



Unity & Diversity

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

The discussion moves on to the unity and diversity of the body of Christ, with the emphasis being on unity. Believers are unified since they have all been baptized into one body (12:12–13), yet there is also diversity since the body is made up of many parts (12:14). Since the body is one, it follows that no member is inferior (12:15–16), nor is any member comprehensive (12:17–20). A person's place in the body is assigned by God himself. Nor is any member of the body superior, for the weaker parts of the body are necessary (12:21–24). God has constituted the body so that the members will care for one another in both the sufferings and the joys of life (12:25–26). The chapter concludes with a listing of gifted people, which again indicates that the gifts in the church are varied (12:27–31a).¹⁷

If you've played a team sport before, like basketball, softball or soccer, you know the concept that when "if we win, I win." Learning your place on the team and how to use your skills to enable the greatest success for the team is essential. Team chemistry gets disrupted when the team leans too heavily on just one person's abilities or when others feel like they have nothing to contribute because they are not the top performer on the team. It is ironic to me when a league MVP (most valuable player) in a professional sport comes from a last place team. Certainly they should be rewarded for being the best player in the league, but were they really the "most valuable player?" In fact many teams that have one superstar end up doing poorly. That superstar will have great stats and accomplishments but unless the team has good team dynamics and other good players on the team they will not go anywhere.

To have a healthy relationship with a local church you have to know and believe that each person who follows Jesus, including you, is essential to that church. The Corinthians had many factions in their church and some really talented speakers and wise leaders and yet they were not really living up to the true potential they had as a local church. Instead of being built up in love and growing in sanctification they had pride issues, division and chaotic worship services where people were exalted over God. Paul desires for us to see in our text that we are one body made up of many members and each person brings something essential to the life, ministry and culture of the church. To do this Paul addresses social diversity in the church, the church as a body and finally the use of spiritual gifts.¹⁸

¹⁷ Schreiner, Thomas R.. 1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Book 7) (pp. 331-332). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

¹⁸ David Frederick, "1 Corinthians 12:12-31 Study Guide: One Body, Many Members," West Hills Community Church, October 20, 2021, <https://westhills.org/blog/2021/10/20/1-corinthians-12-12-31-study-guide-one-body-many-members>.

APPLY IT

In the process of placing our faith in Jesus' death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins and new life in Christ we were baptized in one spirit and into one body regardless of our social background. This means that the Corinthians were meant to live out their life in the church in a way that was upside down from the culture around them. They were to study the Bible and eat and drink and pray with people who were slaves or free, Jews or Greeks, rich and poor, old and young.

This was a struggle for them as we've seen throughout the letter. But, their friendships were meant to be different than the world around them. Someone walking into the Corinthian church during a worship service should be confused because of who was gathered together and how much they're blessing and serving each other.¹⁹

4. Before we can get the practice of unity right, we have to get the theology of unity right. From a biblical perspective, what is the basis of unity within the Church?

5. What might it look like for someone walking into your church to see relationships that “confuse” them because of the diversity and unity within the congregation?

6. How would you explain the difference between unity and uniformity?

¹⁹ David Frederick, “1 Corinthians 12:12-31 Study Guide: One Body, Many Members,” West Hills Community Church, October 20, 2021, <https://westhills.org/blog/2021/10/20/1-corinthians-12-12-31-study-guide-one-body-many-members>.

Unity without diversity would produce uniformity, and uniformity tends to produce death. Life is a balance between unity and diversity. As a human body weakens, its systems slow down and everything tends to become uniform. The ultimate, of course, is that the body itself turns to dust. This helps to explain why some churches (and other Christian ministries) have weakened and died: There was not sufficient diversity to keep unity from becoming uniformity. Dr. Vance Havner has expressed it: “First there is a man, then a movement, then a machine, and then a monument.” Many ministries that began as a protest against “dead orthodoxy” became dead themselves, because in their desire to remain pure and doctrinally sound, they stifled creativity and new ideas. However, if diversity is not kept under control, it could destroy unity; and then you have anarchy. We shall discover in 1 Corinthians 13 that it is maturity that balances unity and diversity. The tension in the body between individual members and the total organism can only be solved by maturity.²⁰

7. How does this passage challenge and confront the idea that a person doesn’t need to be an active participant and contributor in the life and ministry of the church?

8. Essential to our church’s mission and vision is to discover, develop, and deploy disciples. How does our understanding of this passage play into the execution of that mission and vision?

²⁰ Wiersbe, Warren W.. Be Wise (1 Corinthians): Discern the Difference Between Man's Knowledge and God's Wisdom (The BE Series Commentary) (p. 140). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

Paul addresses the tendency to undervalue your place in the body of Christ in verses 15-20. Just because you're a foot and not a hand does not mean you're not essential to the body. God has arranged the parts of the body to serve a particular function for human life to flourish and so he does the church (1 Corinthians 12:18). Can you imagine being at a church where everyone has the same gifts, strengths and weaknesses you have? It sounds boring and limited. Likewise what about being at a church where everyone has the gift of teaching but no one has the gift of hospitality? Or how about a church with the gift of administration but no one has the gift of leadership? These gifts are all essential and really flourish when they're complimented by other gifts that the Lord apportions. This means that even if our world's culture devalues the types of gifts you have, the Lord sees them as so essential that he gave them to you by the Spirit to be used in the church.²¹

9. Why might the value of some gifts be downplayed in the church?

10. How does the church practically live out what Paul says in verses 23-24?

²¹ David Frederick, "1 Corinthians 12:12-31 Study Guide: One Body, Many Members," West Hills Community Church, October 20, 2021, <https://westhills.org/blog/2021/10/20/1-corinthians-12-12-31-study-guide-one-body-many-members>.

What about those who take pride in their gifts and overvalue their contribution to the church? Paul addresses this problem in verses 21 and following where he says of one part of the body saying to another “I have no need of you.” The Corinthians would rank certain gifts as being better than others and therefore more indispensable in their mind and Paul is saying to them, “if you really knew which gifts were indispensable you would not be boasting.” There are parts of the human body that you cannot live without and they’re typically weaker or hidden parts and not the ones you bestow a lot of honor for. You may compliment someone about having a great arm in football or nice hair, etc but you never say that someone has great white blood cells. Some parts of the body get praised more than others but all are essential and if you were missing some of the weaker or less honorable parts you’d notice it and be unable to continue to do what you do on a day by day basis. So it is with the church and when we recognize this truth unity is built up (1 Corinthians 12:25).²²

11. How does the perspective that places higher value on more visible or public roles in the church miss the full picture of the body of Christ?

12. How can you encourage and affirm the people serving in more “hidden” roles in your church that you’ve never thought about but would notice immediately if they disappeared?

²² David Frederick, “1 Corinthians 12:12-31 Study Guide: One Body, Many Members,” West Hills Community Church, October 20, 2021, <https://westhills.org/blog/2021/10/20/1-corinthians-12-12-31-study-guide-one-body-many-members>.

The interdependence of the body continues to be advanced in the argument. Since God has sovereignly and wisely appointed the place and role of each person in the body, and since it was his intention that the church have unity and diversity, as we see in a human body, the eye cannot say to the hand and the head cannot say to the feet: I don't need you! Those who think they can be independent are deluded; they are, so to speak, cutting off their own hands or feet.²³

13. Given the human tendency to undervalue and overvalue different gifts within the church, how might comparing one person's giftings to another's potentially cause harm to the unity within the body?

14. How can verse 26 be true in a church where it's difficult to know everyone personally?

15. What do you think Paul means when he says, "But earnestly desire the higher gifts," in verse 31?

²³ Schreiner, Thomas R.. 1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Book 7) (p. 348). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

Now there is nothing more beautiful and more effective and more exquisitely, delicately balanced than the church of Jesus Christ. Spiritually it is the most marvelous organism in the whole universe. The angels are longing to look into the functioning of the Body of Christ in the world today. God has put it together, therefore, we ought to have great care for one another.²⁴

- 16. Throughout this chapter Paul has mentioned various giftings within the church. Recognizing that this list isn't intended to be an exhaustive list of giftings, take a moment to consider how those different giftings each contribute to the health and vibrancy of the church.**

- 17. How would you describe a church that is “firing on all cylinders” as it discovers, develops, and deploys disciples in their God-given giftings?**

²⁴ Ray Stedman, “How the Body Works,” Ray Stedman Authentic Christianity, January 7, 1979, <https://www.raystedman.org/new-testament/1-corinthians/how-the-body-works>.

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