoked such criticism amongst people how can that possibly be true when you have all these fractions and disagreements I believe tonight that the day will come when God's people we might never see it but the day will come when God's people will be one otherwise Jesus would never have prayed it one day it will happen one day it will happen one day it will happen that God's people will be one that's for the first reason that I feel so passionate about the church the second reason is this is the church is the family or the family collection of God's people it's God's family it's my home it's your home you remember what Jesus said about his disciples when they came to him that day he was in the house and he said your your mother and he said your mother and your brothers are waiting outside for who are my mother and my brother said Jesus those who do here they are and he pointed to the disciples around him and he said here is my mother and my sister and my brother they are the family of God and first reaction we ought to be anytime is anytime we think of church unfortunately our first reaction is to think of the structure of the church and maybe the formality of the church and maybe whatever negative thoughts that we have but that's not what Jesus says at all he first thinks of them as his family perhaps that's one of the clues one of the reasons why there are disagreements in the church where do you experience disagreement in your life where is it it's in your home isn't it at least I don't think our home is any different from anyone else when I say that that's where I'd experience disagreement and squabbles and arguments that's where it happens isn't it the people that we love the most are the people that we disagree with the people that we love the most are the people that we're honest enough to tell them and when that we're that we're that we're sometimes having a bad day and sometimes down and sometimes grumpy and sometimes fed up and and that's that's what happens when you're in I'm not trying to make excuses for it but that's what happens in a family isn't it so don't be surprised when there's the occasional disagreement and fallout

that doesn't take away the fact that doesn't take away the fact that Jesus loves his people and he loves his family and the disciples of Jesus they fell out sometimes they argued Peter was one of the worst culprits and yet over and above all of these failures and faults Jesus continued to love them because they were his people they were his people would you not love to be part of that would you not love to be part of the family of God tonight I hope that as as we talk about how glorious the church is and how precious God's people are I hope that if you haven't taken that step of faith that you will want to more than anything else that you will this will create within you a hunger after what you should have and what you can have by faith in Jesus but the third reason that I feel so passionate about the church is that it has a guaranteed future it has a guaranteed future about six months about six months ago the whole of the western world felt far more comfortable and far more secure than it does tonight that's because six months it seems a very short time but in that short time the world economic system whole system has shaken and right now nobody can predict what the economy will be like across the world over the next six months we're all pretty nervous about what is happening in the world at this moment in time perhaps we shouldn't have been so confident in the first place because nothing in this world is guaranteed just because you have a certain amount of money in your bank tonight does not mean you're going to have that amount in your bank next year just because you have a job tonight doesn't mean you're going to have a job next year just because you're living a particular lifestyle it all depends on some very slender things doesn't it and it doesn't take much to change the very foundation of your life all that needs to happen is the oil prices need to start moving upwards and your whole life turns upside down because we depend so much on these things don't we the fact is that in this world nothing is guaranteed except the success and the ongoing reality of the church

Jesus said I will build my church on this rock and the gates of hell will not prevail against it some weeks ago I read with great interest a newspaper article which was obviously done which obviously was written on the basis of a survey that was carried out and that where the question was where will the church be in the year 2030 and there was this great graph charting the number of church goers that there were say 20, 30, 50 years ago 100 years ago and charting the decline and it was really fearful it was just a downward slope all the way down through the end of the 20th century into the 21st century and at the same time there was another chart charting the upward slope of the number of people attending mosques so that according to this newspaper prediction by the year 2030 there will be the same number of people attending church in this country as will be attending mosques and so the trend they say is away from Christianity altogether and into either a secular state or even a Muslim state or whatever it's certainly away from

[13:16] Christianity that's what this article said the only problem is what they didn't take into account was that that is not guaranteed that Jesus has promised that he will build his church now that doesn't mean he's necessarily going to do it in Britain it may very well be that we that Britain may experience who knows all but desolate land as far as as far as the Christian gospel is concerned we just don't know but for one one thing is for sure that Jesus has promised that across the world the church will always be there it is absolutely guaranteed so then in that case how are we to live in the church then here is what Paul is focusing his attention on in this passage if I was to give a title to this chapter which summed everything that Paul said it would be it would be this diversity without division diversity without division because that's exactly what Paul speaks about in these words the unity and the diversity in the church let's just work our way through this passage very quickly and try and to see how Paul how Paul identifies the various features and the principles that are associated in the church and try and apply them in some way both in our congregation but also if you're from somewhere else apply them in the church to which you belong first of all in verse 12

Paul makes clear that the church is identified with Christ himself this is what Jesus thinks of his church 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 and here what Paul is doing is he's recognizing as Jesus did in John chapter 15 that there is an inextricable unity between God's people and himself I am the vine said Jesus you are the branches that's the way that he sees himself and that's the kind of unity that there is between God's people and himself it's a precious unity and it's an ongoing unity and it's an identification with with Jesus but then he says he goes on to say the body is one and what he's really focusing upon is the need to preserve that unity within any given congregation because there's one thing saying

I believe in the worldwide church like you get many people saying I believe in the worldwide church well so do I but my first responsibility is to the congregation to which I belong not just as a minister but as a member and your first responsibility is your congregation to which you belong that's Paul's whole point here the whole sense of this passage is a thriving community of God's people a living pulsating body a body which is healthy and moving and active and functional that's why he that's the whole emphasis of this passage a healthy body a body which is walking and running and doing and working every part of the body which is identified with one another but then also the body is not only one but it's diverse it's composed of many different people from different backgrounds and ages and personalities so there's two things there's first of all the unity the oneness of the gathering or the collection of God's people but then that unity is comprised of different people of different ages and different intelligence levels and different personalities and different viewpoints and so on and all of this has to work together then he goes on in verse 13 to talk about to describe two common factors first of all he says that we've all been baptized into the one spirit in verse 13 for you have all we are all made we were all baptized into the one body in one spirit here's the fulfillment of something that John the Baptist said he told us he told his hearers that he was preparing for the coming of Jesus who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and that's something we're discussing on a Wednesday evening that when a person comes to faith in Jesus the Holy Spirit comes to that person and takes possession in that person's life but you see how what he's saying he's identifying

I'd like us to to really to really take note of this when a person comes to faith in Jesus the promise is that God comes to live with and in that person and to be with that person forever and yet it's in the context of the church that Paul tells us that this is going to happen in other words what the implication is it's absolutely unthinkable to the apostle for a person to be converted and not to belong to the church that's the implication in these in these words because if you're saying I'm converted I trust in Jesus but I have no time for the church I don't want anything to do with the church that certainly is not the vein that Paul emphasizes in his writings it's not biblical whatever else you might whatever else argument you might use for that you can't use the argument of the Bible the church is immensely important to the apostle because it is important to God so we have been baptized in the one spirit in the context of the collection of God's people but we're also made to drink of one spirit in verse 13 and the idea here is you've seen it often enough in the country areas of the trough the sheep trough where all the flock of sheep gather together to drink and when a sheep even if it's at the other end of the field when it's thirsty it comes all the way back time and time again maybe several times in the day it will come back to that one place and all of the sheep will come together and they're all drinking from that same trough of water well the Bible describes the Holy Spirit as that water of life that gives us life to whom we come to derive all our nourishment and in the spirit who dwells in us now he turns to the actual membership of the body diversity without division and he says first of all in verse 14 he says the body does not consist of one but many then he goes on in verse 15 to 17 to describe the kind of problem that might practically arise in a collection of people

God's people and yet sinners at the same time in a collection of God's people as they try to relate and live together and here's the first problem in verse 15 the person who compares himself with other people in the body in the collection of God's people he compares his gifts he compares his personality he compares his intelligence his education he compares his powers of speech compares himself in so many different ways and you compare yourself with another person and you say I'm not like that person I'm not part of this I don't belong here because I am not that person well says Paul the logical conclusion to that is that according to you the body is only one person with only one function and he says if that is the case if the whole body were an eye where would be the hearing if the whole body were an ear where would be the sense of smell you see how ridiculous the conclusion that you have to come to if that's what you think if you are going to say because I am not like that other person

[22 : 33] I don't feel I belong to this place that doesn't work it just doesn't work because he tells us that it's God it's not up to you to decide what kind of arrangement that there ought to be it's God who has already decided God who has already taken the pieces of the jigsaw together and he has placed them together as it has pleased him that's what it says in verse 18 as it is God has arranged and don't you don't you get here the picture of God himself building constructing something fashioning something and doing his own will in what he's doing God arranged the members in the body each one of them as he chose so we have no right to say that because I am not like another person I don't belong in this place no right to say that at all the opposite problem is the person that says because that other person is not like me he has no right to be in this place we can do without him the kind of the kind of attitude that looks down on people because they're not like us and they're not like the kind of people that we would like them to be once again the conclusion is quite obvious and it's absurd if everyone were like us there would be no diversity in the body at all there would be no difference there would be no variety and once again

Paul comes back to the same conclusion it's God who has arranged the various pieces of the body members of the body and given them a function some of them have got an obvious function an evident function but that does not mean that they are more important than the ones that are less obvious there are parts of the body that we see all the time like the hand and the head there are other parts of the body that take place that function inside us you never see them some parts of the body that are tiny you could hardly detect them even if you could see them and yet each one works with the other to make the body a function and here's what Paul says if one goes wrong then the whole body begins to feel pain and that's the way it should be within the church there should be such a linkage together such a union together and such a cooperation together that once one even the smallest member who God has promised special recognition for if one goes wrong the apostle tells us that the whole body suffers and he goes on to say that there may be no verse 25 that there may be no division but that the members may have the same care for one another if one member suffers all suffer together and if one member is honoured then all rejoice together and here is where

I confess I'm troubled and where I think that perhaps our idea of what the church is in relation to each of the people that belong to it has gone wrong and I'm going to say this because I think because it troubles me and because I want to put it right Paul is thinking of the church not just as a worshipping people but as a caring people otherwise why would he use that word in verse 25 that the members may have the same care for one another you remember how in Acts chapter 6 a dispute arose about the care of some of the widows and the distribution of food that was going wrong in other words from the very beginning the church wasn't just a collection of people that came together on Sunday and then disappeared again the church was a living functioning caring unit that each one of them looked out for one another now here's where we've gone wrong we've gone wrong when we think that the caring is just the minister's responsibility and we've gone wrong when we think that the caring is just the elders responsibility or the deacon's responsibility

I don't deny for a moment that caring is the minister's responsibility I don't deny for a moment that caring is the elders responsibility and the deacon's responsibility that's why the first deacons were set up to make sure that the distribution of food amongst the poor was put right and to make sure that everybody got something.

And yet the apostle goes one step further than that in this passage and says that the members may have, the members, the minister, no, the elders, no, but the members may have the same care for one another.

[28 : 03] You know what he's saying? He's saying that the responsibility of care lies with all of us. All of us. And just in case you think that's a cop-out, you're just trying to cop-out, I'm not. I promise you I'm not.

I promise you I would love to spend far more of my time visiting people where there is need. And I'm so aware of the need of a congregation like this.

I'm so aware of it and it's so frustrating not to be able to do the kind of visiting I would love to do. And I know Mr. McLeod feels the same. But it's an impossible task.

But I say at the same time, if you know of somebody who would benefit from a visit from myself or Mr. McLeod, please tell me. Please tell us. And we would be happy to do that.

We would be happy to go around and see that person. And the elders are the same. And yet, here is where I think we need to make an adjustment. And that we need to change our understanding of what the Bible tells us.

[29 : 14] And to take the responsibility first and foremost upon ourselves. It seems to me very clear that that's what the Apostle is saying. That the members may have the same care for one another.

And I would love for us as a result of what we're looking at tonight. To go out the door determined to look out for someone that you know that needs your attention and your care.

It may not be anything more than the person who is lonely, the person who is housebound, the person who is in hospital, the person who has some need or another.

But instead of saying, I don't know why the minister doesn't go around to see that person, go around and see that person yourself. And if you really believe, if it would help for me to go around, I will go.

I have no problem with that at all. But in a congregation like this, and I would suggest in any congregation, it's not just big congregation that need this. It's a body.

[30 : 21] Even if it's a small congregation, a small congregation is just as much a body as a big congregation. And it takes organization. But it takes, first of all, that awareness that I have a responsibility towards my brother or my sister in the Lord to encourage that person.

to speak to that person, to know that person, to go and visit that person, and to show the love that Christ has put in my heart for my brother and my sister in the Lord and others who are attached to the church and who are associated with the church.

And I'm not making any distinction here between members and adherents. As far as I'm concerned, we're all attached to this body.

So here is something interesting, isn't it? It's something deeply challenging, isn't it? And it makes us feel uncomfortable. And so it should. Good. The Lord does that. That's how he changes people.

That's how he works within people, to provoke them and to get them to think again and to get them to think of the needs that there are. Do you know what? You know that there are...

[31 : 37] I've listened for many years in my life to people who criticize the church. I used to be one of them.

I grew up and for many years of my life, my young days, I was as much of a church rebel as anyone else. I saw the church as nothing but false and look at what they do here and they do there and look at what they don't do here and they don't do there.

And the moment that my life was transformed was when I stopped fighting against the church and started working for it.

And you know, that's it. You see it in a whole different light. You see it for what it is and for what it can be one day. There's absolutely no point in sitting on the sidelines criticizing and seeing...

Anyone can see the faults. Anyone can see what's wrong. But if you're not part of it and if you're not working within the collective gathering of God's people for the good of that body, then the greatest wrong is you.

[32:50] That's what I had to discover in my young days. And then once we start devoting our energy to the church, once we get involved in it, and once we start caring for other people and encouraging one another and using our gifts for the benefit of other people as the Lord, God has put you where you are and he's put you here for the benefit of someone else so that you can be like Barnabas was, a son of encouragement, so that you can somehow help your brother or your sister.

And there are times when all of us, when things happen to all of us and we need our brothers and sisters in Christ to come round and to speak to us and to pray for us and to show an active sense of the genuine care.

You know, I'm going to leave it like that. I was going to say some more things, but the time has gone out. You know the most, you know the one thing that will convince the world of the truth of the gospel?

I used to think that being able to explain the gospel and argue the gospel was what could convince someone of the truth of Jesus.

I'm not saying it's not important to be able to argue the truth of the, of course it is. But you know what people are looking for? They're looking for the reality of a changed life. And they're looking at the church and they're looking to see how Jesus has changed us and to what extent we are living and acting as the Lord wants us to act.

[34:29] And they're looking first and foremost at our relationships with one another. And to what extent we're looking after one another. And to what extent we're acting as a family of God's people with love and care and devotion towards one another.

With forgiveness. Ready to forgive when we fall out with one another. Ready to receive again as Christ has received us. And to do whatever lies within our power to take care of the needs of God's people.

May it be so. Let's pray. Our Father, once again, we ask that you will so work within us that each one of us plays a vital part in the working and the operation of your kingdom here.

We ask, Lord, that as we take those words to heart and as each of us arises and responds to them, we ask, Lord, that you will make our work visible to others so that by our witness that others may come to see the truth and the genuineness of what it is to be a Christian.

Oh, Lord God, we ask that you will do great things amongst us and that you will work within every congregation of your people and pardon our sins in Jesus' name. Amen.