

## **The Church as the Body**

### **1 Corinthians 12**

Suppose I decided to go into the shoe manufacturing business. I bought my premises. I bought all the shoe manufacturing equipment to put in those premises. I set up all my bank accounts. I got to the stage of hiring staff. Somewhere along the line, I'd heard that, for a company to be really successful, they had to have a good CEO. So I think to myself: If that's the case, why not hire good CEOs for all the positions in my company? Then I'll be really successful. So, I go out and hire 100 of the best CEOs in the country. Will my shoe manufacturing business succeed?

Not very likely, is it? I may have the best committee meetings in the country as all these expert CEOs get together and discuss their great ideas – but who's going to do all the work?

- Who's going to run the machinery that manufactures the shoes?
- Who's going to get out into the retail industry to market the shoes to retailers?
- Who's going to keep track of how many shoes we make and how much it costs to make them and whether we're selling them for more than it costs us?

In order to run a successful shoe manufacturing business, I need a variety of employees:

- production line workers
- forepersons
- cleaners
- middle management
- accountants

- sales people
- storemen

I need different types of people who have different skills from one another. It simply won't work if they're all CEO types who want to work as CEOs.

That's what it's like when we come to think of the church as the body of Jesus. After the church as the family of God, this is probably the most common picture the New Testament uses to describe the church. It pops up in all sorts of different places. If you get out a concordance, you can track down those references easily enough. This evening, however, we're not going to look at all those references – rather, we're going to concentrate on just one passage where Paul develops this picture at some length – 1 Corinthians 12. There are two big ideas Paul puts before us.

### **Diversity in the Church**

The first is diversity. Just as with my shoe manufacturing venture, it's important we're all different. There are two aspects of what Paul says that I want to highlight.

#### 1. The Church Consists of Many Members

First, the body – the church – consists of many members (verse 14). Have a look at your physical body for a moment. There are all sorts of different parts:

- There are parts we can see: our arms and hands and elbows and legs and knees and feet and toes and fingers and so on.
- There are parts we can see if we have a mirror: our eyes and ears and teeth and mouth and nose and hair (or lack thereof).
- There are parts we can see if a surgeon gets a scal-

pel and cuts us open: our hearts and lungs and liver and kidneys and stomach and so it goes on and on.

A huge number of parts go into making up our bodies.

Paul says: it's just like that in the church. The church consists of many members. That's fairly obvious – you only have to look around to see it. You're not the only person here this afternoon – nor am I. The very word *church*, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, refers to a gathering of people. A gathering of one person, while perhaps semantically possible, is nonsense. You just can't gather by yourself – and once you've gathered with someone other than yourself, you have diversity.

## 2. Each Member has a Different Function

Secondly, each member of the body has a different function. That's how it is with our physical bodies. Each part of our bodies has a different function.

- The eye performs the function of seeing.
- The ear performs the function of hearing.
- The nose performs the function of smelling.

And so the list could go on and on.

Some parts of our bodies perform more than one function. Our mouths, for example, are involved in the function of speaking and the function of the intake of food and drink and the function of getting air in and out of our lungs and the function of giving doctors something to look into and charge us \$60.

These different functions of each individual part are important for the overall proper functioning of the body. Imagine, for a moment, that each member of the body was an eye. That's the question Paul asks in verse 17.

There's your body plopped down in the middle of the room – just one big mass of eyes.

- What would be the advantage of having a body where each member was an eye? No one could sneak up on you. You'd literally have eyes in the back of your head – except you wouldn't have a head to put them in the back of.
- What would be the disadvantage? No one could sneak up on you, but they wouldn't need to sneak because you'd have no means of escape. You'd have no feet with which to run away. All you can do is plop there in the middle of the room and watch them come. Or you could close all your eyes and pretend they weren't there.

In God's design, our bodies aren't like that. Each part of our body has a different function.

So it is in the church. We're all different. In terms of this passage, we each have different gifts and abilities. We're not all pianists. We're not all preachers. We're not all Sunday School teachers. We're not all administrators. We're not all visionaries. Each of us is made and gifted in different ways – and it's important that is the case. If we all had the same function within the church, there'd be lots of things that we couldn't do.

## **Unity in the Church**

The first big idea that comes from this body picture is diversity; the second big idea is unity – it's one body. Again, let me highlight two aspects of this.

### 1. Unity of Common Experience

First, it's a unity based on our common Christian experience. 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.*

Within the church there's unity – a unity we're given through the method by which we're brought into the church. The only way into the church is by conversion.

- A person must accept the truth of the gospel.
- A person must turn from their rebellion against God.
- A person must submit to the Lord Jesus.
- A person must be born again through the Holy Spirit.

Each person within the church has that common experience. That's the basis of our fellowship. That's what makes us spiritual people. That's our unity.

We have that in common:

- no matter what our nationality;
- no matter what our economic status;
- no matter what our gender;
- no matter, even, what gifts God has given us.

It's the great leveller within the church. We stand before God on a par – as forgiven rebels. The divisions of our society – political, economic, social – are broken down. We're brought into the one organism of the varied body on the same basis. We're unified by the Spirit of God. We have that common experience.

## 2. Variety for the Common Good

Secondly, the gifts and abilities we're given – these things that make us different – are to be used for the common

good. Verse 7:

*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

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 honored, all rejoice together.*

Yes, we have different abilities and gifts and functions within the church – but those differences aren't there so we can each go off and do our own thing. Those differences are to be used for the common good. We're to work together as a team. It's like with my shoe manufacturing venture:

- Imagine some of my workers decided they'd use their time for making personal phone calls rather than making shoes.
- Or imagine my accountant spent all his working hours playing golf instead of keeping the books.

In order for my business to be successful, the focus of my workers must be on the venture's goal – not the personal goals of the individuals. In order for the church to function properly as a body, our focus must be on God's goals – not on our own desires or needs.

## **Clashing Diversity**

That's the basic picture of the church as Paul gives it to us in 1 Corinthians 12. In the body, we have great diversity within the overall unity given to us by God. That's fairly simple. So why doesn't the church body work together just as well as my physical body? The problem seems to come at the point of our diversity – and how we allow that diversity to impact our unity. Yet, the problem isn't

the diversity itself – for that would be to blame God for creating the diversity. The problem, as always, is our attitude.

It's important to stress that. Diversity in itself isn't a problem. That should be obvious from the example Paul uses. There's immense diversity among the various parts of my body, and yet that's never caused a problem for my body. My body's managed to act as a unified whole for many years now. Not once has it tried to act otherwise. What's more, others also recognise it as a unified whole and treat it as such. When they see me walking down the street, they don't say: There go ten fingers, two arms, two legs and a head. They simply say: There goes Rodney.

You can see that in the church also. Think of some of the differences among us we don't usually think about:

- Is it an issue that one of us has brown eyes and another has green eyes?
- Is it an issue that one person has a size 7 foot and another person has a size 10?
- Is it a problem for our church that one person has red hair and another is blonde?

Diversity itself isn't the issue. The problem's our attitude.

These people in Corinth used their diversity of gifts to move them towards division. How? Instead of focusing on using the gifts for the common good, they focused on themselves as individuals. Instead of recognising these things as gifts from God, they treated them as somehow providing a ranking among the members of the church. Personal pride – a wrong attitude – had invaded and pushed the concept of the common good to the side.

Look, for example, at verse 15:

*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.*

One member of the body isn't happy with his/her position in the body and so picks up his/her bat and ball and goes home – except they don't really think they have a bat and ball to pick up, because they're a foot instead of a hand.

Has that happened to you?

- Has your foot complained it doesn't like being a foot – it would rather be a hand instead?
- Has your foot asked to be excused from your body for a few days while it takes a holiday all by itself?
- Has your foot wandered off by itself because it wanted to go to the art gallery while the rest of your body went to the football?

Yet, it happens in the church. There are members who aren't satisfied with the gifts and abilities God's given them. They want to be Billy Graham rather than Graham Andrews. They want the glamorous gift of evangelism rather than the gift of quietly helping others.

- Sometimes they merely whinge and complain to God about how He's underestimated them.
- Sometimes they stop using their gift of helping others in protest against God's unfair treatment.
- Sometimes they leave the church altogether.

They're dissatisfied with the God who didn't assign them a better part in the body.

What happens if a member of our physical bodies leaves? We lose that function within our bodies.

- If our eyes leave, we can't see.

- If our ears leave, we can't hear.

What happens when a member of our church body fails to perform his/her function? The church misses out on whatever that function is. That person's gift is effectively removed from bringing common good to others within the church. The church as a whole is impoverished.

Look at another example in verse 21:

*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."*

Again, this doesn't happen in our physical bodies under normal circumstances. On rare occasions, one part of the body becomes so diseased that the rest of the body decides it's a good idea for that part to go before it hurts the rest – like a ruptured appendix. Yet, under normal circumstances, this doesn't happen. I can't remember a time when my eye wanted to get rid of my hand.

Yet, within the church, it does sometimes happen.

- Old people want to get rid of young people or young people want to get rid of old people.
- Rich people want to get rid of poor people or poor people want to get rid of rich people (as long as they keep sending in their tithe).
- Upset people want to get rid of the people who are upsetting them.

Eyes do want to get rid of hands. Again, the result is the church is impoverished. The church misses out on something God's given for the common good. The body's less effective than it's supposed to be.

### **The Underlying Problem**

So what are we to do about these sorts of things? As I

mentioned before, the problem isn't diversity in itself – the problem's my attitude. My attitude can be wrong in so many ways.

I may have an attitude of jealousy. I may be jealous of the gifts of others. I may want to be:

- a great evangelist like Billy Graham
- a great evangelical scholar like Don Carson
- a great song-writer like Graham Kendrick
- a great giver like ... – no I'm probably too materialistic to want to be a great giver

It's easy to ask: Why can't God gift me like that? Why can't God make me an eye instead of merely a foot?

Jealousy focuses on self – rather than the common good. Jealousy focuses on me and what I think I'm missing out on – rather than how the gifts I do have can be used to benefit and encourage others. Jealousy focuses on fantasy rather than reality. Jealousy refuses to submit to the church's Lord who distributes His gifts as He sees fit.

Wouldn't it be tragic if, at the end of time, some Christian complaining before God of the lack of some great gift were told:

But, my child, I did give you such a gift. You were given far more ability than that person you've been jealous of all these years. You simply didn't develop your gift. You didn't take the opportunities to exercise your gift. It wasn't that you lacked a great gift – you simply lacked the dedication to develop it for the good of others.

I may have an attitude of pride. That can show itself in all sorts of ways.

- I may become so proud of the great gifts and abilities God's given me that I forget they're simply gifts. I may believe I actually deserve these gifts and abilities – that somehow I earned them.
- Or I may think I own these gifts and abilities in some absolute sense – rather than remembering they're a stewardship from God. I may exercise them as I see fit and for my own purposes – rather than under God's direction for the common good.
- Or I may somehow rank people's spirituality based on their gifts and abilities – and look down my snobbish nose at those whose gifts I rank lower than my own. Suppose I think the gift of giving is the top-ranked gift. Suppose I think the existence of that gift indicates God's great favour in someone's life. Suppose I think I have the gift of giving. I'll get proud and look down my nose at you.

Pride's a fairly pervasive attitude and can be so subtle at times. Pride can even mask itself as something that looks like the opposite. Some people excuse themselves from getting involved because they're scared they won't be very good or they're worried their gifts and abilities aren't really up to scratch. Often, that's just a form of pride.

I may have an attitude of selfishness. I may think these gifts and abilities are given for my own personal ends – rather than for the common good. Thus, I may use them to build up my own little kingdom – rather than God's kingdom.

- I may think the money and resources God's given me are purely for my personal enjoyment – rather than a stewardship to be used for God's purposes.
- I may think my ability to attract a professional income is my ticket to a bigger house or a fancier

yacht – rather than an opportunity to contribute more to the work of ministry.

- I may think my ability to teach is an excuse to build up a following of personal disciples – rather than encouraging people to be true disciples of Jesus.

I may have an attitude of half-hearted commitment. My understanding of my personal Christian life or my understanding of the church may be inadequate.

- If I think of my Christian life as only being a couple of hours on a Sunday; or
- If I think of my church life as what happens inside a church building,

then I haven't yet understood what being a Christian and belonging to God's family is all about. Being a Christian is a 24/7 proposition – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Belonging to God's family is the same. The church isn't simply a club to entertain us for a couple of hours each week – the church is a body of which we're an active part for the duration of our Christian lives on this earth.

The problem isn't the diversity caused by the different gifts – the problem's our attitudes.

- Attitudes that focus on self rather than others.
- Attitudes that see our differences as a means for ranking ourselves with one another.
- Attitudes that consider gifts are somehow earned rather than freely given.

We still use the world's value system rather than God's system of grace. We compete with one another and work for our own advancement, rather than blending together as a team for the common good.

## Conclusion

What should we do about all this? I think two major steps are crucial. The first is to recognise our relationships with one another within the church. We're part of the one body – and that speaks of a belongingness that extends beyond a couple of hours on Sundays. If we think of church as simply sitting through a series of items put together to form the church service and occasionally getting involved by singing, then that's a very pale shadow of what church is intended to be. Church is supposed to be much more than that. We're supposed to be a Christian community – except in our individualistic western culture, we're much better at being individuals than at being community. We have to renew our minds by paying attention to God's word. We need to accept that God's called us to be part of one another's lives at more than just a superficial level. We're missing out on something important because we have too small an idea of what church is.

The second major step is to use the gifts and abilities God's given us for the common good. Being part of the body isn't simply about sitting back and enjoying the nourishing food coming in – it's also about performing the function God's given you within the body. Again, if you think only about our Sunday meeting, you'll miss out on most of what this is about. In a relatively short, structured meeting like we have on Sundays, there isn't a great opportunity for everyone to exercise their gifts and abilities. That's fine. That's not what this meeting's about. There are plenty of opportunities for those gifts and abilities to be used outside this meeting:

- within the various departments of the church;
- within the small group Bible studies;

- by simply serving one another on an individual basis as the opportunity arises.

It doesn't have to be done with a great fanfare. It doesn't have to be done so everyone notices what a great job you're doing serving others. People quietly serving one another – whether or not others know. That's what being part of the body is all about. The question is: are you doing your function within the body? Or are we as a church missing out because you're not doing whatever it is God intends you to do? How will God evaluate the way in which you're using the gifts and abilities He's entrusted to you?