

Belonging
1 Corinthians 12:12-31
John Breon

We're looking at three dimensions or aspects of the church's essence: believing, belonging, becoming. We've seen that God gives us something to believe. But being a Christian means more than just believing, it also involves *belonging*. God gives us a place to belong, a family to be part of. In our witness, we not only tell what we believe, we show people that they can belong. Our belonging, our fellowship, is a vital part of being the church and of our witness to the world.

We are God's people. We are Christ's body. We are the Spirit's fellowship. The church is a fellowship created by the Holy Spirit.

So the church on fire has *a flame about its fellowship*. The church is the gathering of those who have God's fire in their hearts. We each contribute to the burning and we need each other to keep the fire alive in us.

There's an old story about a pastor visiting a man who said that he could be just as good a Christian alone as he could attending church. The pastor didn't say anything, but went to the fireplace where coal was burning. Using the tongs, he removed a burning coal and set it out by itself. In silence, the two watched the coal smolder and burn out. "I see," said the man.

God intends us to be Christians together. Fellowship isn't an option in the church.

The earliest disciples, right after Pentecost, devoted themselves to "the fellowship." They were *together* and had everything in common. They continued to *meet together* in the temple and they broke bread in their homes and *ate together* with glad and sincere hearts. The fire of Pentecost was sustained in fellowship (Acts 2:42-47). Each of us is all that God wants us to be and all of us are the church God wants us to be when we're together in believing, serving, worshiping, and witnessing. We really do need each other.

These days of COVID-19 challenge that. But we're still connected, we're still in fellowship with each other even when we can't be together physically like we once were—and hope to be again. Scattered as we are, we're still the body of Christ, united by God's Spirit.

Paul calls the church "the body of Christ" in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. In each of these passages, Paul writes about the body of Christ, gifts of the Holy Spirit, love, and service. These all belong together.

If the church is the body of Christ, *we* are the body of Christ. God works through people and God wants to work through all of us. No one person in the church has all the gifts necessary to do all the ministry God wants to do in and through the church. That includes the pastor. We need all kinds of people in the church, with all kinds of gifts and talents and personalities.

Paul's emphasis in 1 Cor. 12 is on the body's *diversity*. The Corinthians were exalting one or two spiritual gifts above all others and were seeking uniformity rather than unity. That is, they thought everyone in the church had to be just alike in their experience of spiritual gifts. Paul wanted them to recognize the value of *all* God's gifts and *all* the members.

Certainly there is unity in the body of Christ. When we place our faith in Jesus and we're brought into right relationship with God by his grace, the Holy Spirit joins us to Christ's body (1 Cor. 12:13). Our common experience of receiving God's Spirit unites us into one body.

The Spirit attaches us to the body and incorporates us in the body of Christ so that we have *a place to belong, to have our needs met, to be in ministry, and to be accountable*.

In verses 14-20 we find the principle that *the body needs you*. In the context of discussing spiritual gifts, this section is addressed mainly to those who feel unneeded in the church. Maybe they feel unneeded because of their low social status or because their gifts aren't the more spectacular and popular ones.

Paul says that every member of the body is needed. The body isn't the body without its different parts. If it were all an eye or an ear, it wouldn't be a body but a monstrosity.

I've talked before about Dr. Paul Brand. He was a surgeon and missionary in India. He specialized in treating leprosy (Hansen's Disease) and actually developed various procedures to treat it. Later in life, he directed the leprosy treatment center in Louisiana. He and Philip Yancey wrote some books together. Recently, Yancey combined and updated two of their books into one titled *Fearfully and Wonderfully*. Doctor Brand describes the human body—its cells, tissues, bones, and so forth—and draws comparisons with the body of Christ and spiritual life. The body has various kinds of cells that function in different ways. The body includes skin, muscle, bone, internal organs, the brain, the nervous system, and many other parts and systems. Each has a unique role in the body and all together are needed for the body to be healthy.

If the church is going to be the church and carry out our mission to be the visible body of the crucified and risen Jesus in the world, each of us needs to carry out the function the Holy Spirit gives us and equips us for. The way Paul describes the body of Christ here reflects the way God acted on the cross where he turned status distinctions upside down. God used what was considered "weak," "foolish," and "dishonorable", that is, Jesus' crucifixion. In the crucifixion of Jesus, God displayed God's true power and wisdom (1 Cor 1:24-25). So the members of the body who seem "weak" and "dishonorable" by society's standards are vital if the body is going to resemble the crucified Christ and show how God's power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). "God's 'leveling of the playing field' like this is to lead to every member of the church being mutually concerned for every other member, all sharing in one another's suffering (25-27) rather than causing other members to suffer as some were doing" (Andy Johnson, *1 CORINTHIANS. Wesley One Volume Commentary*).

Each of us has something unique to contribute. You have a unique personality and gifts that contribute something special to the life of the church. You have a unique sphere of influence where you can serve most effectively. Your sphere of influence is your circle of friends, relatives, acquaintances, and neighbors who are influenced by your life and witness and who respond to you more readily than to many others.

We don't have to try to be just like anyone else in the church. We can simply be ourselves as God has made us and redeemed us. And, we don't have to envy anyone else for their influence or gifts. We don't have to put others down in order to make ourselves look better. We can simply affirm God's calling and gifts in each other and love one another in the community of God's Spirit.

There's a story about a monastery that had fallen on hard times. Once it had been a great and thriving order, but it had declined to the point that there were only five monks left in the decaying building. There was the abbot and four others, all over 70 years old. No new people were joining them. Their order would soon be dead. One day, the abbot met with the rabbi from a nearby synagogue. They talked about the poor situations they were in and sympathized with each other. As he was leaving, the abbot asked the rabbi if he had any advice for them. The rabbi said, "No. I can only say this. The Messiah is one of you."

The abbot went back to the other monks who asked him if the rabbi had given any helpful advice. "No. He just said that the Messiah is one of us."

They all wondered about this. Each one thought, "It couldn't be Brother So-and-So, could it? But what if it is? It couldn't be me, could it? But what if it is?" With this in mind they began to treat each other and themselves with extraordinary respect, honor, and love. And things began to change. There was a spirit, an atmosphere, about the monastery that people began to notice. People came to picnic on the grounds, to walk the paths and even to pray in the old chapel. Over the next few years, several new monks joined the order that once again was flourishing (M. Scott Peck, quoted in *A 2nd Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul* 56-59).

Now that's a good lesson and that rabbi was smart. But he was wrong. *One* of us is not the Messiah. *All of us* together are the body of Christ, the Messiah (Bob Tuttle emphasizes this when he tells this story). The body needs all its members. The body of Christ needs you. And in the body of Christ we treat each other with extraordinary respect, honor, and love.

In verses 21-26 we see that *you need the body*. You need the other body parts. One part by itself isn't enough. They all have to be joined. Each one needs the others. The one body is composed of various parts.

This section is addressed mainly to those who feel that their gifts are superior and more important. Or, those who are rich and high up the social scale who think they don't need anyone else. In chapter 11 we see that the wealthier members of the Corinthian church were disregarding the poorer members. Paul is trying to correct that attitude.

None of us in the body of Christ is superior to anyone else. Spiritual gifts aren't merit badges. They're *gifts*. Their purpose is ministry and building up the body. What does social status count for when we're all one in Christ Jesus? Whatever experiences we've had may make us better than *we* were, but they don't make us better than anyone else.

One body part can't say to another, "I don't need you." One church member can't say to another, "I don't need you." We do need each other to be all that God intends us to be. In the body of Christ we're set free from competing with each other and set free for complementing each other. We're like members of an orchestra, not soloists. "Faith is corporate before it is individual" (James Edwards, *Romans. New International Biblical Commentary* 287).

This is one reason we sometimes speak of the church as the *community of faith*. The body is a community. We share life together in Christ.

Dr. Brand illustrates community by referring to a lecture given by anthropologist Margaret Mead, who spent much of her life studying primitive cultures. She said that, to her, evidence of the earliest true civilization was a healed femur, a leg bone, which she held up before the students in the lecture hall. She explained that such healings were never found in the remains of competitive, savage societies. There, clues of violence abounded: ribs pierced by arrows, skulls crushed by clubs. But the healed femur showed that someone must have cared for the injured person—hunted on his behalf, brought him food, and served him at personal sacrifice. Savage societies couldn't afford such pity (*Fearfully and Wonderfully* 101).

The church is where you can be cared for and healed—of many kinds of brokenness. The parts of the body have equal concern for each other, suffering together and rejoicing together.

A woman named Shannon belonged to a church we served in Missouri. She was a teenager at the time. She and her mom and sister were active in the church. Her dad, Mike, didn't participate. Shannon was a babysitter for our two older kids. She got pregnant while she was in high school. Then tests showed that the baby had spina bifida. The church didn't judge, but rallied around. We prayed for her and the baby. The church showed care in many ways. I performed her wedding. When the baby was born in August, he was affected by the spina bifida, but not as severely as he might have been. After all that, Shannon's dad Mike wanted to talk with us. He was so touched and moved by God's grace and the church's response to his family's situation that he wanted to commit himself to Jesus and join the church. So on Christmas Day in 1994, I had the privilege of baptizing baby Lance and his grandpa Mike.

Let's be the church, the body of Christ, caring for each other and reaching out to people who need grace and compassion.

Paul sums up what he's been saying: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (27). He then re-emphasizes the body's diversity by again showing the diversity of God's gifts in the church. Then he encourages the church to desire the greater gifts, that is, to pursue those gifts that do the most to build up the body of Christ in love.

At a college in California, there was a summer class in "Group and Interpersonal Relations." About a dozen people took the class and at the end they decided they wanted to do something together. They decided to take a hike up to Hennigar Flats, a place about three miles up the side of the mountain behind the campus. It takes about an hour and a half for anyone to make the hike.

So they set the day and made the sandwiches and the hot chocolate and brought cold drinks and backpacks and they all gathered and started up the mountain together.

But it wasn't long until the stronger ones were up in front and the other ones were back in the middle and way back at the end of the line was

a girl named Jane who was not much of a climber. At the front was Don, a big, strong, former paratrooper. He and some others—the strong ones—were up in front and the weaker ones were in the back and way in the back was Jane. And Don looked back a couple of switchbacks and saw Jane and felt the Lord telling him to go back and walk with her. This was hard for him because he had a need to be first.

But he went down and started walking with Jane. And the people up above called down, "Come on up here. It's great." And Jane yelled, "I don't think I can make it." And they hollered, "Yeah, you can. Try harder. Come on up." And every time they yelled she felt worse. So the strong went on ahead and the weak hung behind and Jane never made it to the top.

But they just couldn't end the class like that. So a couple of weeks later, they got together again to make the hike. Sandwiches and drinks in their packs, they started up again. This time, though, they stayed together. Instead of an hour and a half, the climb took four hours. But they stayed together. They laughed and sang. They all reached the flats together—hungry, but exhilarated and happy.

The moral of the story is that we don't use our energy to sprint out ahead of the group. We use our energy to contribute to the unity of the body. Because the goal is not somewhere "up there." The goal is somewhere along the way when we finally realize what it means to be the body of Christ (Bob Tuttle, *Wind and Flame*, 93-94; Reuben Welch, *We Really Do Need Each Other*, 121-25).