

The Church is a Body

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[0 : 00] 1 Corinthians chapter 12, verses 12 to 31. Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.

For we were all baptized by one Spirit, so as to form one body, whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free. And we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

And so the body is not made up of one part, but of many. Now, if the foot should say, because I'm not a hand, I do not belong to the body, it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.

And if the ear should say, because I'm not an eye, I do not belong to the body, it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of hearing be?

If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

[1 : 11] If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, I don't need you.

And the head cannot say to the feet, I don't need you. On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable, we treat with special honour.

And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

And God has placed in the church, first of all, apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues.

[2 : 26] Are all apostles, are all prophets, are all teachers, do all work miracles, do all have gifts of healing, do all speak in tongues, do all interpret.

Now eagerly desire the greater gifts, and yet I will show you the most excellent way. This is the words of the Lord. Thanks so much, Emma, for reading.

And it would be a help for me if you could keep your Bible open at 1 Corinthians 12, or it's the sheets if you've got them handy here. Let's pray as we turn to God's Word.

Let's bow our heads and I'll lead us in a prayer. Jesus answered, Heavenly Father, as we come to your living Word, we thank you that it is food for our souls.

Help us to feed on your Word and grow up in our spiritual lives, rescued and transformed to maturity in Christ. For we ask in Jesus' name.

[3 : 38] Amen. So do you ever look in the mirror at your body and dream? Dream that you could have the body of an athlete? We've come into the end of the Olympic Games, aren't we, today?

And it's astonishing what the athletic body is capable of. Yesterday, I watched Maria Lazizkini win gold, jumping over 2 meters 20 on the high jump.

And it's astonishing seeing an athletic Olympic body at work. Or do you dream you could have the body of a model? We spend a lot of money and a lot of time on our bodies, don't we?

We've got creams for our skin. We've got makeup for faces. We've got product for our hair. I heard 100 million pound footballer Jack Grealish this week explaining the three hair products he needs every morning just to get his hair in that style, to chisel and mold it.

Whether it's vanity or it's healthy living or it's gym memberships, there are multi-billion pound industries built on our concern for our bodies. They matter to us, don't they?

[4 : 45] And God says that our spiritual body, that is, our local church that we attend, should really matter to us. We're starting a little series this month.

As restrictions ease, we're resetting ourselves. We're asking, what really is church? And what's it for? Some of us have felt quite distanced from church.

For others of us, we're coming back, but some of the key things that we used to really enjoy about church, we've not been able to do in the same way because of the restrictions. So as we move from tomorrow beyond level zero, what is church?

The New Testament's favorite picture of the church is the body. I read this week, the Apostle Paul uses that picture of the church 68 times. And we're going to be anchored this morning in this particular passage written by Paul to a particular local church, the church in Corinth that he planted. And in this half of the letter, the second half, he's responding to questions that church had about their corporate life together. So it has a lot to say to any local church gathering about our corporate life.

[6 : 00] He's particularly thinking about the issue of spiritual gifts. But that issue would brought the church to all kinds of confusion, people feeling insecure, people feeling superior.

And in this chapter, Paul actually makes two remarkably simple points that you get from seeing the church as a body. The first is that it's one thing. It's a unity.

And the second is it's got many parts. It's really simple. He makes those two points in verse 12 and he makes them twice. Have a look. Just as a body, though one, has many parts, then he says it again.

But all its many parts form one body. So it is with Christ. And then he says it again in verse 14. And so the body is not made up of one part, but of many.

Everything that the Lord has to say to us today, this morning, flows out of that simple reality. That when you look at a body, we've got one here. You've all brought one today.

[7 : 03] What do you see? You see one body. But you actually see lots of things, don't you? See a head, eyes, ears, hands, feet. And all the parts belong to one body.

So let's think about what that means for the church. Our first point, it means no one is unsuitable. We all belong here. No one is unsuitable. We all belong here.

When we put our faith in Jesus, God gives us the same spirit, each one of us, to every believer.

Verse 13, Paul writes, For we were all baptized by one spirit, so as to form one body, whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free.

And we were all given the one spirit to drink. In other words, no one is to think, because I don't have a particular gift, or because I don't look a particular way, I don't belong to this body.

Instead, the diversity of the church is part of the beauty of the church. Just think about how counterintuitive that really is.

[8 : 11] When you walk into a place and people are not like you, how do you feel? When you walk into a place and people are not like you because of their accent, or because of their skin color, or because of their clothes, or their hairstyles, or any other identity markers, or because of particular gifts, knowledge, skills, talents, passions that you don't have.

When we see a group like that, you tend to think, I'm not comfortable here. I'm not safe here. I won't enjoy being here.

I don't belong here. And we leave. And we go and find a group of people we have more in common with. But God says, not so with the church, with the people of God.

He says, you're all one in Christ. You all got the same spirit when you put faith in Christ. And because of that spirit, you belong here.

It's true even, verse 13, if you were a Greek slave owner in the first century, who came to Jesus and found forgiveness, and you walked into your local church in your town, and it was full of slaves.

[9 : 27] Even then, you belong there. God says, you've got the same spirit as these men and women. You belong here. Imagine you walk into a service at St. Silas, and there are some new songs, and you don't know them.

And hardly anyone raises their hands when they're singing, or dances when they're singing, and that's what you're used to. Or nobody sings the Psalms unaccompanied, and that's what you're used to.

Or everyone you speak to seems to know things that you don't know. You think, I don't belong in this church. I'll look for a church more full of people like me.

That's where I'll fit in. God says, you've been given the same spirit as these men and women and children, and you belong here. In fact, it's the diversity that God uses to grow His church.

He uses our different things about one another to sharpen one another and grow one another to maturity as believers. It grows the health of the church, because as we'll see in a moment, just as a body has lots of different parts, Jesus has given different people different gifts that they bring to serve in the life of a church.

[10:47] Unique talents, passions, personalities. And He looks for us to use those freely given gifts. But what happens sometimes is, because we look for a church full of people who are similar to us, we end up with churches that are full of the same kind of body parts and missing other body parts.

When I went to theological college in London to train for ministry, the vice principal said to us on our first day, welcome to the world of left feet. And what He was saying was, you're all here at kind of minister school, because you've been sent by a local church that has identified in you gifts that would be appropriate for being a church elder, or being in that kind of role in a church.

That means that you all have a similar set of gifts, and there'll be a load of other gifts that are critical to the life of a healthy Christian community that you guys are not going to have.

It's the world of left feet. So in our church family here, don't feel that you don't belong here because you feel different. And let me ask, how could you better reflect this principle that no one is unsuitable, that we all belong to the same body, in the people that you spend time with from church?

As things open up, how do you reflect that in whom you talk to on a Sunday, in who you make time to see, in who you have over for lunch, who you invite to join you for a cinema trip on a Friday night?

[12:29] Being committed to a growth group is a great expression of that reality. It's one of the hard things about a growth group, is that we are brought together differently to one another.

That's our first point. We all belong here. Our second point, no one is unimportant. We're all valued. We can piece together here what Paul means by the different body parts, and as I just mentioned, thinking about the gifts that God's given us, and they come at the end of the chapter.

He actually mentions them at the beginning of the chapter as well. He has this list of gifts that we didn't have read, and then in verses 27 to 30, he lists spiritual gifts again, and he writes another list of spiritual gifts elsewhere, in Romans chapter 12, and he has a similar list in Ephesians 4.

So none of them is meant to be exhaustive, and I take it, it seems reasonable to think that even if it had been exhaustive, which it's not, Christ might give different gifts to his church in the first century to the 21st century.

They maybe didn't need quite so many tech gifts as we've needed in the past year, and that sort of thing. But some of them, as you read them, are more obviously what we might think of as supernatural, and we can't, in some cases, we can't be sure what they specifically meant at that time, but he mentions words of knowledge and words of wisdom, the Spirit giving people insight that enables them to bring God's Word to bear on people's lives.

[14:08] He mentions gifts of healing and a spiritual gift of faith, even though every believer has faith. He mentions gifts of leading, gifts of administration, gifts of mercy.

What he's saying here is that Jesus is freely giving gifts to people in his church. They're not deserved, they're not earned by people, and we shouldn't feel envy towards somebody who has a particular spiritual gift that we don't have.

The problem is that we play the compare game, and God has ordained it that everyone has a contribution to make to the church family, and that it will be different for different people.

That's the point we get from verse 15. So have a look with me at verse 15. Now, if the foot should say, because I'm not a hand, I do not belong to the body, it would not, for that reason, stop being part of the body.

And if the ear should say, because I'm not an eye, I do not belong to the body, it would not, for that reason, stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?

[15:15] If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. So the big implication here is, don't feel inferior.

You might be someone who knows that you're never going to lead a band, or lead the prayers, or preach a sermon, or lead a home group. But if God had wanted you to do that, he'd have given you the gifts to do that.

And if everyone did those things, we'd be a church full of left feet. Do you see the encouragement here? I think there are people in our church family who have thought through the pandemic, I don't know if I'll go back to church when it opens up again, because I'm just not sure what my role is at church.

But what does God say? If you don't come back, the church is missing a limb. It's missing a hand, or an arm. God has given you gifts because the body needs them.

[16:25] I had an idea about this, that if you're someone who might feel, I don't feel I have anything to offer at my church, why not get a t-shirt printed this week that says, I am God's gift to this church, and wear it to church.

You can maybe put 1 Corinthians 12 underneath so people know you haven't just made it up. Maybe it's because we sometimes undervalue the behind-the-scenes roles that are needed to make the church grow, that are absolutely vital.

The Bible does place a big emphasis on the value of the gifts of faithful, clear Bible teaching to lead the church. In Ephesians 4, Paul describes how it's through those word-speaking gifts that the church is built on the foundation of Jesus as He's revealed to us in the Bible.

And through those gifts, the people are equipped for works of service. So we all get on with serving Christ together. We speak the truth in love to one another because of those word gifts of pastor-teachers.

We can't do without them. But as I go about my full-time job here at church, I am just so aware of the gifts that we need in order to function well as a church, and that I definitely do not have.

[17:56] There are all kinds of things people are doing in our church every day, and for our church every day. There are all kinds of jobs that come with the privilege of having this great building, of being a legal body with accounts and finances and a constitution, and there are needs that we get presented with from our community where we could serve and we could splash people with gospel witness, and there are opportunities to care for people and visit people, and there's a camping weekend we're planning for dads with their kids in three weeks' time, and we want to change the way we serve tea and coffee and welcome so that we can show hospitality to more people on a Sunday as we grow.

And there are live streaming needs, and I look at the staff team, and I look at me, and we cannot do these things, these ministries. And lots of you know that because you're doing them.

Christ has given the gifts to other parts of the body, and he does that so that none of us should feel inferior. Isn't that a wonderful thing? That we're all to be valued for the contribution we can make.

So that's our second point. No one is unimportant. We're all valued. And our third point is, no one is unnecessary.

We all need each other. So if the last point was saying no one should feel inferior, now Paul makes sure no one should feel superior and think they don't need the other members of the body.

[19:27] Have a look with me at verse 21. The eye cannot say to the hand, I don't need you. And the head cannot say to the feet, I don't need you.

Then he has an illustration about how there are parts of the body we tend to think of as less honorable. There are the bits we keep private. We don't need to go into all the details. But Paul says, think about how you treat those parts of your body.

You actually take care over them. You cover them. They get special treatment. But he's just making the point that we need all these parts of the body.

And it's God who has ordained for us the different gifts for every local church. Just notice that he makes that point twice so that we don't ever think that God has made a mistake.

Verse 18, he says, in fact, God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. Then in verse 24, but God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

[20:36] If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. So the point is that none of us is to think, I don't need the other people in my church.

Folks, this is massive because I come across this mentality everywhere in the contemporary church today. Not just here, but even before the pandemic.

I remember a conversation with a guy who had stopped coming to church on Sundays with his children, and he said to me, but I don't think we need to be at church. I can listen to a sermon online during the week.

We can read our Bibles at home. We can listen to great worship songs in the car. Why do we need to be at church in this day and age? How would you respond to someone who says that to you with 1 Corinthians chapter 12?

While someone has that mentality, it's like the church is missing an arm, isn't it? Church is meeting with a missing limb because you're not there.

[21 : 45] If that's what you think. But also, what good is it to be an arm on your own? What good is that going to do you? The reality is that God says we won't grow to maturity in Christ without being part of a corporate body of believers.

It's very clear in God's plan to grow us to maturity in Christ that we need one another. What does that mean that church has been in lockdown?

Please don't mishear me. The technology we've had has been so critical, hasn't it, for the last 18 months. Praise God that we had this pandemic at a time when we've had the technology to move so much of our meeting together online.

We've been able to stay connected and praise God for the people who had the skill to bring that technology to us as a church. But we mustn't think that it was real church or that that is real church. There will be times, and there are people at home watching today, there will be times for all of us going forward where it won't be appropriate to meet physically to keep others safe.

[23 : 01] Maybe you get a call from track and trace or you have COVID symptoms, and it's not appropriate to meet physically. But let's always remember that real-life church can't be replicated online.

It's a body made up of many parts serving Christ together. That's who we are. The person you think of at church who's hard work, the person you kind of maybe even hope you don't see, God has ordained for you to be in the same church as each other so that you can each be instruments in his hands to make each other more like Jesus.

God grows us to maturity as he challenges us to unite around the gospel in our diversity. So the best illustration I've heard of of what it meant for church to go online and close physically was that it was church on a life support machine.

For a time, we weren't able to meet to keep each other safe, but in general, it was church on life support. And when a human body is on a life support machine for a while, what happens is the muscles start to weaken.

You get this atrophy of the muscles. And I remember, you know, being in intensive care in hospital and coming out of intensive care and feeling weak and terrible and nurses coming in and making me get out of the bed and start walking.

[24 : 32] And I didn't want to because it was painful, but they were saying, if you don't start now, the muscles won't, you need to build the muscles again. And maybe as a church, some of us have to start flexing our meat-together muscles again as we get going and get off life support.

We all need each other. So let me invite you to reflect on the question, are you serving? Are you using your gifts?

Sometimes we have a particular gift. You might be someone who's passionate about reaching international students or passionate about serving the local area in a particular way or passionate about having people through your home.

And you look around at the church and you think, you're frustrated that more people don't have that passion. But 1 Corinthians 12 encourages us to celebrate that that's because you have a gift and to bring that and serve others with it.

Are we serving? Are you using your gifts? I guess an obvious next question might be, how do I know what my gifts are? I think one way to work that out is to ask a couple of friends, a couple of Christian friends.

[25 : 44] But you could also just ask yourself two questions. First, what needs to be done in my local church? What needs to be done in my church? Secondly, could I do it?

What needs to be done? Could I do that? Within reason, you know, I mean, I think of a previous church I was in and one Sunday, none of the singers turned up.

The band was there, no singers. And a friend of mine said, it's okay, I can see that needs to be done. I'll sing and got up. And after one of the songs rehearsing, I got up and as gently as I could encouraged him, brother, this is not for you.

And he sat down. And we're still friends, we got through it. But we see the point, you know, fair play to him, that needs doing, I'll have a crack. It didn't work, but it's good to think, how can I serve?

What needs doing? We've had a unique season where we felt cut off from one another as a body. The picture of the church as a body speaks into that as we come back together and says, you all need each other.

[26 : 57] And as we hear that, let's not resent it. Let's not feel that's disturbing our Sunday routine or our midweek routine. Let's remember that there really is nothing better than being called to be part of this church, this body.

When Paul uses this picture in Ephesians chapter 5, he makes clear that the head of the body is the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus had a physical body, but such was his passion for this spiritual body, the church, and his love to desire to invite us to be part of it, that he bore our sins in his physical body and allowed people to break that body so that he could invite us now to be members of his spiritual body.

And now he feeds it, feeds his body day by day with his living word and he cares for it by continually giving out spiritual gifts generously so that we can grow together.

So when you look in the mirror, what do you see? When you look around at your church, St. Silas, what do you see? Do you care for this body that you're a part of?

What do you pray for? For us as a church, for your church? Could you pray that we would be a united body of many parts, serving together in love?

[28 : 22] That's what Jesus wants us to be. That's what he's redeemed us to be part of. Let's pray together now. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you've called us not just as individuals, but as members of your church, your body, even the body of Christ.

Thank you that you've generously given every one of us a unique set of gifts, freely given by your grace to serve one another with. Father, please help us lovingly to consider how we can serve one another with the gifts you've given us for the good of others and the glory of your name.

Amen. Let's listen now. In the next one, amen.