

The Bible teaches the truth and derived application of the unity and diversity of the church by analogously exploring how the human body is also a unity composed of diverse members. Your specific role and functions as a “member” in the local church are vital aspects of your Christian identity.

Introduction – Point I.C.2 from last week’s sermon outline.

I. Answer: The Church is Like a Body

A. Unity transcends diversity of its members (v. 12)

The apostle Paul assumes the Corinthian Christians are familiar with the metaphor of the church as the “body” of Christ (Rom 12:5-8; 1 Cor 6:15; 10:16; Eph 1:22-23; 4:4, 12-16; 5:23; Col 1:18, 24). The human body has many parts (“members”) that function together in the one body as a unit. Each member has a function that is necessary to the body as a whole. Just as the human body is one entity with many members, so is the church. The *gifts* of the church are diverse but are derived from the one Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:4-11), so also it is with the *members* of the one body—the church. The important point is that unity does not cancel diversity. Unity transcends diversity because without unity our diversity can only divide us. The human body is not divided by the existence of its various body parts. So also Christ is not divided when we distinguish the diverse members of his church.

B. Even though its membership seems impossibly diverse (vv. 13-14)

“Of course, that makes logical sense,” you might say. Unity in diversity. One body with many members. A place for everything, and everything in its place. Do everything decently and in order. Organized and compartmentalized. That’s the way to keep peace, and to keep people in their proper place. According to the commonly accepted best practices, how else to unify a church composed of Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, male and female, rich and poor, black and white, adults and children, erudite and simple, professionals and laborers, English and Spanish speakers, and every other opposite and opposed pairing of people? According to the Bible, our unity is based in our spiritually organic relation to Jesus our Lord, not in our ecclesial organization of each other. Paul reminds us we were made to drink of the same Spirit, and that same Spirit has baptized us into the one body of Christ. One body. What does Paul mean by “one body?”

II. Illustration: Absurdity Clarifies Membership

A. Dejectedly dismissing the unity found in the human body’s diversity (vv. 15-16)

Try to imagine a body part that is separated from the rest of the body and is nursing an inferiority complex. The idea is absurd, pathetic, and even a little grotesque! What would such body parts say to the rest? First, Mr. Foot to Mr. Hand. Second, the ear talks to the eye. Not the stupid hand-puppet show, but the rhetorical device of body parts in dialogue, was often used by ancient orators to hold the audience’s attention by personifying impersonal objects and putting words in their mouths. In both illustrations, it is ridiculous for the foot and the ear to conclude that since they are not a hand or an eye, therefore they aren’t good enough to belong to the body. This is a classic *non sequitur*. It does not logically follow. What is Paul getting at? Not so much “unity in diversity, and diversity in unity,” but that unity transcends any diversity and actually makes diversity constructive.

B. Proudly dismissing the diversity found in the human body’s unity (vv. 17-21)

From another perspective, it is also absurd for an eye or an ear to conclude it alone is the whole body. If that were truly the case, where would the other senses be? If all were eyes, where would the hearing

be? If all were ears, where would the smelling be? God has sovereignly arranged all the members of the body by his perfect will/desire, just as he wants them to be. Each member has a different God-designed role to fulfill within the single body. Listen now: a hand does a terrible job as a foot, and an ear makes a lousy eye. By analogy the body of Christ (the church) must not accept or elevate any single person, group, or particular spiritual gift over any others. Why? Because the body is designed by God to properly function only when all members are present and fulfilling their roles and functions. When the church functions properly with all members exercising their giftedness as God designed for them, the beauty of the church and therefore of Christ who is the head of the body is manifest. For Christians in the church to deny the usefulness or validity of certain people with certain gifts in the body, is to reject the will of God to care for the body as he desires. By making this argument, Paul stresses unity but not uniformity.

III. Application: Give Special Honor and Care

A. To weak and hidden members because God has made them indispensable (vv. 22-25)

God wants you to understand and be changed by this truth: the seemingly less important members should receive greater glory and honor. However, please don't mistake this truth for the ideology currently *en vogue* that requires you, if you're powerful and honored, to "check your privilege." From God's view, that path is nothing more than the politics of envy, a cultural Marxism that jealously despises the good gifts God has given to others. God requires treatment of others that flows from our transcendent unity, not our division. In the church, we cannot deny God has bestowed a certain kind of "privilege" on those who are strong, visible, and honored. Rather than relinquishing your God-given privileges for the sake of rectifying historical inequity, Christ would have you serve from your position of blessing by giving special honor and care to those who haven't been entrusted with as much privilege. Our weak and hidden members who appear somewhat disposable are actually way more indispensable than we can imagine!

B. By sharing in the suffering and glory of each individual member (vv. 26-27)

Paul made no formal distinction between professional clergy and laity, where the clergy are the Christians who get paid to do the work of ministry (Eph 4:11-16). Yes, the community of the early church had leaders (1 Tim 3:1-13), but every believer was a member, a vital and necessary member of the body of Christ. Every believer was a ministering steward of God's gifts to build up the whole body through some type of encouragement, counsel, or being a sage of the mysteries of God's Word to others. When any member suffers, it's not only the pastors, or the church officers that bear that burden. No, every member suffers with him or her. And when any member is glorified, every member rejoices with him or her. This general rule especially applies to those weaker, less honorable members who deserve special attention because they also are necessary and indispensable. The fellowship the body shares is a communion of Christian love, a unity in which every member shares in the joys and sufferings of every other member (Acts 12:1-5; 2 Cor 1:7; 2:3; 7:13; 11:28-29). By sharing in mystical union and communion with the crucified and risen Christ, we suffer together, we are honored together, and we rejoice together.

Conclusion – The human body is just an image to convey an important truth about Christ's body. Do not forget Christ's body is a crucified and risen body. As Christ our sacred head was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, you and I are united to him in the cross-shaped life, giving ourselves for his own, our fellow members of his body. We live this way out of love for God, for thankfulness of Christ's sacrificial death on our behalf, and for the Holy Spirit's giving each one of us an indispensable role to play in Christ's body. But you and I will only experience this truth as we live in Christ's body as a *member* of Christ's body. So forsake both devaluing lies we are prone to believe about the church. You are valuable and vital to whichever church Jesus has placed you in. And so is every other Christian brother and sister. Live as you are called, because Christian, you are a church member.