



The Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12)

The Bible uses a number of different word pictures and metaphors to describe the Church, probably because no one image can contain all that the Church is meant to be. But of all the images the New Testament uses, none gets as much “airtime” as the term, “body of Christ.” Paul applies that idea to the church over forty times in four different letters. Why is that? Why does he devote so much time to exploring and explaining this metaphor? What is the Bible trying to convey about the Church when it calls us the Body of Christ?

The answer to that question depends on what scripture you reference. But in 1 Corinthians 12, the point Paul is trying to make is that the Church is deeply unified even while it is incredibly diverse. And as is the case in a human body, the many parts of this Christ’s Body are not meant to cause division. They’re actually necessary in order for the Church to be a whole unit. The “many-ness” is part of what creates the “one-ness.”

But that doesn’t always seem to be the case in the Church, does it? It certainly didn’t seem to be the case in Corinth. From what we see in Paul’s two letters to them, the Corinthian church found all kinds of differences to divide over. Sometimes it was over leadership (1:10-17). Sometimes it was over socio-economic classes (11:17-22). And there may have been divisions over Jew-Gentile relations (12:13).

But the specific dividing line Paul addresses in chapter 12 has to do with spiritual gifts. The Corinthian culture as a whole was fascinated with fancy and impressive things, and that had carried over into the church. Many believers were enthralled with the more flashy and noticeable gifts. They were particularly fascinated with tongues, because something about it just seemed so...spiritual. And so a gap began to form between the “spiritual haves” (those who spoke in tongues), and the “spiritual have-nots” (those who didn’t).

So Paul writes to shut this nonsense down. The whole point of a body is that not every part does the same thing. In order to function well, the body needs many different members serving many different roles. In the same way, the Body of Christ needs different people with different gifts if it’s ever going to thrive. Therefore, the Holy Spirit in His wisdom, has distributed various gifts to each person in the Church for the good of the Body as a whole (12:4-7).

At first glance, this text may not seem to have much for Sunnybrook today. Our specific church body does not get in a lot of fights about how those who speak in tongues are more spiritual or important (though we do probably have our own lists of gifts that we consider to be more “spiritual”). But this text (and this metaphor) still has a lot of value for our church. In fact, there are at least two key principles from 1 Corinthians 12 that need to be heard by all Christians everywhere.

First, I need to be reminded that I need the Church. If it’s true that I am part of a larger Body, then I inflict great harm on myself when I try to live a life severed from the rest of that Body. And if it’s true that the Church is not just

a generic body, but Christ's body, then I cannot experience full fellowship with Jesus while rejecting fellowship with His Church. They are a package deal.

This is why Paul can say that we were baptized not just into Jesus, but "into one body" (12:13). It's why he can say that we were called not just into relationship with Jesus, but into "one body" (Col 3:15). We connect with Jesus as we are connected to His Church. And we grow in the maturity of Jesus as we participate with other members in building up the Body. Paul describes it this way in Ephesians 4:

But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ. From him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building itself up in love by the proper working of each individual part. (Eph 4.15-16)

This actually leads us to the second principle, which is that not only do I need the Church, but the Church needs me. I am meant to be one of those "individual parts" that works to build the church up in love. That's what Paul is getting at in verses 14-23. There he describes the tendency for certain members of the body to think they're not necessary or useful. And he responds to this tendency by declaring that it couldn't be further from the truth.

"On the contrary," says Paul, "those parts of the body that are weaker are indispensable." When I refuse to involve myself in the life of the church, or when I neglect serving in the church, I'm not the only one who loses. So do my brothers and sisters who could be strengthened by my fellowship and service.

We don't pretend that this is always easy. Sometimes we struggle with past wounds from the Church. Sometimes we feel that our gift is not valued by others. Or like many, we may not even be sure what our gift is. But even when it's hard, we can't allow things like past hurts, or apathy, or fear, or consumerism to keep us from living out our calling--the calling we've each received into this one, amazing, imperfect, diverse, beautiful Body of Christ.

Discussion

1. Which of the two principles listed above do you need to hear most in your life?
2. Have you ever struggled to feel unity with the Body of Christ? What did you do to overcome this? If you're still dealing with this today, what are some steps you might need to take to experience unity again?
3. Can you think of some ways in which you have been "built up" through the gifts and service of others in this church? What are they?
4. Are there any steps you need to take toward involving yourself in the life of the church? Toward serving as a part of the Body?
5. Can you think of people "on the edges" of our church who might need some help feeling like they belong to this body? What could you do to help them?
6. How has this particular lesson encouraged, strengthened, confronted or challenged you?

Our Corporate Prayer

Sovereign God, you reign over all things and have appointed your Son Jesus as head over everything in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible. All things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things and by Him all things hold together. None of those things can be said about us. We, as sinful human beings, belong in a completely different category than Jesus. And yet you have connected us so deeply to Him that we can be called His hands and feet, His very own Body. Thank you for this unimaginable gift! Help us to be grateful for it. Help us to love being part of His Body. Use us, however you see fit, to build up His Body in love. We ask you this in the name of Jesus, Amen